

Life-Size

DEHN GILMORE 
Caltech, United states

WHEN we think of Victorian technologies for collapsing time and space, we likely think of new modes of transportation and communication, like the railway, the telegraph, and the steamship, as well as of evolving forms of mass information and entertainment, like the newspaper, the panorama, and the novel.¹ But the Victorians also engaged constantly with another form of “virtual reality” that has been largely overlooked, and this took the shape of being surrounded by a massive shadow population of life-size forms and figures.² From the wax replicas of London’s showrooms to the size-of-life statues of politicians increasingly glutting city streets to the large-as-life characters of advertising and campaigning that populated urban walls, the “real” subjects of the age were often crowded in on (and sometimes out) by people who were not quite people. And they readily found, and frequently remarked, that these representations and models could seem to telescope them across temporal, spatial, and class divides as successfully as any diorama or electromagnetic wire.³

Many of the most major social transformations we think of when we think of the nineteenth century worked in tandem, first, to produce (or to bring to new Victorian attention) new forms of life-size representation and, second, to make such representation a special—or, looked at another way, an overwhelmingly common—subject of remark. And the relentless transformations and advances of the industrial revolution introduced both new materials and modes that could be used to create life-size works—“artificial stone,” galvanic bronze-casting, rubber—but also a newly broad middle-class audience eager for scaled-up self-representation in the more familiar materials—paint, marble, eventually photography—of fine art.⁴ The march of empire urged on life-size representations of the queen and various parliamentarians abroad; it compelled artists to make imperially inspired works like Henry Timbrell’s

Dehn Gilmore is a professor of English at Caltech. She is the author of *The Victorian Novel and the Space of Art: Fictional Form on Display* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), and she has published widely on the relationship between Victorian literature and visual culture. She is currently at work on two books: one on the Victorians’ obsessions with life-size figures and their literary implications, and another on scientist Arthur Schuster and his siblings.

Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 451–454.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press.

doi:10.1017/S1060150323000141

“The Lamp of Ganges” (described as “an elegant life-size statue of an Hindoo Girl” by *The Art-Journal*); and it prompted many a canny showman to display models of foreign peoples in London, whether the “50 figures as large as life, in their native costume, from the highest mandarin to the mechanic” at Nathan Dunn’s Chinese collection at Hyde Park, or the “savages” one could “eat your luncheon in sight of” at the Crystal Palace.⁵ At the same time, the push for scientific objectivity fueled a spate of life-size anatomical drawing, models, and scientific automata (not to mention many a debate about scalar fidelity and perspective).⁶

Alongside the resulting surge in “bodies,” twinned booms in literacy and in periodical and newspaper production meant that news of such novelty reached an ever-expanding audience. And these same expansions also meant that more traditional life-size forms—Italian religious effigies, for example, or ancient Chinese statues—could go from being sites of local cathexis for their direct viewers to being such sites for a mass audience albeit in a more imaginary way. The auratic power of the figures in question may have been diminished when “seen” in print instead of in person, but as the glut of printed pieces invoking life-size forms to focalize everything from Catholic religious practices to Indian governance to industrial innovation testifies, writers clearly counted on the fact that it was not diminished that much, and the power of written reference to the life-size or the large-as-life to catch the interest of readers, and then, in many cases, to keep it while they rode a hobby horse of commentary, was as manifestly an article of faith for commentators as it was for those artists and craftspersons who worked to the same scale.

Across all these appearances in person and on the page, life-size figures, with their close proximity to life, their ability to seem to (literally) stand in for life, could appear to act as a special kind of technology, not only for arresting attention, but also for veritably moving or removing the beholder or reader into new spheres and spaces. As a commentator would write of Madame Tussaud’s, you could see “waxen representations as large as life and also most life-like.” But as miraculous, “half an hour w[ould] save you whole months of weary traveling,” and “consecutive events may be represented simultaneously.”⁷ A life-size sculpture of Queen Victoria, built into a train station in India, could make British rule tangible from thousands of miles away; a large-as-life medieval tomb figure encountered in a cathedral might make the past seem to spring to life—sometimes all too suddenly—in the present.

Perhaps inevitably, the capacity of the life-size to “transport” the consumer also invited—or even compelled—narrative-making as authors

took moments of feeling transported and spun them into larger tales. And the periodical culture of the Victorians is full of moments when commentators on *real* life-size forms depart from their putative work of description or evaluation for a short flight of fancy, a moment of imagining the scrutinized, large-as-life object as actually living, but also themselves as removed to another moment or place. Perhaps as inevitably, many authors of *fiction* navigating their own desire to “transport” the reader would themselves come to take inspiration from the power of, and discourse around, wax models of villains, marble sculptures of the queen, wooden effigies of Italian saints, enlarged photographs of lawyers, painted models on signs, and a host of other life-size forms—and both at the obvious site of the literature of the uncanny, or the romantic, or the mysterious, or the oddly sensual (*The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, *Pygmalion*, *The Well-Beloved*), and also in more realist works. “Here I am as large as life,” says Violet Effingham in *Phinneas Finn* (1869); “here I am, with the mighty merchant’s note in my hand, as large as life, as hot as fire, and as happy as a king!” says Pesca in *The Woman in White* (1859); “Here’s the governor the size of life,” says Mr Weller of Pickwick in *The Pickwick Papers* (1837). Here are a number of characters seeking to borrow, in varying and complicated ways, the capacity of the life-size to offer passage and conveyance, to take the consuming subject from one place to another.

NOTES

1. On “virtual travel,” see, for example, Alison Byerly, *Are We There Yet? Victorian Travel and Victorian Realism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
2. There is an emerging body of work on the Victorians’ version of “virtual reality.” See, for example, Jules Law, “Victorian Virtual Reality,” *BRANCH: British Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, edited by Dino Franco Felluga (accessed January 20, 2023). See also John Plotz, *Semi-Detached: The Aesthetics of Virtual Experience Since Dickens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
3. I give a similar overview in Dehn Gilmore, “Pigmies and Brobdignagians: Arts Writing, Dickensian Character, and the Vanishing Victorian Life-Size,” *Victorian Studies* 57, no. 4 (2015): 670.
4. “Artificial Stone,” *The Critic* (November 27, 1847): 348.

5. The Victoria Terminus of Bombay's major train station exemplarily incorporated such a statue architecturally. Preeti Chopra, *A Joint Enterprise: Indian Elites and the Making of British Bombay* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 208. Timbrell's statue is assessed in "The Lamp of the Ganges: From the Statue by H. Timbrell, in the Possession of the Queen," *The Art-Journal* 9 (September 1855): 260. The account of the Chinese Collection is from "Fashionable Lounges," *Theatrical Observer* (November 11, 1844): 2. The quotation about the Crystal Palace is from "Centralisation—A Dialogue," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (October 1855): 498.
6. Peter Galison and Lorraine Daston offer an account of the rise of an ideal of objectivity in Galison and Daston, *Objectivity* (Princeton: Zone Books, 2010). Some of these debates about scale are treated in Gilmore, "Pigmies and Brobdignagians," 667–90.
7. "At Madame Tussaud's," *Leisure Hour* 534 (March 20, 1862): 182–84.

