

**Birkbeck BA History of Art,
The Unsettled Subject, Year 4
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**To What Extent was Rossetti's Painting of Women
a Turning Away from Modern Life?**

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Many of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's paintings investigate the representation of female sexuality, from the fallen woman in *Found* (Figure 4, started as sketches in 1853 but never finished), to the adulterous woman in *Arthur's Tomb: The Last Meeting of Lancelot and Guinevere* (Figure 3, 1855, Tate Gallery), the woman as sexual object in *Bocca Baciata* (Figure 5, 1859, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) and as femme fatale in *Lady Lilith* (Figure 6, 1864-9, Delaware Art Museum). However, except for a few works such as *Found*, he does not present contemporary social issues with a moral message. Rossetti was more concerned with representing beauty and sexuality and he engaged with them in a novel way that is often now regarded as a precursor to the work of the Aesthetes. He can therefore be seen not as a painter of modern life but as a modern painter of life.

I shall show that far from turning away from modern life Rossetti was in the vanguard of those avant garde artists who were exploring sexuality in new and modern ways.

What is Modern Life Painting?

John Tupper wrote, 'every poet, every painter, every sculptor will acknowledge, his best and most original ideas are derived from his own time.'¹ Note that Tupper is saying that the ideas are derived from contemporary issues not that the subject had to be contemporary.

His thought ran counter to the teaching of the Royal Academy which, based on the *Discourses* of Joshua Reynolds, encouraged working in the style of the Old Masters and praised history painting as the highest genre.² History painting was never popular with private patrons but there were many popular genre paintings of contemporary scenes, such as William Collins, *Rustic Civility* (Figure 8, 1833, Victoria and Albert Museum) although they

¹ J. Tupper, 'The Subject in Art (II)', *The Germ* (London: Aylott & Jones, 1850), p. 121 printed in facsimile in A. Rose, *The Germ: The Literary Magazine of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1992). A similar idea was expressed by Charles Baudelaire, 'The painter, the true painter for whom we are looking will be he who can snatch its epic quality from the life of today, and can make us see and understand, with brush or with pencil, how great and poetic we are in our cravats and our patent-leather boots.' Baudelaire's review of the Salon of 1845, quoted from S.F. Eisenman's *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History* (London, Thames & Hudson, 2002), p. 13.

² B. Taylor, *Art for the Nation: Exhibitions and the London Public 1747-2001*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 20-28. The ideas in history painting were derived from the classical although the moral theme was intended to be relevant to the contemporary viewer.

were inevitably sentimental and uncontroversial.³ In the 1850s modern life works with a strong moral lesson become popular, such as Augustus Egg, *Past and Present, No. 1, 2 and 3* (1858, The Tate Gallery). The message of many of these paintings concerned the consequences to women who strayed from a strict moral code—so called fallen women. Egg presented the consequences as fatal; the wife whom the husband believed had committed adultery is thrown into prostitution which results in her death under a London bridge (Figure 7).⁴

The representation of female sexuality and women's role in society were important themes for many artists, not just Rossetti, for example, Coventry Patmore's *Angel in the House*, John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* and George Hicks's *Woman's Mission* trilogy (Figure 9, 1863, *Companion of Manhood* is in the Tate Gallery, the other two works are now lost).⁵ However, most artists would only present sexuality in a moral context and the fallen woman was, as Egg illustrates, beyond redemption. The harshness of this view was tempered in some paintings, for example, William Holman Hunt shows a fallen woman in his *Awakening Conscience* (Figure 10, 1853-4, The Tate Gallery) and to a modern viewer the bright sunlight suggests the possibility of redemption but Ruskin's letter to *The Times* shows he expected the woman to fall into street prostitution which was seen to lead inevitably to decline and death through 'moral gravitation'.⁶

Rossetti deals with sexuality without such obvious moral overtones except in a few images of contemporary scenes such as *Found*, which was never completed and *The Ladies of Marlboro' Street* (c. 1846) which is a sketch showing a man pinned to a wall by two women in Marlboro' Street, a street that was infamous for its criminal element. On the wall is a poster for the 'Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge' and another on venereal

³ T. Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1998), p. 87-8.

⁴ The death of prostitutes was often associated with bridges and the Thames, perhaps based on the idea of baptism and a final cleansing away of sin; a form of redemption after death.

⁵ C. Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (Massachusetts, Kessinger, 2004, first published 1854) and J. Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1293>, accessed 16th January 2007).

⁶ Barringer (1998), p. 96-7. The possibility of redemption was widely discussed and many criticized Egg's harsh morality. 'The law of "moral gravitation" that meant one slip led to inevitable fall was opposed by Gladstone, Dickens and Christina Rossetti who were bent on the rehabilitation of the "fallen" woman', R. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 92-93. Bullen also mentions that Hunt criticized Egg's painting and said 'it is by no means...a matter of course that when a woman falls she should die in misery.' However, the fact that Hunt expresses himself this way shows it was a commonly held view.

disease.⁷ However, the majority of his works are contemporary portraits or have an historic, often medieval setting. By disassociating his representation of female sexuality from a contemporary setting with its requirement for a moral message Rossetti had more freedom to explore sexuality itself. However, we shall see that this turning away from a contemporary setting did not prevent his work from being criticized. *Bocca Baciata*, the first of his 'floral heads with floral attributes', shocked many people including Hunt, who wrote to Thomas Combe the following year that he equated its 'gross sensuality' with 'foreign prints', that is, pornography.⁸

Rossetti's Early Work

Rossetti's early paintings such as *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (Figure 1, 1848-9, The Tate Gallery) and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (Figure 2, 1849-50, The Tate Gallery) were not modern subjects but were seen as morally acceptable although for many they were too Catholic.⁹ However, to a modern viewer the Virgin Mary in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* has sexual associations, unusually she is shown facing towards us, she is wearing a thin nightdress and cowering before Gabrielle who is clad only in a thin gown open down the side. Even the thrusting lily stalk he holds suggests physical impregnation rather than spiritual union.

From the beginning Rossetti's representation of women was ambiguous. The reason for this ambiguity may be related to the story he wrote for the first issue of *The Germ* about Chiaro dell'Erma, a painter from Arezzo who comes face to face with his soul which Rossetti presents as female.¹⁰ The fact that he presents an artist's soul as female is often ignored but he may be suggesting a sexual ambiguity within the artist, or within all of us. He raises questions about the nature of self and may be suggesting that within us there is an ambiguity or dialogue between male and female.

During the 1850s Rossetti explored sensuality through medieval allegory and in his poem *Jenny*. *Jenny* had a long and complex gestation, it was begun as early as 1848, was rewritten in 1858, buried with his dead wife in 1862, dug up in 1869 and published in

⁷ See the Rossetti Archive, <http://www.rossettichive.org/docs/s21.raw.html>, accessed 16th January 2007.

⁸ 'female heads with floral attributes' was a phrase used by W. M. Rossetti, Bullen (1998), p. 110. Hunt described *Bocca Baciata's* 'gross sensuality of a revolting kind peculiar to foreign prints', see E. Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Publishing, 2000), p. 108.

⁹ Bullen (1998), p. 33, the title was changed to *The Annunciation* to avoid the imputation of popery.

¹⁰ D. Rossetti, *Hand and Soul, The Germ* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1992), pp. 23-33

1870.¹¹ The subject matter was modern and the idea of writing the poem as a stream of thought during a night with a prostitute was daring and provocative. As Bullen points out the centre of discourse does not concern the reaction of male sexuality to female but the 'ambiguous, fantasmagoric, and troubling responses within the libido itself.'¹² The poem concerns the 'ricocheting of the mind between the extremes of purity and impurity.' In this sense it is a moral poem that tries to deal honestly with basic human feelings and emotions.

Although most of the critics were enthusiastic one called 'Thomas Maitland', later revealed as the poet Robert Buchanan, wrote a critical sixteen page article in *Contemporary Review* entitled '*The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr D. G. Rossetti*'.¹³ It is worth quoting Buchanan, even though it concerns Rossetti's poetry, as I will argue that this was how many Victorians would see his paintings of female beauties.

*Here is a full-grown man, presumably intelligent and cultivated, putting on record for other full-grown men to read, the most secret mysteries of sexual connection, and that with so sickening a desire to reproduce the sensual mood, so careful a choice of epithet to convey mere animal sensations, that we merely shudder at the shameless nakedness...It is simply nasty.*¹⁴

It is clear that Rossetti's work produced a very strong reaction although the sexual and sensual accuracy conveyed by the work is not denied. What he objects to is that someone would choose to represent it.¹⁵

In the late 1850s Rossetti influenced a new generation of artists.¹⁶ One of Rossetti's close friends, the poet Algernon Swinburne, presented a theory of art's independence in his review of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* in 1862 and he was the first to use the English phrase 'art for art's sake' in his work *William Blake* published in 1868.¹⁷ Swinburne's

¹¹ J. Seigel, 'Jenny: The Divided Sensibility of a Young and Thoughtful Man of the World', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 1969), pp. 677-693 and R. Sheets, 'Pornography and Art: The Case of "Jenny"', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 14, No. 2. (Winter, 1988), pp. 315-334.

¹² Bullen (1998), p. 70

¹³ B. and J. Dobbs, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Alien Victorian* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1977), pp. 180-184. It is worth noting that, as Buchanan pointed out, most of the other critics were friends of Rossetti, see Waugh (1975), p. 153.

¹⁴ Dobbs (1977), pp. 181-2.

¹⁵ Although it was one of the few negative reviews it affected Rossetti deeply, 'he collapsed pitifully under the unwonted strain of notoriety.' and his brother found him "past question not entirely sane.' Waugh (1975), p. 176.

¹⁶ D. Corbett, *The World in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848-1914* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 67

¹⁷ E. Prettejohn, *Beauty and Art: 1750-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 124-130. The equivalent French phrase 'l'art pour l'art' was first adopted as a slogan by Théophile Gautier although he was not the first to use the phrase.

ideas were supported by Walter Pater, an Oxford don, in his book *The Renaissance*.¹⁸ Both make it clear they believe all works of art have lasting value only because of their beauty and this is what makes the work modern at any period and 'for the English critics,...modern-life subject matter *per se* is relatively unimportant.' As Burne-Jones wrote, in his own mind he escaped to 'that strange land that is more true than real.'¹⁹

Later Swinburne acknowledged his aesthetic thinking was derived from the work of 'Gabriel Gautier and of Théophile Rossetti (*sic*)'.²⁰ It is clear that Rossetti was one of the leading artists in the movement to reject the need for art to have any moral, didactic or reforming role. Swinburne even rejects Baudelaire's claim that beauty 'shows us a glimpse, a *correspondence* of Heaven' as he sees art's value as lying entirely within itself.²¹

This suggests Rossetti was creating what he saw as a beautiful poem or image without any consideration for its moral purpose. However, I believe that although his paintings were not didactic they were dealing with his own emotions. In 1899 William Michael could write 'the only satisfactory works of art are those which exhibit the very soul of the artist. To work for fame or self-display is a failure, and to work for direct moral proselytizing is a failure; but to paint that which your own perceptions and emotions urge you to paint promises to be a success for yourself, and hence a benefit to the mass of beholders.'²² A view Rossetti expressed nearly fifty years earlier in his story *Hand and Soul*.

Rossetti's Modern Life Painting - *Found*

Of all his works the one most associated with the conventional meaning of 'modern life' was *Found*, a painting with a moral message in a contemporary setting. Although he never finished it he regarded it as one of his most significant works and explained its role was in 'furnishing a refutation...against poetic painting such as I follow...I mean the charge that a

¹⁸ Prettejohn (2005), pp. 129-130.

¹⁹ Corbett (2004), p. 27

²⁰ Théophile Gautier was the French poet to whom Baudelaire dedicated *Les Fleur du mal* and who wrote extensively on art for art's sake.

²¹ Prettejohn (2005), p. 126. A view that is consistent with Immanuel Kant's description of the beautiful in *Critique of Judgement*.

²² C. Harrison, ed. *Art in Theory 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 426-434

painter adopts the poetic style simply because he cannot deal with what is real and human.’²³

If this statement is taken at face value the painting was a defence against certain types of criticism and we know Rossetti was very sensitive about any criticism. If this was its role then his failure to finish the work could be seen as understandable as once finished it would be judged as to whether he had succeeded but as a work in progress it acted as a protective blanket for his sensitive ego.

The painting shows a prostitute cowering away from her former sweetheart and as Rossetti describes it she ‘has sunk under her shame upon her knees...while he stands holding her hands as he seized them, half in bewilderment and half guarding her from doing herself harm.’²⁴ The two figures are ciphers that stand for the innocent rural drover confronting the commodified urban worker. Rossetti described artists as prostitutes and he is perhaps presenting prostitution as a way of understanding the role of the working woman.²⁵

The urban environment created the specific working conditions for both artist and prostitute and the nature of their transactions became purely financial and part of the economic circumstances of living and working in the city. There was a great deal of anxiety about urban prostitution and the working woman because they created new values and were a visible part of the urban crowd. Prostitution was part of this bigger issue of legibility and decoding, seeing and being seen in the city. The city visually overloads the viewer, people stream by and must be codified and understood if they are to be dealt with and confronted or even coped with. One amusing example of the uncertainty of decoding in Victorian streets is provided by Lynda Nead who shows a contemporary illustration of a woman approached in the street by a ‘Philanthropic Divine’ to whom she replies ‘Bless me, Sir, you’re mistaken. I am not a social evil, I am only waiting for a bus.’²⁶

²³ Written in 1879 to William Graham and quoted in L. Tickner, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), p. 22.

²⁴ L. Tickner, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), p. 19.

²⁵ ‘I have often said that to be an artist is just the same thing as to be a whore, as far as dependence on the whims and fancies of individuals is concerned.’ see S. Andres, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel: Narrative Challenges to Visual Gendered Boundaries* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2004), p. 37.

²⁶ L. Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 63.

Everything was displayed for sale in the city. Plate glass and more extensive gas lighting were introduced and there were large window displays where people could stroll and look and look at each other looking.²⁷ There was a plethora of over visibility and a mixing of classes and ages in a way that had never occurred before. If everyone worked for a salary then potentially everyone could be bought and this made everyone a commodity to be traded. The only exception was men of independent means who were above the trading system and could parade around the throng observing what could be bought.²⁸

Found is a modern life painting that makes a moral statement concerning the shame experienced by a fallen woman on being confronted by her childhood innocence but significantly it was never finished.²⁹ Perhaps Rossetti could never resolve whether shame was appropriate or more generally whether it was the role of painting to make moral statements. Or possibly *Found* was Rossetti's equivalent of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it was kept by him throughout his life, never shown in public and represented all the evil of his life.³⁰

Modern Life as Medieval Allegory

In the 1850s Rossetti painted a number of watercolours of medieval scenes based on King Arthur's court, the life of Dante and the legend of St. George. *Arthur's Tomb* deals with what was an important contemporary social issue, that of the conflict between platonic and physical love. The painting is based on Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* which Rossetti described as one of the two greatest books in the world, the other being the Bible.³¹

The painting is claustrophobic with the three figures imprisoned by a threatening 'sky' of apple tree branches perhaps referring to Eve's apple and the sin that Launcelot and Guenever have committed and this reading is reinforced by the snake wriggling through the grass. Launcelot with his passion-red tunic and beetle carapace shield crushes Arthur's effigy as he pushes forward to try to take one last kiss from Guenever, as in Malory's words he

²⁷ Nead (2000), pp. 83-108.

²⁸ In France Baudelaire called such people flâneurs and saw them as exemplifying modern life as they impartially observed and decoded everything.

²⁹ The reality may have been very different; Fanny Cornforth did quite well out of prostitution and bought a pub that Rossetti often visited in his old age and Annie Miller was for years the mistress of the seventh Viscount Ranelagh and eventually married his rich cousin.

³⁰ Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) describes a beautiful young man who wishes his portrait would fade rather than himself. His wish is granted and although he leads a dissolute life he remains looking young as the portrait in his attic slowly looks more and more evil.

³¹ A. Bowness, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate, 1984), p. 276-7.

says, "I pray you kisse me once and never more".³² She holds up her hand between his mouth and hers and replies, "Nay," said the queene, "that I shall never do." Evelyn Waugh describes it as 'the only complete expression in Rossetti's art of this stress of constricted energy which is so characteristic of his life.'

The painting is not a simple visual description of the story told by Malory as in Malory's tale the tomb is in Glastonbury but the meeting takes place in Almesbury 'in the presence of all the ladies and gentlemen'. Rossetti has chosen to present an encounter charged with erotic tension rather than a romantic scene idealising chivalry. Although I am not suggesting a simple autobiographical interpretation the painting was produced shortly after he is thought to have had sexual relations with Annie Miller when William Holman Hunt was away in the Holy Land.³³

Le Morte d'Arthur is a medieval poem that presents not courtly platonic love but seduction and adultery. Victorian categories for female morality were bipolar but Malory's poem allows a much more elastic interpretation of sexuality. Guenever is an adulterous woman who through her rejection of Launcelot and life as a nun hopes to 'sit on the right hand of God' when she dies. Rossetti shows the moment of her final temptation and her rejection leading, she believes, to her redemption. Unlike much Victorian morality, such as that mentioned in Egg's *Past and Present*, Rossetti shows the possibility of redemption. The painting can therefore be seen as an allegory of modern times and a comment on Victorian morality, presented as an illustration of a medieval poem.

Rossetti does not make it clear how we should interpret his medieval paintings and, in 1870 he wrote, 'My own belief is that I am a poet...a good deal of my paintings being pot-boiling and no more—whereas my verse, being unprofitable, has remained ... unprostituted.'³⁴ However, this sentiment is undermined by the overlap between his poetry and his painting which, as we saw with *Jenny*, can be used to throw light on each other.

³² T. Wright (ed.) Sir Thomas Malory, *La Mort d'Arthur: The History of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*, Vol III (London, John Russell Smith, 1858), p. 338. The idea of his shield being a carapace is from E. Waugh, *Rossetti: His Life and Works* (London, Duckworth, 1975, first published 1928), p. 93-95

³³ B. and J. Dobbs, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Alien Victorian* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1977), p. 113 and D. Hunt, *My Grandfather, His Wives and Loves* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1969), p. 137-8.

³⁴ O. Doughty and J. Wahl (eds.), *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Vol. II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-1967), pp. 849-51.

The Aesthetes and Modern Life

From 1859 virtually all his major works were images of beautiful, sexually inviting or intimidating woman. Although they are not depictions of modern life they do express what in the 1860s and 70s was a very modern view of the role of art. They are therefore not a window onto a modern life subject but an artistic work that reflects the artistic thinking of the avant garde artists of the time.

In the final volume of *Modern Painters* in 1860 Ruskin wrote 'the painter [Titian] saw that sensual passion in man was, not only a fact, but a Divine fact.'³⁵ A year later, Rossetti painted *Bocca Baciata*, the first of his female figures in the Venetian Renaissance style. These paintings are seen by many to define what we mean by Pre-Raphaelite although they are very different from the early Pre-Raphaelite work of 1848-53. Rossetti's work was prefigured by Joanna Boyce's *Elgiva* (1855, private collection) in so far as he knew and admired the work and it introduces an entirely new pictorial type consisting of powerful images of women with an expression of reverie.³⁶ Not all later critics liked the paintings, Waugh described them as a 'monotonous series of women's heads' which resulted from his 'grasping desire for money'.³⁷

Bocca Baciata was commissioned by George Boyce and Fanny Cornforth was the model. The title gives us a clue to the painting, it is a line from Boccaccio's *The Decameron* which means 'a kissed mouth' and it continues 'does not lose its freshness but renews itself like the moon'.³⁸ The story is about an irresistible Eastern woman who makes love to eight men before her marriage to a ninth, as a virgin. The painting raises the question of whether it is a portrait of Cornforth or an idealised image of a beautiful woman. Boyce 'shared at least some of Fanny Cornforth's favours with him [Rossetti]' and so it is possible he painted her portrait for Boyce.³⁹ Later paintings of female heads were painted on commission for patrons who probably did not know the model and so they were purchasing them as beautiful heads.

³⁵ Bullen (1968), pp. 101-2 and Prettejohn (2005), p. 116.

³⁶ Prettejohn (2000), p. 67-71.

³⁷ It should be noted that Waugh found *Beata Beatrix* (1864-70) 'perhaps, the most purely devotional and spiritual work of European art since the fall of the Byzantine Empire', Waugh (1975), pp. 98 and 130.

³⁸ Bullen (1998), p. 91 and A. Grieve, 'Rossetti and the scandal of art for art's sake in the early 1860s', E. Prettejohn, (ed.), *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 22-23.

³⁹ Waugh points out the ambiguity between representation and idealisation, 'the fact remains that all the voluptuous figures do bear a most confusing resemblance to Mrs. Schott [Fanny Cornforth], and all the

I have shown that many eminent Victorians thought Egg's bipolar view too harsh but *Bocca Baciata* goes much further than their well meaning reforms. Griselda Pollock describes it as a 'very sensuous treatment in paint of flesh, flowers, hair and jewellery' and although today it is almost decorous it was then using the 'bawd' of colour as a 'celebration of female sexuality.'⁴⁰ As Bullen puts it he 'confronted or contested contemporary moralizing discourses about fallen women by frankly celebrating the sexualised woman without any of the compensating didactic contextualization.'

His later paintings went further, a half-length nude, *Venus Vericordia* (1864-8), his only large-scale nude, caused a break with Ruskin and 'among the circle of buyers with whom he dealt there was no demand for such works [nudes]; the worthy old men were frankly shy of them, and Mr. Valpy even went so far as to refuse place in his collection to a figure wearing a sleeveless gown.'⁴¹

Two years after his wife's death Rossetti started *Lady Lilith*, the first of his images of women whose sexual attraction was associated with pain and death.⁴² The original painting was of Fanny Cornforth but at his patrons request it was overpainted with the head of Alexa Wilding.⁴³ In the frame is a sonnet that clearly describes her evil intentions over men and she is one of the first images of what we now call the femme fatale, a female type that was much painted by the Symbolists and became 'one of the sources of Art Nouveau'.⁴⁴ The legend of Lilith, Adams first wife, makes her responsible for libidinal dreams and fantasies

pensive ones – even those that are designedly portraits of quite other people - to Mrs. Morris', Waugh (1975), p. 134

⁴⁰ Bullen (1998), p. 93, 104 and 108.

⁴¹ Waugh (1975), p. 136.

⁴² V. Allen, "'One Strangling Golden Hair": Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 66, No. 2. (Jun., 1984), pp. 285-294 and E. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', *Transactions and Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America*, Vol. 99, No. 5. (Oct., 1984), pp. 936-954.

⁴³ According to Bullen Rossetti was 'almost certainly having sex with Fanny Cornforth in January 1859' and was enamoured of Jane Burden from their first meeting in 1857 and 'shadows of treachery and adultery hand over Rossetti, Morris and Burden', see Bullen (1998), p. 108.

⁴⁴ For example, some of the works of Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, Fernand Khnopff, Gustav Klimt, and Edvard Munch, see Nicoll (1970), p. 83. The sonnet reads:

Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told
(The witch he loved before the gift of Eve.)
That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,
And her enchanted hair was the first gold.
And still she sits, young while the earth is old,
And subtly of herself contemplative,
Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,
Till heart and body and life are in its hold.

and breaking up marriages. Rossetti presents a 'Modern Lilith' who combines the 'double edged attributes of unobtainable beauty and irresistible power.'⁴⁵

Amongst Rossetti's papers when he died was found a scholarly letter describing 'Lilith, about whom you ask for information, was the first strong-minded woman and the original advocate of woman's rights.'⁴⁶ The 'woman question' was much discussed in the 1860s and the Women's Emancipation Movement was ridiculed, criticised and supported by the magazines of the period. In 1867 *Punch* lampooned John Stuart Mill when his Women's Suffrage Bill was defeated in Parliament. One inevitable consequence of the women's rights movement was seen to be that women would refuse to do their duty and have children, to the detriment of the Empire. Reinforcing this idea, Lilith rebelled against Adam and is known as a baby stealer and baby killer.

It is unlikely that Rossetti supported women's rights but it is possible that these later paintings were making a moral statement about a contemporary social issue. We know from his letters that although Rossetti was very unconventional in his life style he was more conventional in his beliefs and was always very happy to amend his paintings to suit the whims of his clients. His female heads were popular and *Astarte Syriaca* (1877) sold for £2,100, a large sum for any Pre-Raphaelite work. Such women as Lilith and Astarte were mythological but were also a very modern type of woman, one that was definitely not an 'angel in the house' but liberated, powerful and dangerous.

In 1910, the year Hunt died, Roger Fry held an exhibition called *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*. 'Fry and his colleague, Clive Bell, venerated those artists they considered the masters of pure design.'⁴⁷ But Hunt had recently defined the Pre-Raphaelites as a morally superior English school and this may have helped damage its reputation as far as Fry and his colleagues were concerned as they considered a didactic morality as positively harmful to a painting's aesthetic quality and it certainly ruled it out of their modernist project.

However, when Fry reviewed Rossetti's watercolours in 1916 he was puzzled by Rossetti's 'close knit unity of design' and he thought if he had taken 'just the next step' he would have been a leading early modern artist. The Pre-Raphaelites stayed out of favour

⁴⁵ Bullen (1998), p. 136-7, Bullen uses the term 'Modern Lilith', and the quotation is from Anthony Graham.

⁴⁶ Allen (1984), p. 292

⁴⁷ Tickner (2003), p. 71-72 for the quotes in this and the next paragraph.

from 1910 to 1960 when they began their rise in popularity, academic respectability and market value. William Fredeman described them in 1965 as 'the dominant animating force in English aesthetics through four decades of the nineteenth century' and, with the rise in post-modernism, Rossetti's reputation has risen further; Jerome McGann claims that Rossetti's work forecasts the critique post-modernism would raise against the modernism project and that rightly understood he was a conceptual artist, like Duchamp. Although I don't believe Rossetti was raising such fundamental questions about the meaning of art he was raising questions about human sexuality and Victorian morality.

Conclusion

The phrase 'modern life' leads us into the minefield of modernity and modernism and the endless dialogue concerning the relative importance of subject and form. Baudelaire is often seen as one of the first to discuss and define modernity in art. There is no simple definition but it is generally seen as a project rather than a style and part of the project was to find ways to represent contemporary issues and present them in a novel way. It might be argued that the roots of modernism lay in social comment, as in Rossetti's work, or a desire to escape the rigid formality of the academic tradition, a desire that inspired all of the Pre-Raphaelites. Many art historians now regard it as a formal property associated with the self-defining aspects of painting, for example, Greenberg wrote that each art is obliged 'to determine, through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself.'⁴⁸ In the case of painting Greenberg saw the artistic project as recognizing and making the viewer aware of painting as dealing with a flat surface by covering it with pigment or other materials and separating it from its surrounding.

But this is not enough, Clark writes as part of his definition of modernism 'Art seeks out the edges of things, of understanding; therefore its favourite modes are irony, negation, deadpan, the pretence of ignorance or innocence.'⁴⁹ Although Clark was talking about Paris in the 1860s he provides a way to approach Rossetti's work. Despite the large amount that has been written about Rossetti's female heads with floral ornaments they continue to give rise to multiple interpretations. They can be seen as a form of erotic kitsch in the same genre

⁴⁸ Greenberg is quoted from T. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (London, Thames & Hudson, 2003), p. 11.

⁴⁹ Clark (2003), p. 12.

as the more sentimental Keepsake pictures or they can be seen as precursors of the Aesthetes and Symbolists and even the Art Nouveau movement.

I shall not attempt the fruitless exercise of placing Rossetti within the ranks of those engaged in the modernism project, if there ever were such a project, but he was a leading avant garde artist in the English artistic movement of the 1860s and 1870s and although he turned away from representing modern life as contemporary social issues in a contemporary setting with a didactic moral purpose it could be argued that was why his representation of sexuality was so modern.

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Illustrations



Figure 1: Dante Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1848-9, Tate Britain



Figure 2: Dante Rossetti, *Ecce Ancilla Domini! (The Annunciation)*, 1849-50, Tate Britain



Figure 3: Dante Rossetti, *Arthur's Tomb*, 1860, Tate Britain



Figure 4: Dante Rossetti, *Found*, 1854, Delaware Art Museum



Figure 5: Dante Rossetti, *Bocca Baciata*, 1859, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Figure 6: Dante Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*, 1868, Delaware Art Museum



Figure 7: Augustus Egg, *Past and Present, No. 3*, 1858, Tate Britain



Figure 8: William Collins, *Rustic Civility*, 1833, Victoria and Albert Museum



Figure 9: George Elgar Hicks, *Woman's Mission: Companion to Manhood*, 1863



Figure 10: William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853