

Close Encounters: Pre-Raphaelite Photography and Painting

by Gail Leggio

The rescue of Nature from the Bastille of academic convention is a recurring motif of artistic revolutions. The artists spearheading the Victorian revolution were the Pre-Raphaelites, inspired by but rarely slavishly following the gospel of John Ruskin. They were part of a broader cultural phenomenon: artists and scientists were both searching for fresher, more truthful ways of understanding the world, and the interests of the Victorian polymath were often cross-disciplinary. Ruskin, the most influential art critic of the age and a fine draftsman, was a dedicated amateur geologist and botanist, for example. The fledgling discipline of photography, which straddled the worlds of art and science, developed out of the experiments of passionate amateurs such as Roger Fenton, Lewis Carroll and Julia Margaret Cameron. The relationships between photographers and painters are particularly complex. "The Pre-Raphaelite Lens: British Photography and Painting, 1848–1875," recently on view at the National Gallery of Art, explored the cross-pollination through an exhibition of a hundred photographs and twenty paintings.

The painter William Bell Scott, an associate of the Pre-Raphaelites but not a member of the Brotherhood, wrote in his *Autobiographical Notes*: "The seed of the flower of Pre-Raphaelitism was photography....History, genre, medievalism, or any poetry or literality, were allowable as subject, but the execution was to be like the binocular representations of leaves that the stereoscope was then beginning to show." While this assertion oversimplifies the relationship, it points to a striking confluence of parallel techniques and priorities. Victorian painters sometimes used photographs as they would preparatory sketches; more significantly, painters and photographers were both swept up in a distinctive mid-nineteenth-century mania. As Michael Bartram writes: "the accumulation or scrutiny of detail was the energizing impulse."² The Romantic landscapists had looked up, enamored of the vast expanses of the sky. J.M.W. Turner's work was defined by his sunsets and snowstorms, John Constable's, by the infinite variety of scudding clouds. The Victorians came down to earth, examining vegetation and rock surfaces at close range. An 1856 article in *Athenaeum* praised the photographer's ability to depict "the surface of objects, the frittered crumblyness of stone, the crisp wrinkles of tree bark."³ Microscopes became popular in the 1850s, and the secrets of nature became visible at a new level.

The exhibition includes some remarkable juxtapositions of photographs and works on paper that illustrate close encounters between nature and the human eye. Ruskin's opinions about most subjects are hard to pin down, ever-evolving and often contradictory. He was ambivalent about photogra-

phy, but he used daguerreotypes. The exhibition features a daguerreotype view, *Fribourg, Switzerland, Rue de la Palme and Pont de Berne* (c. 1854 or 1856), by Ruskin and Frederick Crowley, alongside Ruskin's pen, ink and watercolor version of the view, *Fribourg* (1859). Daguerreotypes attributed to Ruskin and John Hobbs, c. 1849–52, record details of the Ducal Palace in Venice, fodder for Ruskin's architectural drawings and theories. Less obviously related but more visually compelling, Ruskin's *Rocks and Ferns in a Wood at Crossmount, Perthshire* (1847, pencil, ink, watercolor and gouache) burrows into the leafy crevices of a rocky outcrop. Ruskin's sketch appears alongside an impressive array of photographic nature studies, including Henry White's albumen print *Ferns and Brambles* (1856). Both these works are horizonless, an important compositional strategy that carries through the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic, even when the subject is more ambitious than a patch of ground primarily of botanical or geological interest. The enthusiasm for *sous bois* was not, of course, limited to Britain. Two albumen prints of the Adirondack woods (1859) by an American follower of Ruskin, William James Stillman, strongly resemble the work of Hudson River School landscapist Asher B. Durand, especially what he called his "earthbanks"—boulders, ledges, rocky streambeds and soil teeming with exposed roots.⁴

"The Pre-Raphaelite Lens" is primarily a photography show, and examples of major landscape paintings are lacking, although the catalogue authors



John William Inchbold, *The Chapel, Bolton*, 1853

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discuss important works such as John Everett Millais's outdoor portrait *John Ruskin* (1853–54), which shows the frock-coated sage in a rocky landscape at Glenfinlas, Scotland. As Tim Barringer remarks, Millais obsessively recorded the appearance of rocks and lichens on site, but he drew on photographs of flowing water, with their “distinctive frothy blur” for the stream.⁵ A lesser-known painter and Ruskin disciple, John William Inchbold, is represented by a couple of attractive paintings. *Mid-Spring* (c. 1856) presents a mass of foliage so dense that it completely fills the picture plane. A rhythmic stand of tree trunks provides strong lines, but there is no real distinction between the background screen of leafy branches and the riot of blue flowers in the foreground. Inchbold's *The Chapel, Bolton* (1853) is paired with Roger Fenton's *Bolton Abbey, West Window*, an albumen print from 1854. The site was a popular one with artists. An engraving after a Turner watercolor—with the ruined abbey characteristically pushed to one side to afford an expansive vista of somewhat exaggerated hills—was included in *Picturesque Views in England and Wales from Drawings by J.M.W. Turner* (1838). Both Inchbold and Fenton avoided Turner's angle of vision. Inchbold emphasizes the vegetation—grasses, wildflowers and moss that further mottles the deeply eroded stone; a tree half-obscures our view of the Gothic windows. Fenton's photograph offers a clearer picture of the windows' tracery. Architectural documentation was an important part of the Victorian photographer's mission.



Roger Fenton, *Bolton Abbey, West Window*, 1854

THE ROYAL PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIETY COLLECTION AT THE NATIONAL MEDIA MUSEUM

From the beginning, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood combined realism with medievalism, as their quasi-monkish appeal to art before the Renaissance underlined. As Barringer points out, photography and painting shared a double agenda: "In its first decades, photography was an intensely historicist enterprise," while "for all its appeal to the past, Pre-Raphaelitism was inherently a project of modernity."⁶ The complexities of the relationship come to the forefront when we examine how photographers and painters tackle similar historical and literary subjects. The pre-eminent photographic exponent of the poetic style was Julia Margaret Cameron, who, as Joanne Lukitsh details in the catalogue, was part of a circle that included Alfred, Lord Tennyson and the Rossetti brothers.⁷ Tennyson asked Cameron to create an album of photographs based on his *Idylls of the King*. He had been unhappy with the cavalier approach to illustration taken by the Pre-Raphaelites for the 1857 edition of his poems published by Moxon. In an 1855 letter to a friend, Rossetti defended the visual artist's autonomy, the right to "allegorize on one's own hook without killing for oneself and everyone else a distinct idea of the poet's."⁸

Cameron's Tennyson vignettes develop from the tableaux vivants, fancy-dress stagings of poetic subjects popular in the Victorian country house set. Many of Cameron's medieval scenes are aesthetically compromised by costumes and props, although her signature soft focus and attention to faces makes *A Minstrel Group* (1866) and *The Parting of Lancelot and Guinevere* (1874) emotionally affecting. These albumen prints are juxtaposed with a couple of Rossetti's superb watercolors, drenched in medievalism yet formally inventive in a modern way. The pressure of attention over the entire surface leads to a flattening of the picture plane, the color has a cloisonné richness, and the constriction of space is psychologically telling. Rossetti's *Arthur's Tomb* (1855) takes a different approach to the theme of guilty lovers handled with sentimental decorum in Cameron's photograph. The figures of Lancelot and Guinevere are uncomfortably wedged into the horizontal space under an apple tree so low it grazes the head of the kneeling queen, dressed as a nun and recoiling from her lover's insistence. Evelyn Waugh described Lancelot as "crouching and peering under the beetle-back of his shield like some obscene and predatory insect."⁹ The stone effigy of Arthur is a physical as well as psychological barrier.

Exhibition curator Diane Waggoner pairs Cameron's *A Minstrel Group*, with its pretty trio of girls, with Rossetti's powerhouse watercolor *The Blue Closet* (1857), with two queens and their attendants playing an archaic instrument, enclosed in a narrow chamber lined with blue tiles. The stylized choreography of their gestures and the heraldic compartmentalization of colors creates a dense decorative surface, while the shallow niche-like space resonates with eerie intensity. William Morris, following his master by "allegorizing on [his] own hook," wrote an ekphrastic poem on the picture that uses rhythmic language to create a Symbolist scenario based on the visual details, suggesting that the queens are captives of Pluto or Bluebeard. Extrapolating from a foreground



Julia Margaret
Cameron
A Minstrel Group, 1866
COLLECTION OF
CHARLES ISAACS AND
CAROL NIGRO

detail in Rossetti's watercolor, Morris writes: "Through the floor shot up a lily red,/With a patch of earth from the land of the dead,/For he was strong in the land of the dead."¹⁰

This kind of reliquary claustrophobia is yet another version of the Pre-Raphaelite close-up. Some of Cameron's finest images are close-up and irregularly focused shots of young women, often accompanied by titles with literary or mythic allusions, such as *Mariana*: "*She said I am a weary I would that I were dead*" (1874–75) and *Pomona* (1872). The tableaux vivants props are kept to a minimum, and the narrative dissolves to a glowing nimbus around the haunted face. This is Rossetti's strategy in his ectoplasmic portrait of Elizabeth Siddal, *Beata Beatrix* (1864–70). Alastair Grieve has suggested that Rossetti's painting was influenced by Cameron's photographs,¹¹ and a larger selection of paintings in this exhibition would have provided illuminating juxtapositions. The evidence is stronger for another of Rossetti's muses, Jane Morris, with four photographs of her, posed by Rossetti and shot by John Robert Parsons, from 1865. She wears the uncorseted, flowing aesthetic dress in favor in Pre-Raphaelite circles, and Rossetti has posed her to emphasize her long neck, masses of crisp dark hair and expressive hands. The painting included for comparison,

Jane Morris (The Blue Silk Dress), from 1868, confirms the root realism of these extravagant icons. The individuality of the women he cast as Dante's beloved and Prosepine gives Rossetti's paintings a core of power.

This realism brings to life one of the loveliest paintings in the exhibition, George Frederic Watts's portrait of Ellen Terry, *Choosing* (1864). The young beauty, with flowing red-blond hair, holds a red flower to her cheek. The dense foliage presses forward, forming a tapestried field against which her exquisite profile glows. Painter and model were briefly married: she would go on to become the greatest English actress of her time; he would become a painter of vague, idealized allegories. *Choosing* represents a confluence of Pre-Raphaelite qualities: shallow space, tightly rendered botanical detail and a celebration of beauty, with the freshness of scarlet petals matched to the paler flush of the model's skin. It's a painting with more modern appeal than another in the exhibition, by John Everett Millais, a member of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. *A Huguenot, on Saint Bartholomew's Day, Refusing to*



George Frederic Watts
Choosing, 1864
NATIONAL PORTRAIT
GALLERY, LONDON

Shield Himself from Danger by Wearing the Roman Catholic Badge (1851–52) suggests, by its cumbersome title, a narrative painting, but its real subject is the tearful parting of a pair of young people in historical costume. The space is shallow, with the couple posing in front of a meticulously detailed, ivy-covered and moss-encrusted brick wall. The wildflowers at their feet are closely observed. The Pre-Raphaelites were enamored of medieval manuscripts, with their margins full of botanical specimens, and Ruskin praised the prolix naturalism that featured as one of the characteristics of the Gothic style. In *A Huguenot*, Millais captures the fine points not only of the plants but of the girl's brown-on-black brocade dress. Yet *A Huguenot* does not rise to the first rank of Millais's paintings, because conventional sentimentality lies at the heart of all that formidable technique. We are not drawn into the world of the painting. This exhibition traces the crosscurrents between painting and photography in the aesthetic of close-looking, but there was another influence in play. Rossetti deeply admired the work of the Flemish Primitives (as they were then called) and wrote sonnets about paintings by Memling and Van Eyck. In those works, the clear-eyed focus on details—a tiny town with bridges and horsemen glimpsed through a window, the jewels on the hem of the Virgin's robe—was steeped in spiritual intensity.

Millais was certainly capable of great intensity, and the absence of one of his signature paintings here is keenly felt. For *Ophelia* (1851–52), he drew on the Shakespearean heroine's catalogue of flowers, studying the streamside vegetation in situ and with mesmerizing detail. But *Ophelia* does not have a plein-air sensibility. The model, Elizabeth Siddal, posed in a bathtub in the painter's studio, and the image has that curious composite quality that makes many Pre-Raphaelite paintings seem disorienting. The combination of vivid realism and cognitive dislocation contributes to, rather than detracts from, the highly charged atmosphere. The composition of *Ophelia* reinforces the sense of a private world of quiet madness. The curved top of the frame echoes the overhanging branches, which cocoon the figure floating through a horizonless landscape.

A number of photographers specialized in composite images, often as a way of addressing the problem that the exposure necessary for a sharp view of landscape left the sky a white blank. Gustave Le Grey and Henry Peach Robinson were pre-eminent practitioners of this technique, cobbling together two photographs taken at different times. Often, the piecemeal approach went unacknowledged, and many disapproved of such trickery. But Robinson celebrated the artifice of his albumen print *The Lady of Shalott* (1860), a deliberate attempt to mimic the style and iconography of a Pre-Raphaelite painting. He explained: "I made the barge, crimped the model's long hair....and gave her a background of weeping willows, taken in the rain that they might look dreary; and really they were very expressive...I think I succeeded in making the picture very Pre-Raphaelite, very weird and very untrue—I mean imagi-

native.”¹² As cynical—or playful—about the manipulation as Robinson is, he identifies an important aspect of Pre-Raphaelite style: realism is in the service of formal experiment. The dance between photography and painting reaches a Symbolist apotheosis in a pastel by the Belgian artist Fernand Khnopff, a continental disciple of Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones. In *Memories* (1889), Khnopff lays out a procession of seven figures, all based on photographs of his sister, Marguerite, in different poses and costumes. It’s a haunting tribute to her willowy grace, and an evocation of the persistence of memory, which Dalí would picture in wilder terms. This exhibition and its catalogue draw attention to an intriguing nexus in art history. The questions raised about the roles of mimesis and imagination continue to resonate. “The Pre-Raphaelite Lens: British Photography and Painting, 1848–1875” was on view October 31, 2010–January 30, 2011, at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. On the web at www.nga.gov

NOTES

1. Tim Barringer, “An Antidote to Mechanical Poison: John Ruskin, Photography and Early Pre-Raphaelite Painting” in Diane Waggoner et al., *The Pre-Raphaelite Lens: British Photography and Painting, 1848–1875* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2010), p. 28.
2. Michael Bartram, *The Pre-Raphaelite Camera: Aspects of Victorian Photography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, New York Graphic Society, 1985), p. 16.
3. Cited, *ibid.*, p. 18.
4. See *Kindred Spirits: Asber B. Durand and the American Landscape*, ed., Linda Ferber, with contributions by Ferber, Barbara Dayer Gallati, Kenneth J. Jackson and Sarah B. Snook (Brooklyn Museum with D. Giles Limited, London, 2007).
5. Barringer, *Pre-Raphaelite Lens*, p. 24.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
7. Joanne Lukitsh, “‘Like a Lionardo’: Exchanges between Julia Margaret Cameron and the Rossetti Brothers” in *Pre-Raphaelite Lens*.
8. Cited, Forrest Reid, *Illustrators of the 1860s*, 1928 (New York: Dover, 1975), pp. 31–32.
9. Evelyn Waugh, *Rossetti* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1928), p. 84.
10. “The Blue Closet,” *The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle*, ed., Cecil Y. Lang (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).
11. *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Gallery, Penguin Books, 1984), p. 209.
12. Cited, Bartram, pp. 171–72.