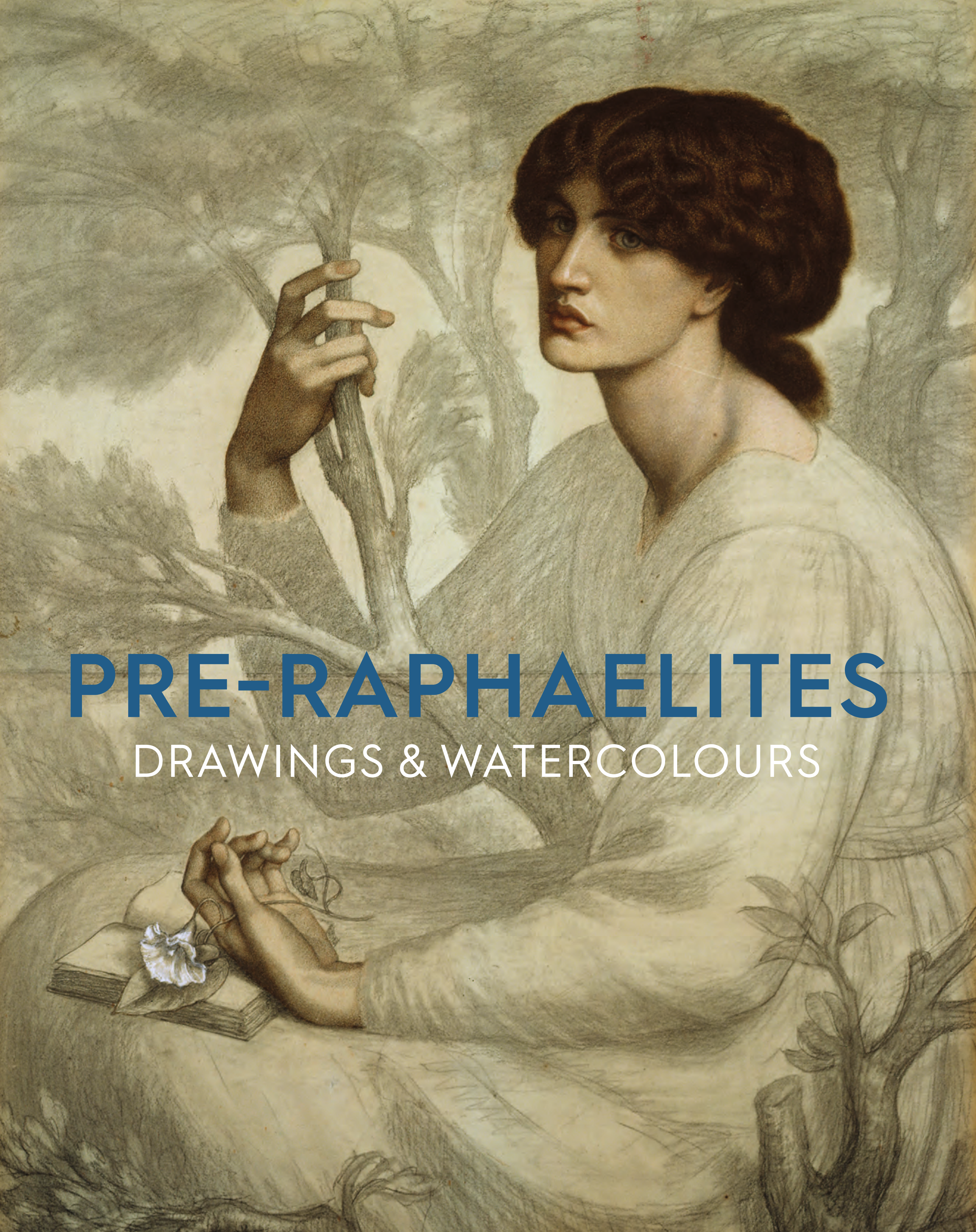

PRE-RAPHAELITES

DRAWINGS & WATERCOLOURS

Foreword

Many visitors to the Ashmolean have been seduced by the bright colours and details in the Museum's impressive collection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Fewer, however, have been able to examine the large collection of works on paper, held in the Western Art Print Room. Although these are usually available to see by appointment, even enthusiasts and scholars have rarely looked at more than a selection. This exhibition, for the first time, makes it possible to see a wide range of these drawings together. It includes a variety of works of all kinds and different purposes, from William Holman Hunt's first drawing on the back of a tiny envelope for *The Light of the World* (Keble College) to large, elaborate chalk drawings of Jane Morris by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Portraits throw an intimate light on the friendships and love affairs of the artists, and landscape watercolours reflect John Ruskin's advice to 'go to nature'. The exhibition demonstrates the enormous range of Pre-Raphaelite drawing techniques and media, including pencil, pen and ink, chalk, watercolour, bodycolour and gold paint.

Some key events in the history of Pre-Raphaelitism took place in the city of Oxford. In 1850, soon after the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded, the avuncular Thomas Combe hosted the young artists in his house at the Clarendon Press; his widow Martha left their collection to the Ashmolean in 1893. William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones became converts to the movement when they studied here as undergraduates. It was in an Oxford theatre that the fateful meeting took place between Jane Burden, the stunningly beautiful stableman's daughter, and the two men who were to become her husband and her lover: Morris and Rossetti. Oxford, too, played an important role in Ruskin's life, and he began donating many of his own exquisite drawings to the University in the 1870s.

Thanks to all these connections, the Ashmolean Museum has been a magnet for Pre-Raphaelite bequests and donations, augmented by purchases, up to the present day, from Thomas and Martha Combe's foundational bequest to the recent acquisition of Burne-Jones's wonderfully illustrated letters to May Gaskell.

We are delighted to have recruited Christiana Payne, Professor Emerita of History of Art at Oxford Brookes University, as guest curator and main author of the catalogue. Two scholars whose doctoral research she supervised, Fiona Mann and Robert Wilkes, have contributed essays to the catalogue, bringing new insights in the important areas of painting techniques and literary inspiration. Within the Museum, Christiana has been ably assisted by Colin Harrison, Senior Curator of European Art, and Caroline Palmer, Western Art Print Room Manager. As ever we are enormously grateful to those who have made this work possible through their vital financial support including The Roger and Ingrid Pilkington Charitable Trust, The Anson Charitable Trust and others who wish to remain anonymous. Much of the preparation and research for the exhibition and catalogue has taken place during the conditions of lockdown, when libraries, and the Museum itself, were closed which has presented its challenges but also been a source of solace and optimism. We hope that visitors will enjoy seeing the drawings as much as we do.

Alexander Sturgis
Director, Ashmolean Museum

Opposite: detail of cat.70.

Acknowledgements

It has been a great pleasure working on this catalogue and exhibition, even under the stresses and restrictions caused by the global pandemic. Colin Harrison, Caroline Palmer and Katherine Wodehouse showed me drawings and followed up my queries with efficiency and courtesy. All the team at the Ashmolean, but especially Alexandra Greathead, Declan McCarthy, Catriona Pearson and Natasha Podro worked hard, often under very difficult conditions, to get everything ready in time.

I am grateful to the Pre-Raphaelite scholars who responded promptly to my questions and helped me out with their own special areas of expertise: Colin Cruise, Carol Jacobi, Pamela Gerrish Nunn, Elizabeth Prettejohn, Jason Rosenfeld, Malcolm Warner and Stephen Wildman. In addition, I have learned much over the years from conversations with Barbara Bryant, Nancy Langham Hooper and Dinah Roe.

Finally, I must thank my fellow authors Fiona Mann and Robert Wilkes, who made many useful comments on the text as well as contributing essays of their own.

Christiana Payne

Opposite: detail of cat.21.

Introduction: Pre-Raphaelites on Paper

The movement we now know as Pre-Raphaelitism began in the autumn of 1848. Seven young men – John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Frederic George Stephens, William Michael Rossetti, Thomas Woolner and James Collinson – got together and founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: the PRB. This name reflected their admiration for artists who had worked prior to the death of Raphael in 1520. Poetry, study from nature, social criticism and a desire to be original were all important elements in their work.

Their initial meetings took place in London. However, Oxford was to play a key role in the Pre-Raphaelite movement as it developed to encompass a wide range of artists, including Elizabeth Siddal, Ford Madox Brown, Arthur Hughes, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris. Some of the painters gathered at the house of Thomas Combe in Oxford in the early 1850s; another group decorated the Oxford Union with murals in 1857. In the 1870s their champion, the art critic John Ruskin, gave a teaching collection of drawings to the University of Oxford. Ruskin, Burne-Jones, Morris and the landscape painter Alfred William Hunt studied as undergraduates at Oxford University. As a result of all these connections, the Ashmolean Museum's collection of Pre-Raphaelite works is one of the most significant in the world. The PRB itself came to an end by 1853, but the movement it began had a dramatic effect on British, and indeed European and American art, that lasted into the early years of the twentieth century.

The Pre-Raphaelites are best known today for brightly coloured oil paintings, for example Millais's *Spring (Apple Blossoms)* (fig.1) or Rossetti's '*Astarte Syriaca*' (fig.2). Yet it is less widely appreciated that the Pre-Raphaelites were also keen

Opposite: detail of cat.94.

Below left: fig.1 Sir John Everett Millais (1829–1896), *Spring (Apple Blossoms)*, 1856–9. Oil on canvas. Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight. WGL82984. Bridgeman Images.

Below right: fig.2 Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), '*Astarte Syriaca*', 1877. Oil on canvas. Manchester Art Gallery. MAN62973. Bridgeman Images.

draughtsmen and draughtswomen. Their drawings and watercolours tend to be overlooked, since due to the risk of damage by light they cannot be permanently displayed. Yet, as Colin Cruise has shown, drawing is 'key to an understanding of Pre-Raphaelitism … it was in the setting up of a new way of drawing that they built the foundations of a new movement in painting'.[1] Members of the group drew constantly in a variety of graphic media, trying out their ideas, studying from life, producing rough sketches or elaborate finished drawings in pen and ink, graphite pencil, coloured chalks, pastel or wash. Burne-Jones was especially inventive in his drawing media, working in silverpoint and even gold paint.

Watercolour, too, was an important medium for them. Pre-Raphaelite watercolours have a jewel-like strength and intensity of colour, thanks partly to their use of bodycolour (gouache). Indeed, some watercolours by the Pre-Raphaelites are so densely worked and opaque that they have been mistaken for oil paintings. Rossetti and Burne-Jones worked exclusively in watercolour for sustained periods of their careers; Ruskin only used watercolour, never oils. Watercolour might be preferred for reasons of health, cost and practicality, but it was also closer than oil to some of the works from the past that the artists admired, such as tempera paintings and manuscript illuminations from the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance. In addition, watercolour was the medium favoured by William Blake. His writings, and his status as a poet painter, were important inspirations for the Pre-Raphaelites, especially for Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris, both of whom were also poets.

Artists of the Pre-Raphaelite movement came from a wide variety of artistic backgrounds, and individual artists developed very different drawing styles and techniques over the course of their careers. As a result, Pre-Raphaelite works on paper display a wide range of different types of drawing. All the original members of the PRB, apart from William Michael Rossetti, underwent the standard training in drawing at the Royal Academy Schools, but some absorbed it more deeply than others. This training involved a long apprenticeship in drawing from antique sculpture, in order to master form and light and shade, before going on to draw from the living (nude) model. Artists were set exercises in composition and perspective so that they could invent multi-figure designs, involving some kind of heroic action or narrative. Holman Hunt's design for his never-executed painting of the biblical subject *Ruth and Boaz* (cat.20), with its nude or lightly draped figures in contrasting poses, is the kind of production for which the Academy training was meant to prepare artists. Millais had a particularly thorough academic training: a child prodigy, he began attending the Schools in 1840, aged just eleven. Rossetti, Hunt and Stephens joined him there in 1844.

All four artists were to rebel against the competent but rather bland and uniform kind of art that the Royal Academy training produced. Endless drawing from plaster casts of sculpture did not inspire them and Rossetti, in particular, quickly became impatient with its methods. As a poet, he was keen to use his imagination to illustrate literary themes rather than following repetitive exercises. Along with his protégés Elizabeth Siddal and Edward Burne-Jones, Rossetti introduced a distinctive element to the Pre-Raphaelite movement which valued originality and feeling over artistic skills progressed through training. Siddal

first came into the Pre-Raphaelite circle as a model, but developed her innate talent as a poet and artist under Rossetti's tutelage. Burne-Jones also received instruction from Rossetti when he moved from Oxford to London in 1856.

Poetry was vitally important to the Pre-Raphaelites. In 1849 William Michael Rossetti began keeping a diary of the PRB, offering us a crucial record of their early years. In the very first meeting he describes Millais is writing a poem, while Dante Gabriel Rossetti reads out one of his own poems and another by Coventry Patmore, which the brothers then 'minutely analyzed'.[2] They produced a magazine, *The Germ* (January–April 1850), subtitled 'Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, Literature, and Art' which published poems by both Rossetti brothers and their sister Christina, as well as poems by Woolner, Collinson and Hunt. As Robert Wilkes has recently discovered, Stephens also wrote poetry, although he never published it.[3] The poets the artists admired included not only the classic figures of Chaucer and Shakespeare, but also their own contemporaries: Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alfred Tennyson and, from an earlier generation, John Keats, William Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was half-Italian, identified especially with the fourteenth-century poet Dante Alighieri, after whom he was named. His father, Gabriele Rossetti, was a poet, Dante scholar and political exile; he had been obliged to leave Italy in 1821 because of his support for the country's revolutionary nationalist movement. In many of Rossetti's drawings and watercolours his theme is the unrequited love of Dante for Beatrice, who died young. *Beatrice, meeting Dante at a Wedding Feast, Denies him her Salutation* (fig.3) illustrates one of the few, unsatisfactory, encounters that the poet had with Beatrice in life,

Fig.3 Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), *Beatrice, meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast, Denies him her Salutation*, 1855. Watercolour and bodycolour on paper. Ashmolean Museum. WA1942.156.

Fig.4 Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), *Dante Drawing an Angel on the Anniversary of Beatrice's Death*, 1853. Watercolour and bodycolour on paper. Ashmolean Museum. WA1894.16.

while in *Dante Drawing an Angel on the Anniversary of Beatrice's Death* (fig.4) Rossetti imagines the effect on the poet of her untimely death. Rossetti's own poetry often dealt with love or lovers, and this became an important theme in his art, and indeed in Pre-Raphaelite art generally. They are generally illicit or doomed lovers, whose passion is intense but does not turn out well – a state of affairs echoed in Rossetti's own relationships with Elizabeth Siddal, whom he married in 1860, and Jane Burden, who married his friend William Morris in 1859.

Inspired by a desire to reform art, and by what they had read and seen of the so-called 'Primitives' – the fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century artists of Flanders and Italy – the Pre-Raphaelites began drawing in a deliberately awkward and 'spiky' style. Instead of studying the revered 'Old Masters' from the High Renaissance and the seventeenth century – Raphael, Michelangelo, Rubens – they looked at engravings by Carlo Lasinio of fifteenth-century Italian frescoes, original prints by Albrecht Dürer and illustrations to Shakespeare in the 'outline style' by the contemporary German artist Moritz Retzsch. These sources of inspiration were all in black and white, rather than colour, and they all relied on an emphatic use of line.

Millais's lunette designs of 1847–8 (cat.60) date from just before the formation of the PRB. They show the influence of the outline style, combined with an ease in figure drawing based on a sustained period of study. A year or two later, however, the figures in his drawing for *Christ in the House of his Parents* (fig.5) are stiffly posed and lacking in anatomical definition. It is as if Millais has self-consciously 'unlearned' some of the academic stratagems he had absorbed, trying rather to imagine himself as a fifteenth-century artist who had never seen classical sculpture, drawn from the life model or fully understood the rules of perspective. A similar kind of awkwardness is evident in Rossetti's drawing *Dante Drawing an Angel on the First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice* (fig.6),

III

'Stunners'

It seems to have been Dante Gabriel Rossetti's idea to refer to beautiful women as 'stunners', and his work dominates this section of the exhibition. Drawings of the model and artist who later became his wife, Elizabeth Siddal, match what we are told of her quiet, reflective character. Rossetti often drew her in the evening, by candlelight or gaslight, revelling in the way the light played across her features or the folds of her dress.

In 1858 he portrayed the actress Ruth Herbert in a very different way – beginning the focus on full lips and a long, rounded neck that was to become the hallmark of his later, more sensual drawings of women. He experimented with different media, sometimes using soft pencil, sometimes combinations of pen and ink and wash, resulting in subtle or dramatic effects of light. From the late 1850s and early 1860s he had two favourite models: Fanny Cornforth, his housekeeper and lover, and Jane Burden, who married William Morris in 1859. Both women had abundant, wavy hair, which also starts to be more of a feature in his drawings.

As with Elizabeth Siddal, Rossetti drew Jane Morris in pencil or in pen and ink, resting on a sofa in the evening, her head or shoulders propped up against a pillow. But he also made her the subject of large drawings in coloured chalks, emphasising her long, slender fingers and her melancholy expression. In *Reverie* and *The Day Dream* she is transformed into a goddess-like creature from another world.

When Burne-Jones drew Violet Manners (herself a skilled draughtswoman) he concentrated on her head. He used soft pencil to suggest an otherworldliness and a fragility of character that suited her role as one of the so-called 'Souls' – an aristocratic social circle that favoured refined intellectual and artistic pursuits. The drawing was given as a gift to Helen Mary Gaskell, with whom Burne-Jones had an intense, but platonic friendship.

Frederick Sandys made many drawings of women, often with a title suggesting some mythological subject, but with only a loose narrative connection. For *Hero* he used as model his neighbour Marianne Shingles, a silk weaver. *Nepenthe* is based on a drawing of his sister, the artist Emma Sandys. Executed in 1892, the fifteenth anniversary of Emma's death, the opium poppies and ecstatic expression echo Rossetti's paintings of *Beata Beatrix*,[47] a similar tribute to his dead wife.

These images of women by male Pre-Raphaelite artists frequently divide opinion. Some see them as objectifying the female sitters, turning them into passive objects designed to cater to the male gaze. For other viewers they are 'celebrations' of female beauty, and the fact that the women are often depicted alone or in thought lends them a kind of agency or inner life. Recent scholarship has proposed that the women were more active in the modelling process than has previously been recognised; far from being passive lay figures, they were active participants in the development of Pre-Raphaelite visual culture.

Opposite: detail of cat.38.

31

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI (1828–1882)

Elizabeth Siddal, 1855

Pen and brown and black ink on paper, with some scratching out, 13 × 11.2 cm
Signed in monogram and dated: *DGR / Feb. 6 / 1855*
Bequeathed by Francis Falconer Madan, 1962; WA1962.17.77
LITERATURE: Surtees (1971) no.472; Surtees (1991) no.26; Harrison (2015) no.66

Elizabeth Siddal entered the Pre-Raphaelite circle in 1849 or 1850, having been spotted by Walter Deverell while working in a milliner's shop in Leicester Square. She initially modelled for a number of Pre-Raphaelite artists, including Holman Hunt and Millais, but from 1851 she modelled exclusively for Rossetti. His drawings of her were often made in the evening, under conditions of candle- or gaslight. Siddal's health was not good and her relationship with Rossetti was a complex one. From the intense closeness evident in the drawings the couple moved to a period of estrangement and then, in 1860, to marriage, but Siddal died of an overdose in 1862 after giving birth to a stillborn child. This drawing is unusual in showing her full face: the dramatic contrasts of light and shade hint at her changing moods, with an underlying theme of melancholy introspection.

Feb. 6
1855

32

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI (1828–1882)

Elizabeth Siddal playing Double Pipes, 1852

Graphite on paper, 19.6 × 13.6 cm
Bequeathed by John Bryson, 1977; WA1977.79
LITERATURE: Surtees (1971), no.459; Surtees (1991), no.3

Most of Rossetti's drawings of Elizabeth Siddal are, like this one, in soft pencil with subtle lighting, emphasising the delicacy of her character. This drawing is one of a pair in which she plays different musical instruments; in each case Siddal kneels on the floor, her full skirt gathered in folds around her knees. It is likely that Rossetti was planning a composition which contrasted two women, representing one as chaste and the other as sexually alluring. In the companion drawing[48] Siddal plays the cythern, an instrument associated with angels. Here, however, she plays the double pipes or aulos, an instrument played by prostitutes in ancient Greece and bearing obvious phallic connotations. Although she is modestly dressed her long, loose hair may be intended to indicate sexual availability; in the companion drawing it is tied back.[49]

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