

The New Criterion

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Week in review

by Jane Coombs

Recent links of note:

“*The Radical Potter* by Tristram Hunt review—how Wedgwood astonished the world”

John Carey, *The Times*

Tristram Hunt, the current director of the Victoria & Albert Museum, has written a new book on the British potter and entrepreneur Josiah Wedgwood. Born to a large family of potters in a small Midlands town, Wedgwood suffered a severe case of smallpox as a child that left him with a gimpy leg. Unable to turn a potter’s wheel, he focused instead on technical experiments, inventing different colors of lead glaze, new methods of transfer printing, and a type of fine earthenware called creamware, soon renamed “queensware” after Queen Charlotte ordered a tea set. (Catherine the Great was also a fan—her 944-piece queensware set now resides in The Hermitage.) Today he is most remembered for his pale blue and white jasperware with neoclassical reliefs inspired by those found at archaeological sites such as Herculaneum. As the literary critic John Carey explains in *The Times*, Wedgwood single-handedly upended the European market for Chinese porcelain with his artistic versatility and shrewd business sense. We learn that in a cruel twist directors of the Wedgwood firm in the late twentieth century decided to fire thousands of British potters, outsourcing production to the Far East.

“Turbulent Music, Turbulent Life”

Adam Kirsch, *The New York Review of Books*

When most hear the name Beethoven, they picture a man deaf, lonely, and volatile, with a wild mane of hair, an image that is difficult to shake when listening to his most fiery compositions. As Adam Kirsch, *The New Criterion*’s poetry editor, explains in *The New York Review of Books*, “our understanding of the music has always been profoundly shaped by the stories we tell about the man.” Such stories began with the one told by the playwright Franz Grillparzer at Beethoven’s (very well attended) funeral, in which he presented the composer as a tortured outcast. Though true in part, Beethoven was in fact recognized as a genius early in his career and, unlike Mozart, died one of Vienna’s wealthiest citizens. In his review of *Beethoven’s Lives* by Lewis Lockwood, a

new book on Beethoven's biographers, Kirsch examines the Heiligenstadt Testament, in which Beethoven reveals the emotional toll of his deafness, and the "Immortal Beloved" letter addressed to an unnamed woman. It is in this letter, Kirsch says, that we learn that the "qualities powerfully expressed in Beethoven's music—passion, yearning, defiance—were also present in the man."

"Progressive scientists, or high-flying elitists? The Met unlocks a secret behind a famous Jacques-Louis David portrait"

Nancy Kenney, *The Art Newspaper*

Jacques-Louis David's painting of the chemist Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier and his wife, Marie Anne, which hangs in the Met, differs from conventional aristocratic portraits of the 1780s in highlighting the couple's passion for science—but we recently learned that the present composition is not how David first envisioned it. As the painting appears today, the so-called father of modern chemistry is seated at a table next to several scientific instruments and gazes up at his wife, who, though perched over her husband's notes, glances directly at the viewer. Conservators have made use of new X-ray technology to see what David had painted beneath the topmost layer—to their surprise, they discovered an earlier version of the work that omitted the scientific instruments and instead showed the couple wearing flashy attire, Marie in a large feathered hat and Antoine in a red mantle. Some believe the change was made to downplay the couple's social status in the months before the Revolution, but the curator David Pullins thinks the changes merely reflect the artist's "chameleon" character and his desire to create a modern portrait. (Either way, poor Antoine ended up at the guillotine.) The researchers believe this is the first in-depth technical study of a David painting; those keen to learn more can dig into the scholarly articles released this week in *Burlington Magazine* (available for purchase) and *Heritage Science* (open access).

Podcasts:

"Roger Kimball introduces the September issue." *A new podcast from the Editor and Publisher of The New Criterion.*

Dispatch:

"The past returns," by Jay Nordlinger. *On hearing a recording of a concert you attended long ago . . .*

Jane Coombs was the ninth Hilton Kramer Fellow at *The New Criterion*.