

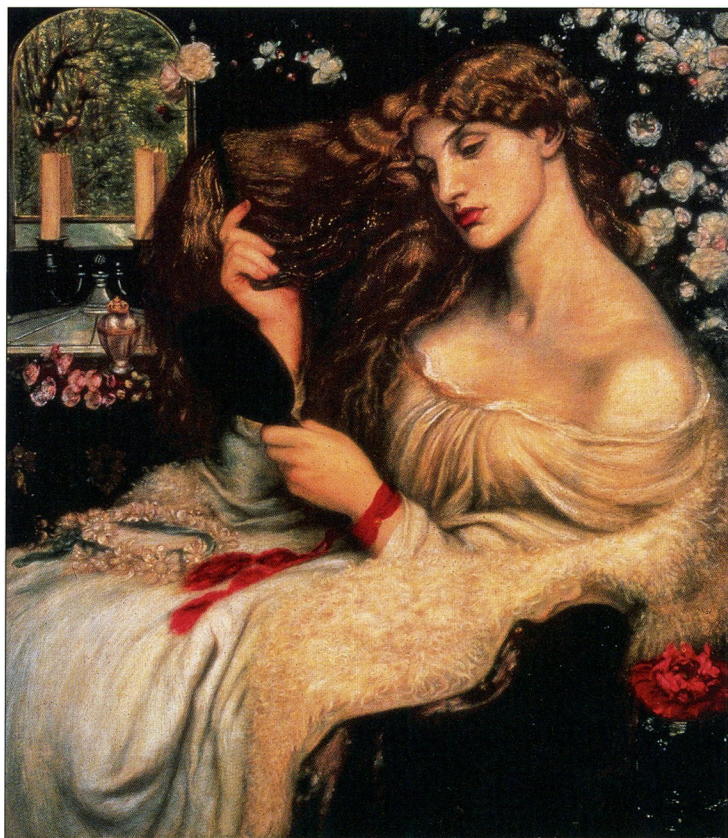
An American Collector's Pre-Raphaelites

by Gail Leggio

Samuel Bancroft, Jr. (1840–1915), a Wilmington, Delaware, cotton manufacturer, had little experience of the arts when he encountered his first Pre-Raphaelite painting at the home of businessman William Alfred Turner in the north of England in 1880. The picture was *A Vision of Fiammetta* (1877–78) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82), and Bancroft was, in his own words, “shocked with delight.”¹ Bancroft’s infatuation with the Pre-Raphaelites lies at the heart of an intriguing episode in the history of American collecting. Purchasing his first Rossetti in 1890, he quickly amassed the most significant group of Pre-Raphaelite works outside the United Kingdom. Originally displayed in his Wilmington home, Rockford, the collection was given by the family to the Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts in 1935, along with land for what would become the Delaware Art Museum. An exhibition of 130 works, “Waking Dreams: The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites from the Delaware Art Museum,” is now halfway through a nine-city tour, and to use a bit of Pre-Raphaelite slang, it’s a stunner.

What Bancroft discovered was a ripe, second-wave Pre-Raphaelitism. Three young artists dominated the group of friends who formed the Brotherhood in 1848—Rossetti, William Holman Hunt (1827–1910) and John Everett Millais (1829–96). Their early work has a deliberately archaic awkwardness that enraged many, including Charles Dickens, but spurred John Ruskin to come to their defense. The original PRB manifesto emphasized Ruskinian truth to nature, along with bright, clean color, and advocated emulating the integrity attributed to artists before Raphael. They all worked on literary subjects; Shakespeare and Keats were favorite sources. But Rossetti, a celebrated translator of Dante, developed his own brand of Romanticized medievalism. The group had largely disbanded by 1857, with Millais settling down as a successful, more mainstream painter and Hunt pursuing single-mindedly his biblical subjects and social allegories. As the leader of a new generation of Pre-Raphaelites, Rossetti mentored Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98) and William Morris (1834–96). This is the phase of the movement that most captivated Bancroft.

The collector’s first purchase was Rossetti’s *Water Willow* (1871), a portrait of Jane Morris, from a summer the two spent together in the absence of her husband, William Morris. Morris’s newly acquired home, Kelmscott Manor, appears in the distance beyond the riverbank, a dreamy background to the half-figure of Jane, who fingers willow branches. Anyone who thinks Jane Morris’s beauty was an invention of Rossetti’s imagination should consult the many photographs taken of her.² Bancroft was as fascinated by Rossetti’s life as by his



Dante Gabriel Rossetti,
Lady Lilitb, 1866–68,
 altered 1872–73
 DELAWARE ART MUSEUM,
 WILMINGTON, DELAWARE

art and arranged for a copy of *Water Willow* to be presented to the subject. Still, Rossetti was not particularly interested in pure portraiture as a genre. Rather, his images of women are secular yet fervently devotional icons. Details are more like saints' attributes than marks of social standing. The willow, symbol of sorrow and romantic loss, suggests a doomed relationship. Rossetti was already engaged to his fragile first muse, Elizabeth Siddal, when he met Jane Burden during the 1857 Oxford Union decorating campaign, a larkish adventure undertaken with Morris and Burne-Jones. Jane married Morris, and Rossetti married Siddal in 1860, two years before her tragic death. Rossetti, the only English poet-painter of real consequence besides Blake, explored these themes in a set of four sonnets, "Willowwood." A lover sees an image of his beloved in a pool—"the dark ripples spread to waving hair"—and stoops to drink "Her breath and all her tears and all her soul." In this haunted landscape of the imagination, personifications of their time together proliferate: "All mournful forms, for each was I or she,/The shades of those our days that had no tongue."³ Although Bancroft showed relatively little interest in Pre-Raphaelite writing, he did acquire a complete set of the Brotherhood's 1850 journal, *The Germ: Thoughts toward Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art*.

Bancroft bought *Water Willow* in 1890. In 1892 he spent \$22,000 on paintings, among them two important Rossettis. *Found* (designed 1853, begun 1869, never finished) is the artist's only attempt at a "modern moral" subject, here the popular Victorian trope of the fallen woman. Rossetti's mistress, Fanny Cornforth, is the model. *Lady Lilith*—painted with Cornforth as model in 1866–68, altered with the face of Alexa Wilding in 1872–73—is a sumptuous image of a blond siren, Adam's first wife, Lilith, "the witch he loved before the gift of Eve," as Rossetti called her in his poem "Body's Beauty." Both pictures were purchased from the estate sale of Frederick Leyland, the London patron of Rossetti and Whistler, who created the Peacock Room (now Freer Gallery, Washington, D.C.) for him. Another important acquisition in 1892 was Burne-Jones's *The Council Chamber* (c. 1872–92), the second scene in the *Briar Rose* series, the Sleeping Beauty narrative that the artist played with for decades in various forms. The king nods on his throne, the courtiers form a frieze of sleepers across the floor, and thorn-wrapped flowers creep in to capture them all. The surging folds of drapery are dynamic; this is anything but a static image, despite the theme of somnolence.

In 1906 Bancroft purchased another striking picture by Burne-Jones, *Study for the Head of Nimue in "The Beguiling of Merlin"* (c. 1873) in watercolor and gouache (cover). About life-size, it's a fully realized painting, with lively brushwork in the drapery and masses of wavy brown-gold hair. The young sorceress holds her conjuring book and turns her head to regard the success of her spell. The model is Maria Zambaco, a sculptor who had a stormy affair with the painter, and Burne-Jones's passion comes through. (He never sold the picture, and it remained in his studio until his death.) The women Rossetti and Burne-Jones paint do not fit the Victorian stereotype of the domesticated angel. *Study for the Head of Nimue* is a fine piece of painting, with the sinuous, dynamic contrapposto of the figure and its rich, burnished copper and ivory palette. But the personality of the model and the glamour of the Arthurian legend are undeniable parts of the equation. In 1928 a young Evelyn Waugh wrote an appreciation of Rossetti, then out of favor, and suggested why modernist critics disliked the Pre-Raphaelites: "Pure' painting, according to reputable standards, should concern itself with beauty and not with anecdote, but, more than this, it must be with its own beauty and not with the beauty of the thing represented; a head should be looked at as so much mass of matter, so much variation of color, so much light and shadow."⁴ Of course, the first-rate artists in this circle realized that beautiful models and mythic subjects were useless without craft and formal excellence. Burne-Jones hoped that "if all but a scrap from one" of his paintings "were burned or lost, the man who found it would say whatever this may have represented, it is a work of art, beautiful in surface and quality of color."⁵

Not everything Bancroft bought meets that high standard. A number of paintings by Winifred Sandys (1875–1944) do not rise above the level of

greeting card prettiness. But Winifred sold Bancroft a batch of very handsome wood engravings by her father, Frederick Sandys (1829–1904). Sandys was also a vibrant painter, and the collector acquired two of his best. *Mary Magdalene* (c. 1859) is a half-length study of the penitent, cradling the ointment jar of legend, with her red-gold hair flowing, as Christopher Newall writes, “like molten metal across her shoulders and back,”⁶ a good example of loose hair as a sign of sexual freedom. Sandys is a lush colorist, as evidenced by the spring green and scarlet pattern of the Magdalene’s cloak and the rich dark green of the brocade backdrop. The color is just as lively in *May Margaret* (1865–66); there is luminosity in the rose petal skin and red hair of the model, the scarlet silk tassel worn as an earring and the grey-green of her embroidered robe. The robe was actually African, one of two Rossetti owned and sometimes lent out. The same robe appears in Rossetti’s *Mary Magdalene* (1877).

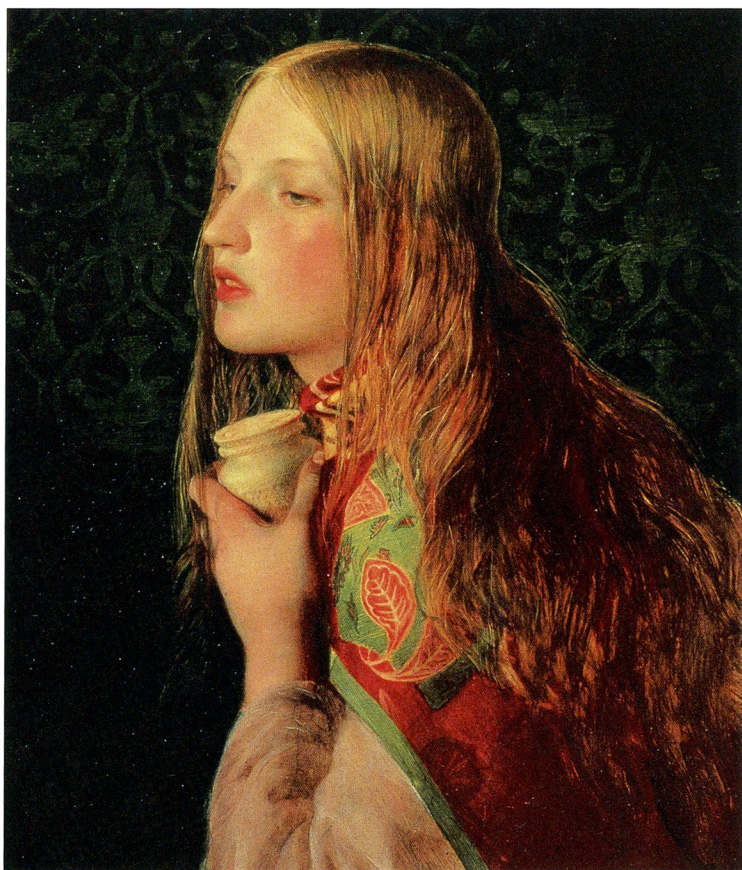
Bancroft’s purchases sometimes reflect his obsession with the personalities of the artists and their circle. *Holy Family* (c. 1856) by Rossetti’s wife, Elizabeth Siddal (1833–62), is a worthwhile addition to the collection. While technically tentative, it reveals a strong, moody sense of color and a psychologically intriguing use of space. Less interesting are pictures by Marie Spartali Stillman (1844–1927), a Rossetti model who became the second wife of William Stillman, editor of the American art magazine *The Crayon*. Competently executed, her images of attractive young women in vaguely medieval settings remain footnotes to the movement. Bancroft’s celebrity chasing paid off handsomely in the case of Fanny Cornforth. “There is a kind of voyeuristic sleuthing to Bancroft’s dogged attempts to seek out Fanny,” Margaretta S. Frederick remarks in the catalogue.⁷ After tracking Fanny down, Bancroft purchased a number of Rossetti letters, accompanied by comical, affectionate drawings of an elephant with notably long eyelashes. “Elephant” was Rossetti’s pet name for his mistress, and he signed himself “Rhinoceros,” acknowledging that they had both grown somewhat heavy-set over the years. There is a welcome strain of playfulness in the Pre-Raphaelites. The cartoons in Burne-Jones’s letters, to give another example, are as witty as those by Max Beerbohm.

This fun-loving quality contributes to the ongoing popularity of what could be called the Pre-Raphaelite biography industry, which sometimes threatens to swamp careful consideration of the art. Still, these recorded high-jinks do help leaven the hothouse aura that lingers around the cult of aestheticism. Bancroft’s taste ran toward Rossetti paintings of almost claustrophobic gorgeousness, such as *Veronica Veronese* (c. 1870–72). The title alludes to the sixteenth-century master colorist, and Rossetti described it to the patron who commissioned it, Frederick Leyland, as both a “passionate reverie” and “a study of varied Greens.” The frame carried a text in French, probably by the poet Algernon Swinburne, about “the dawn of mystical creation,” and it’s a full-blown symbolist production. The model is Alexa Wilding, and the painting is undeniably rich. But it lacks the psychological subtlety and numinous magic

Rossetti was capable of when he was deeply invested in a myth, whether he was depicting Elizabeth Siddal as *Beata Beatrix* or Jane Morris as *Proserpine*.

Rossetti's drawings and watercolors retain their freshness. Bancroft bought a *Portrait of Ruth Herbert* (c. 1858–59), in pencil, watercolor and gold paint, that has the grace of a Botticelli. In 1985, the Delaware Art Museum purchased a vibrant watercolor *Portrait of Elizabeth Siddal* (c. 1854). The museum's additions to the core Bancroft collection are well-represented in the exhibition, and they give a fuller picture of the movement. These acquisitions include a pair of Burne-Jones drawings (c. 1881–82) that are studies for the mosaics at St. Paul's Within-the-Walls, the American Church in Rome, and an elegant decorative piece, *Cupid's Hunting Fields* (1880), oil and gesso relief on mahogany panel. The decorative experiments of the Pre-Raphaelites lead directly to the Arts and Crafts movement, and the Delaware Museum has been energetic in collecting in this area. Among their acquisitions are a chair by Morris and Rossetti, decorated with *The Arming of a Knight* (1857–58), *Four Tiles with Persian-Style Floral Motif* (c. 1884) by William De Morgan (1839–1917) and splendid examples of silverwork and jewelry designed by Archibald Knox (1864–1933) for Liberty

Frederick Sandys
Mary Magdalene
c. 1859 DELAWARE
ART MUSEUM,
WILMINGTON,
DELAWARE





John Everett Millais, *The Waterfall*, 1853 DELAWARE ART MUSEUM, WILMINGTON, DELAWARE

and Company. One of the strongest pieces acquired in the last few decades is the stained-glass panel *Viking Ship* (1883–84) designed by Burne-Jones for Morris and Company. It was commissioned for Catharine Lorillard Wolfe's Newport mansion, Vinland, named for the word the Norse explorers used to describe America. A glorious demonstration of Burne-Jones's skill, the design mixes strong graphic surface patterns with an astute sense of depth. The fabulously orchestrated curves include the warm wooden hull of the ship, the billowing sail emblazoned with a boar (emblem of the goddess Freya) and cold blue, tumultuous waves.

The essays in the lavishly illustrated, 396-page catalogue vary in quality, with those specifically geared to the collection being particularly useful. The catalogue entries are in general very informative and often entertaining, particularly those by Caroline M. Hannah, John Christian and Stephen Wildman, Curator of the Ruskin Library, Lancaster University, England, guest curator of the exhibition. Many of the paintings have retained their original, artist-designed frames, and the catalogue makers are to be commended for reproducing the frames in the illustrations.

The catalogue also features a solid chapter on Charles Fairfax Murray (1849–1919), for twenty-two years Bancroft's advisor and liaison, who provided

introductions to Marie Spartali, Frederick Sandys, Burne-Jones, Jane Morris, Dante Gabriel's brother, William Michael Rossetti, and Fanny Cornforth. Murray worked as Burne-Jones's studio assistant, making copies and cartoon transfers for stained glass, before coming into his own as an agent for private collectors; he never functioned as a dealer, a trade he despised. The Pre-Raphaelites, as a rule, preferred to negotiate privately with patrons, rather than sending in their paintings to the big public exhibitions, and Bancroft's collecting pattern—buying from artists, friends of artists or patrons' estate sales—reflects that. An example of a typical provenance is Ford Madox Brown's (1821–93) watercolor *The Corsair* (1870–71). Commissioned by one of Brown's patrons, it proved an uncomfortable subject and was returned to the artist, who subsequently sold it to Bancroft's friend William Alfred Turner. Murray then bought it for Frederick Leyland, and Bancroft acquired it from Leyland's estate sale. The subject is from Byron, with the pirate hero discovering his beloved lying dead. Bancroft also acquired Brown's watercolor of another Byron subject, *The Dream of Sardanapulus* (1871), which brings a Delacroix's sense of exotic color to a scene founded on marvelous archeological detail. Henry Layard's *The Monuments of Ninevah, from Drawings Made on the Spot* had been published in 1849, making Assyrian iconography more widely accessible. Brown was a first-rate literary painter, coming up with visually dynamic compositions that crystallize a situation without belaboring narrative, and his Shakespeare subjects are particularly strong. Bancroft purchased his *Romeo and Juliet* (1869–70), a passionate balcony scene with Romeo half-suspended over a miniature Verona while still clinging to Juliet. Brown also painted one of the few landscapes in Bancroft's collection, *Hampstead: A Sketch from Nature* (1857), a view from an upper window of the semi-rural London suburb, with the spire of Christ Church on the horizon. Ruskin thought it “a very ugly subject,”⁸ but Brown's casual, plein-air scenes look vivid to modern eyes. Another landscape here is Millais's exuberant *The Waterfall* (1853), a study for the artist's portrait of John Ruskin. The highland torrent made a dynamic setting for the figure of the nature lover, but it could also be read as an emblem of passion. Millais fell in love with and eventually married Ruskin's young wife. Whatever their disagreements, the Pre-Raphaelites—and the diverse group of artists, designers and writers who congregated around Ruskin and Rossetti—shared a belief in art as an antidote to the banality of modern life and as a conduit to a mythic world of infinite vitality.

Organized and circulated by Art Services International, Alexandria, Virginia, “Waking Dreams: The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites from the Delaware Art Museum” travels to the Frick Art and Historical Center, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (July 19–October 8, 2006), the Cincinnati Art Museum (October 28, 2006–January 7, 2007), the Saint Louis Art Museum (February 3–April 15, 2007) and the San Diego Museum of Art (May 5–July 15, 2007).

NOTES

1. Stephen Wildman, et al., *Waking Dreams: The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites from the Delaware Art Museum* (Alexandria, Virginia: Art Services International, 2004), p. 32.
2. Michael Bartram, *The Pre-Raphaelite Camera: Aspects of Victorian Photography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, New York Graphic Society, 1985), pp. 136–37.
3. Sonnets XLIX, L, LI, LII from *The House of Life*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 149–50.
4. Evelyn Waugh, *Rossetti* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1928), p. 228.
5. Cited, Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), p. 153.
6. *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860–1910*, ed. by Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997), p. 104.
7. *Waking Dreams*, p. 88.
8. Cited, *Waking Dreams*, p. 196.

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