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Jonah Siegel. *Material Inspirations: The Interests of the Art Object in the Nineteenth Century and After*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 416 pp.
Reviewed by Jeremy Melius

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A new book by Jonah Siegel is always of real interest. The present volume extends the author's exploration of what he has come to call "the nineteenth-century culture of art" (p. viii). By this he means the period's volatile complex of writings, pictures, and viewing practices that responded to a vast and increasingly mobile body of works of visual art, investing them with ever greater significance. In its now unfashionable enthusiasms and unruly proliferation, this array of cultural forms continues to provoke impatience even in some of nineteenth-century culture's most stalwart scholars, who have tended to repress or simply ignore many of its knottiest complexities. (As Siegel notes tartly in his preface: "In the case of many of the texts I discuss . . . reading the works at all would be a start," [p. xi].) *Material Inspirations* seeks to face those complexities head-on.

In this study, the impassioned interests of writers such as John Ruskin, Anna Jameson, George Eliot, G. W. F. Hegel, and Walter Benjamin (here understood as a belated nineteenth-century thinker about art) are cast in a new light. The metapictorial commentaries undertaken by visual artists—William Blake's repeated engagements with the ancient Laocoön group, for instance, or Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's depictions of Raphael sitting with his lover in the studio—come equally to the fore. Siegel approaches such figures' aesthetic investments by way of their attention to art's material form, proposing their searching explorations of the art object as a fertile site "at which the period negotiated a still-unresolved relationship to the material world"—a relation that is always, at bottom, "conceptual" (p. viii). For in this account, "matter" and "spirit" are always undoing each other's certainties. "Art" becomes a name for this unstable dance. A wide-ranging, generously conceived introduction explores a variety of strong approaches to materiality and thingliness, new and old, standing as a model of what thoughtful engagement with such issues might look like. Several organizing strands emerge: the entwinement of desire, bodily life, and fantasies of death in the century's understanding of "old master" artists (Part I); unnerving encounters with and mediated reanimations of antiquity's material remains (Part II); and the troubled modernity of Ruskin's and Walter Pater's experimental histories of art (Part III). But remarkably, having laid out this groundwork, the book goes on to offer a series of critical episodes that in their variety and intensity—as well as in the exuberance of Siegel's own readings—exceed even so capacious a frame. The difficulty, suggestiveness, and sheer weirdness of nineteenth-century artistic culture manages everywhere to show through. "Desire and excess," to borrow from the title of Siegel's first book, are the order of the day. Chapter after chapter offers deft and carefully considered critical parameters while also teeming with vibrant, undisciplined life. I know of few studies that manage to strike such a balance.

And therefore what remains with the reader, as much as any of the volume's wider conceptual framings, are its moments of granular encounter: discussions of Michael Baxandall's materialism and of Vernon Lee's emergent concerns with form; defenses of Ruskin's self-reflexive historical sensibility and of his concept of the "pathetic fallacy," cutting through decades of nonsense that has accrued around that notorious phrase; and the thematic and iconographic changes that Siegel rings on Raphael's great *Transfiguration* of 1516–20 throughout. Readers will develop their own list of such moments as they surface from the text. Their prominence indexes not only the interest of the material this book gathers together, but also its critical sensibility. Such "engaged individual discrimination," Siegel would suggest, is also a legacy of the century he considers—a happy one, in this case (p. 24). Here, too, we find a criticism that feels "urgent, immediate, responsive . . ., unsettled, and . . . of a wide amplitude precisely because of its commitment to an individual point of view" (p. xii).