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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *I Preraffaelliti. Il Sogno del '400 italiano da Beato Angelico a Perugino, da Rossetti a Burne Jones* (Ravenna, Museo d'Arte della Città, 28 February, 2010 and as *The Pre-Raphaelites and Italy*, Oxford Ashmolean Museum, 15 September–5 December 2010) by Colin Harrison, Christopher Newall, Claudio Spadoni, Martin McLaughlin and Maurizio Isabella; *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones e il Mito dell'Italia nell'Inghilterra vittoriana* (Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, 24 February–12 June 2011) by Maria Teresa Benedetti, Stefania Frezzotti and Robert Upstone

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

I Preraffaelliti. Il Sogno del '400 italiano da Beato Angelico a Perugino, da Rossetti a Burne Jones (Ravenna, Museo d'Arte della Città, 28 February, 2010 and as The Pre-Raphaelites and Italy, Oxford Ashmolean Museum, 15 September–5 December 2010). Italian catalogue by Colin Harrison, Christopher Newall and Claudio Spadoni; English catalogue by Colin Harrison and Christopher Newall, both with additional essays by Martin McLaughlin and Maurizio Isabella. Milan, Silvana Editoriale and Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 2010. 217 pp. colour illus. ISBN: 978-1854442505; ISBN: 185-4442503

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones e il Mito dell'Italia nell'Inghilterra vittoriana (Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, 24 February–12 June 2011), exhibition and catalogue by Maria Teresa Benedetti, Stefania Frezzotti and Robert Upstone. Milan, Electa, 2011. 299 pp. colour illus. ISBN: 978-8837076474

The first exhibition began in Ravenna and then moved, with a few changes to the works on display, to Oxford. The reason for the second location was obvious, given the Ashmolean's own holdings of the work of the Pre-Raphaelites themselves and of their great champion, John Ruskin. However, Ravenna also has its Pre-Raphaelite associations. Dante Alighieri, a major inspiration for the Brotherhood and its followers ended his days there. One of the most powerful episodes in *The Divine Comedy* has associations with the city. Francesca da Polenta came from the city's ruling family; her love for Paolo Malatesta, from the ruling house of Rimini, led to their deaths and their immortalization in the work of Dante, of the Pre-Raphaelites and their associates – William Dyce, Alexander Munro, Dante Gabriel Rossetti – as well as of other writers, artists and composers.¹ Finally, the interest in the techniques of medieval art encouraged by the Pre-Raphaelites, led to the study and emulation of the Byzantine mosaics for which Ravenna is famous.

A major aim of the exhibition and of its catalogues was to ask: how 'pre-Raphaelite' were the Pre-Raphaelites: how well did they know the art of Italy before Raphael? A surprising answer that emerged early on was: to begin with, not as well as one might have expected. For the founding members of the Brotherhood, it did not come from a direct experience of Italy: Dante Gabriel Rossetti never visited the country. The exhibition in Ravenna rightly put much emphasis on the impact of engravings carried out by Carlo Lasinio (1759–1838) of the deteriorating *quattrocento* frescos in the

¹ See, for example, David Bindman *et al.* (eds.), *Dante Rediscovered* (Grassmere: Wordsworth Trust, 2007), especially 99–110; Antonella Braida and Luisa Cale (eds.), *Dante on View* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), especially Part II, 'Dante in the Visual Arts'.



Fig. 1 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast, Denies him her Salutation*, watercolour and pen on paper, 1855 (©Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford)

Camposanto of Pisa, and the work of the Nazarenes in Rome; the highly influential Scottish painter and educator, William Dyce, was an important bridge between the Nazarenes and Britain. The Ashmolean exhibition put more weight on the influence of themes from Italian literature and history. Both Ravenna and Oxford made clear the impact of Dante, seen in subjects treated by Rossetti such as *Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast, Denies him her Salutation* of 1855 (Fig. 1). Taken from the *Vita Nuova*, this episode from Dante's life became a favourite with artists, as in the case with Henry Holland's *The Meeting of Dante and Beatrice*, 1884 (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool).

But other sources of inspiration emerged as, for example, episodes from Italian history, as in Edward Burne-Jones's projected painting of *The Buondelmonte's Wedding*, an event that became associated with the origins of the Guelph-Ghibelline conflict in Italy, and treated by other artists, notably G. F. Watts.²

There was closer convergence between the exhibitions and their catalogues in the next major theme, 'Ruskin and Italy'. Ruskin's championship of the Pre-Raphaelites is well known, as is his skill as a draftsman and painter in watercolours. He shared with the Pre-Raphaelites an appreciation of the mastery of detail achieved by medieval and (early) Renaissance artists and craftsmen, and this was brought out in both exhibitions in some of his beautiful studies of, for example, the Della Scala tombs in Verona, the tomb monument to Ilaria del Carretto in Lucca and Carpaccio's *Dream of St Urusula*. What also emerged was Ruskin's readiness to use the new technology to enhance his own study of late medieval art and its introduction to a wider public, daguerreotypes

² *The Origins of the Guelph and Ghibelline Quarrel in Florence*, Watts Gallery, Compton. Watts (1817–1904) was described as 'England's Michelangelo'. The Watts Gallery at Compton in Surrey has recently been re-opened.

for example. This led on to coverage of 'Ruskin's Disciples in Italy', artists who shared Ruskin's enthusiasm for the country, its monuments and works of art, and who followed – selectively – his advice about where to go and work, like Frederic Leighton and Edward Burne-Jones. It also featured artists who worked for Ruskin to capture the monuments of late medieval art, and their details, John Bunney and Arthur Burgess for example.

In my opinion, the exhibitions then shifted off its initial theme. In 'Other Pre-Raphaelite Travellers and Italy', we were returned to painters following on from the tradition of the Grand Tour. William Holman Hunt, Edward Lear and William Bell Scott – for example – painted extremely fine landscapes and 'scenes from Italian life' which seem to have had little to do with the Pre-Raphaelite 'vision', other than Italy itself and a command of detail. This trend was accentuated by the next major section of the exhibitions, 'Giovanni Costa and the Etruscans – Painters of the Italian Landscape'. The paintings were highly evocative of Italy, and this section produced some relatively 'unknown' artists, like George Howard, ninth Earl of Carlisle, but other than in the possible case of Frederic Leighton, the Pre-Raphaelite contribution seemed diluted.

However it returned – somewhat – in Section VI 'Aestheticism – the Inspiration of the Renaissance', with a focus on the 'stunners' who helped inspire the Pre-Raphaelites and their followers. Here we have Jane Morris – a Jane Russell look-alike – in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Study for 'La Pia de' Tolomei'* (1868) or his *La Donna della Finestra* (1870) or his *Perlusca* (1871). For the exhibition, a link here was suggested in terms of voluptuous Renaissance Venetian portraits of women – not quite Pre-Raphaelite – but the theme of the exhibition was more convincingly recaptured with a section on designs Burne-Jones made for the mosaics for the American church, St Paul's within the Walls, in Rome. An earlier work by Edward Burne-Jones, *Music* of 1877 (Fig. 2), shows the influence of Italian *quattrocento* painting and sculpture on the artist with its suggestions of Luca della Robbia's Florentine *cantoria* and the landscape painting of the Venetian school.

This gave the impression, despite its relevance, of being an after-thought, in both exhibitions and their catalogues, and there were disappointing aspects to both the Ravenna and Oxford exhibitions. The central theme that was addressed was excellent – the Italian inspiration for the Pre-Raphaelitism – but there could have been a greater attempt to set early Renaissance art up against what the Pre-Raphaelites actually painted; the few early Renaissance paintings included in the Ravenna exhibition seemed to have little – if any – bearing on the Pre-Raphaelites' own work. Where were the influential works of Fra Angelico and Perugino referred to in the Ravenna exhibition? Indeed, Colin Harrison, one of the curators, made the interesting admission that the early Pre-Raphaelites had little knowledge of the pre-Raphaelites; despite his parentage, name and enthusiasm, Dante Gabriel Rossetti never visited Italy. The exhibitions suggested that a greater understanding of pre-Raphaelite art came with their followers and admirers, rather than with the 'Brotherhood' itself.

Moreover, other than in the context of mosaic, little attention was paid to the interest shown in the nineteenth century in the study and revival of medieval art forms, like fresco and painting in egg tempera on panel. The Ashmolean exhibition missed a



Fig. 2 Edward Burne-Jones, *Music*, oil on canvas, 1877 (©Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford)

trick in not introducing the public to the Pre-Raphaelite and Gothic Revival work commissioned by or for Oxford University and the Oxford colleges.

However, in both locations the exhibitions were extremely well mounted, in the impressive Museo d'Arte in Ravenna and the equally splendid reworked Ashmolean. In both, the gallery texts were excellent; in Ravenna a great deal of care was taken to explain the exhibits to the non-specialist. Both catalogues are generously illustrated and contain valuable contextual essays by: Maurizio Isabella ('Interlocking Patriotisms: Italy and England in the long Nineteenth Century'), Colin Harrison ('The Pre-Raphaelites and Italian Art before and after Raphael') and Martin McLaughlin ('The Pre-Raphaelites and Italian Literature'). The Ravenna catalogue also carries two essays by Claudio Spadoni – 'Le ragioni di una mostra' and 'Sull'incerta fortuna dei Preffarelliti in Italia' – as well as a number of introductory pieces which serve as a reminder as how ingenious our Italian colleagues can be in finding effective sponsorship even in difficult times.

As far as I could judge, both exhibitions were well and appreciatively attended. This recalled the enthralled public that came to the exhibition *Burne-Jones da Preraffaellismo al Simbolismo* held at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome in 1986. Perhaps that experience encouraged the Galleria to mount *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones e il Mito dell'Italia nell'Inghilterra Vittoriana*, February–June 2011.

The exhibition was somewhat hidden within the imposing spaces of the Galleria, but when reached it proved a gem, beautifully organized, hung and lit. Presumably coincidentally, the exhibition followed a similar argument to that of Ravenna/Oxford, and like that exhibition it made the point that the Pre-Raphaelites found inspiration in Italian art – and Italy – well beyond the strictly ‘pre-Raphaelite’; it also went well beyond the Brotherhood itself, to the contribution of the ‘post-Pre-Raphaelites’; for example the impact of Michelangelo on Burne-Jones – of which Ruskin so disapproved – was well illustrated. As in the Ravenna/Oxford exhibition, due attention was paid to the engravings carried out by Lasinio from the Camposanto frescos in Pisa and their impact on the Pre-Raphaelites and their precursors. Similarly, recognition was paid to the importance of the Arundel Society founded in the Pre-Raphaelite year of 1848, though perhaps more attention should have been given to the Society’s interest in sculpture as well as painting.

The exhibition was accompanied by a handsomely produced catalogue in which there was a close relationship between text and illustration. The catalogue is introduced by a collection of essays: Maria Teresa Benedetti (‘Il Mito dell’Italia da Turner a Rossetti e Burne-Jones’); Stephen Wildman (‘Ruskin e i grandi maestri italiani’); Maria Vittoria Marini Clarelli (‘L’eterna eta di mezzo: Edward Burne-Jones e il Medioevo Italiano’); Stefania Frezzotti (‘“Squisiti pause del tempo”: il Rinascimento di Walter Pater’); Robert Upstone (‘Un Uomo del Rinascimento: Federic Leighton e l’Italia’); Mark Bills (‘George Federic [sic] Watts e l’Influenza dell’Italia’); Silvia Danesi Squarzina (‘Medioevo revisited: the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood’); Maria Volpi (‘William Morris’). The generously illustrated catalogue that follows includes introductions to some of the sections of the exhibition. For example, Matteo Piccioni contributes as ‘postlude’ on ‘La fortuna dei Preraffaelliti in Italia’; if there are few ‘original’ Pre-Raphaelite paintings in Italian collections, they and the ‘post-Pre-Raphaelites’ certainly had an influence through: their own presence and work in the country; the anglo-phone communities in key cities; exhibitions; an active review literature. Giulio Aristide Sartorio (1860–1932) emerges as a key figure here in terms of affinity, contacts and transmission.

More could have been made of ‘History Painting’ inspired by medieval and Renaissance Italy – a subject well handled in the Ravenna/Oxford exhibition – and of the recovery of the techniques used by artists and craftsmen in the period. It is also time that the distinction between ‘England’ and ‘Britain’ be recognized; William Dyce (1806–64), a key figure in the formation of the PRB was Scots. However, throughout the Galleria’s catalogue is carefully referenced, and it contains a fairly up-to-date bibliography.

It also includes a valuable list of recent relevant exhibitions, though this was not composed in time to include ‘The Poetry of Drawing: Pre-Raphaelite Designs, Studies and Watercolours’ held in Birmingham’s Museum and Art Gallery from 29 January to 15 May 2011.³ This exhibition, while approaching the Pre-Raphaelites from a different angle, drew attention to many of the issues raised in Ravenna, Oxford and Rome, Rossetti’s fascination with Dante, for example.

³ Colin Cruise, *Pre-Raphaelite Drawing* (London: Thames and Hudson, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, 2011).

The wealth of interest in the contribution of the Pre-Raphaelites, their precursors and their followers helps to explain why a review of nineteenth century art can find a place in *Renaissance Studies*. The exhibitions under review help to illustrate and explain the fascination for medieval and Renaissance Italy through literature and the fine and applied arts in nineteenth-century Britain, representing an important contribution to the evolution of 'Renaissance studies'.

Finally, for readers of this journal, a high point of the exhibitions and catalogues under review are the studies of late medieval art, sculptural decoration and architecture carried out by Ruskin and his followers in such cities as Venice, Verona and Lucca. Why these figures continue to be regarded as illustrators, draftsmen or copyists rather than as 'artists' in their own right defeats me, but as followers of the original pre-Raphaelite tradition they would probably be pleased.⁴

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⁴ Tate Britain is running an exhibition, *Pre-Raphaelites: the Victorian Avant-Garde*, from September 2012 to January 2013.