LIMOGES: BEAUTY IN A BOX • ENGLAND'S LEGENDARY HAM HOUSE • BALI HIGHLIGHTS

ART & ANTIQUES

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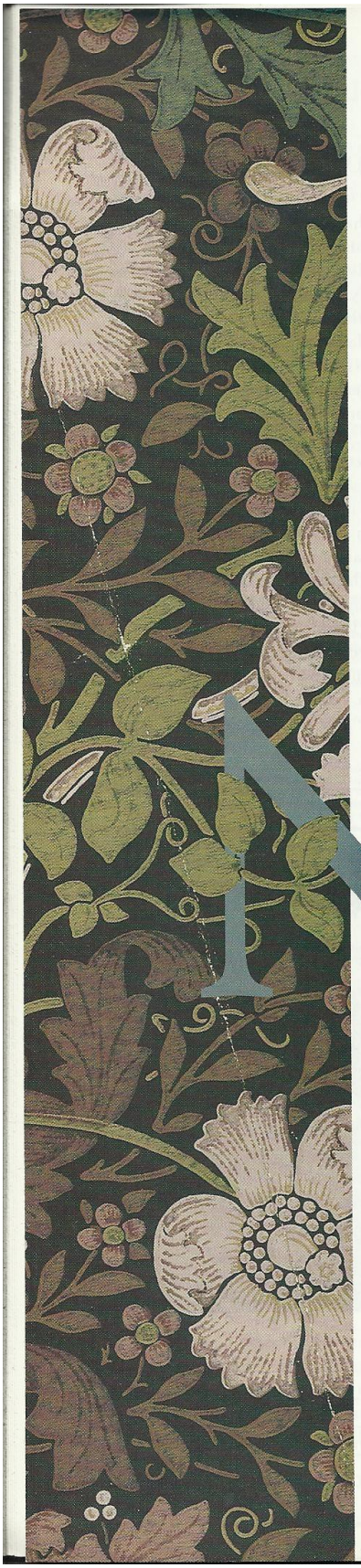
Passions of the Pre-Raphaelites

Classic Windsor Style

R.B. Kitaj: Painter at a Crossroads

Veronica Veronese
By Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1872)

U.S. $4.95
Canada $5.95



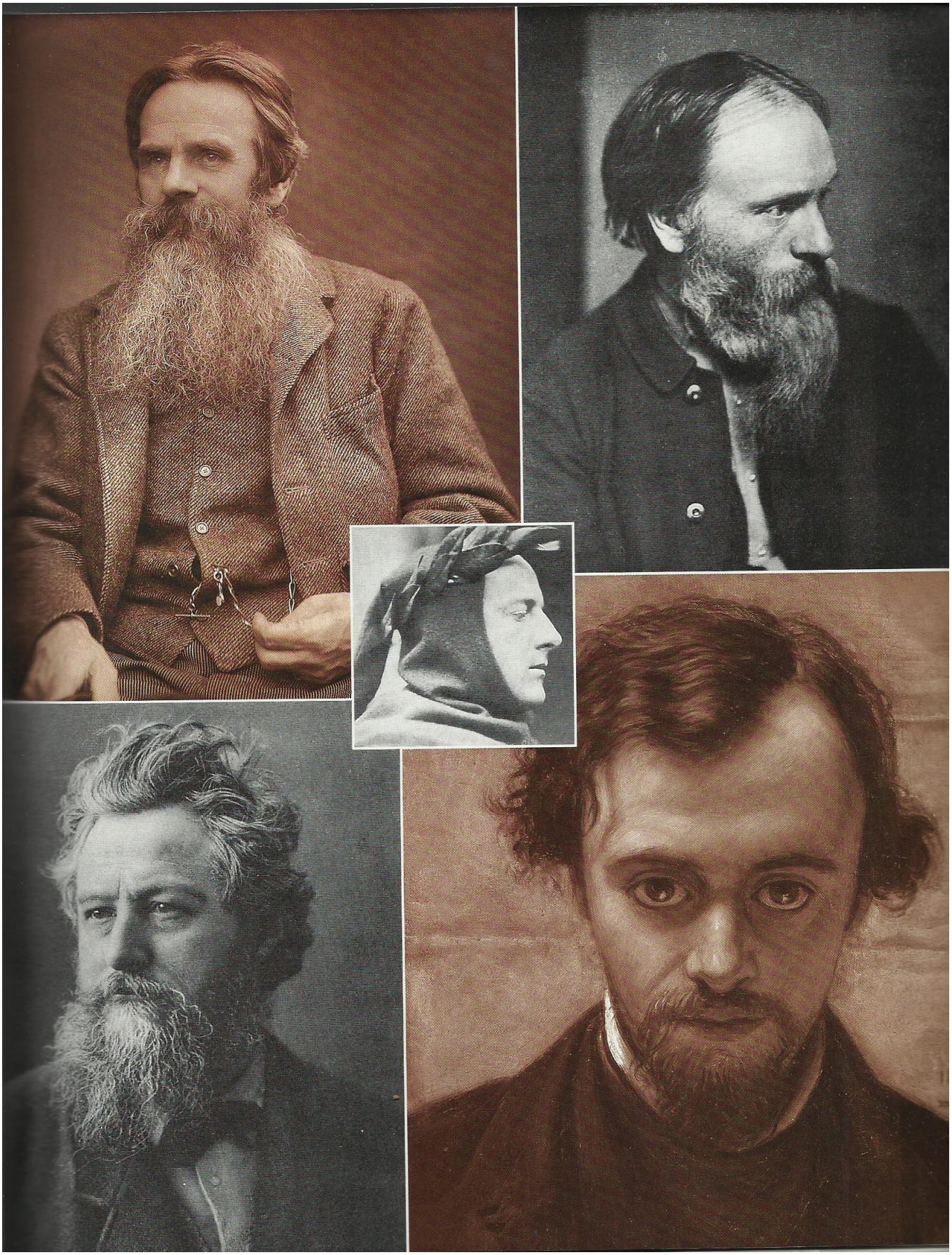
A SISTERHOOD IN BEAUTY

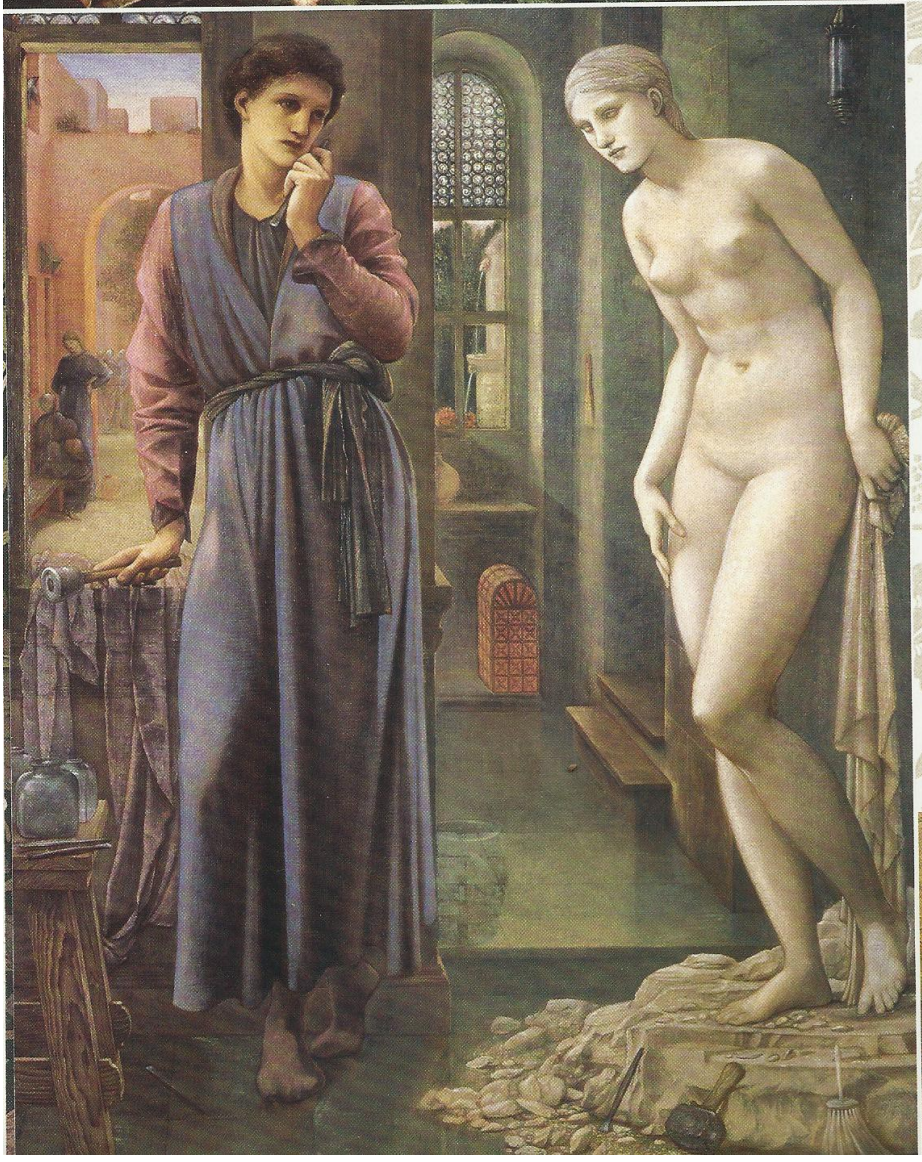
THE FACES THAT LOOK OUT AT US FROM PRE-RAPHAELITE PAINTINGS BECALM THE MODERN EYE. BUT THE WOMEN WHO WERE PAINTED SO FAMOUSLY HAD MORE TUMULTUOUS LIVES THAN THE SERENE WORKS REVEAL. ◆ BY REBECCA KNAPP

Near-death pallor suits her. It comes courtesy of the English climate, or possibly from the liquid opium she adores. Her loose red hair ripples in waves over her pale white shoulders. She stares out from the canvas with hooded eyes, sublime and unattainable. Her impossibly full red mouth is always set the same, unsmiling. You'd know her anywhere.

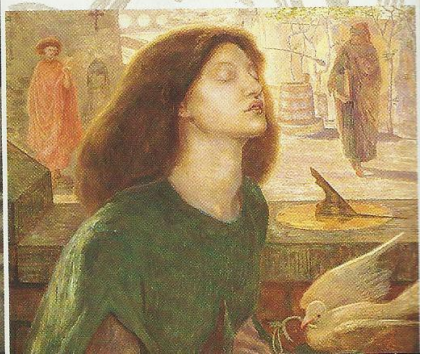
Her name was Lizzie or Jane or sometimes Fanny—the models came and went with the painters' affections. She is called the Pre-Raphaelite Beauty, but this is one of the greatest misnomers in art. The mid-19th-century paintings

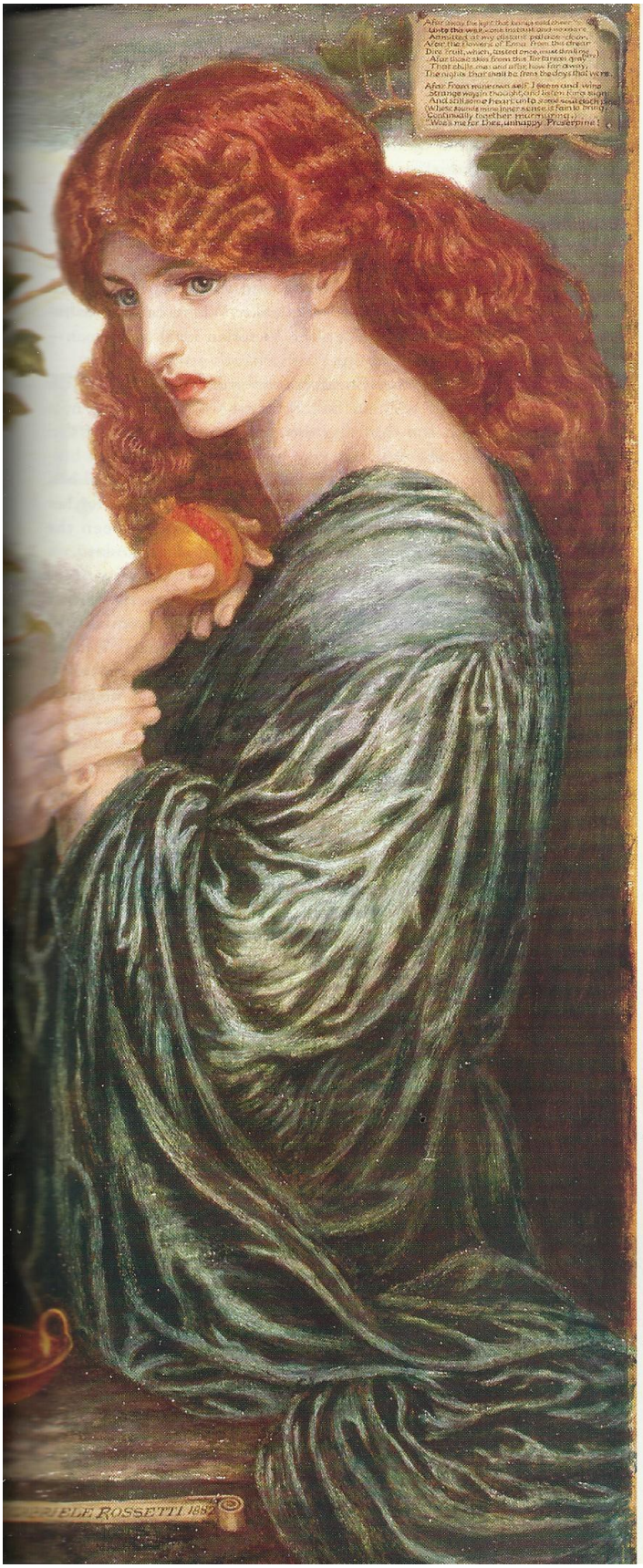
Right, clockwise from top left: William Holman Hunt, Edward Burne-Jones, Holman Hunt's mesmerizing portrait of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1870), Victorian renaissance man William Morris, and (inset) John Everett Millais.





SIDDAL APPEARED IN MANY PAINTINGS AS BEATRICE, AND ALSO AS OPHELIA. THE FATES OF THESE FICTIONAL WOMEN WERE SAD INDEED, BUT NONE WAS MORE TRAGIC THAN SIDDAL'S. NO DOUBT SHE ENJOYED THE ADORATION OF MEN LIKE DEVERELL AND ROSSETTI, BUT IN THE END, A HIGH PRICE WAS EXACTED FOR HER PLACE ON THE PEDESTAL. ◆





that record the luminous looks of these women have little to do with the movement's tenet: "Go to Nature … rejecting nothing." The paintings came out of a far more personal impulse.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was born of the tender sensibilities of seven young men in a now famous meeting in 1848 at the London home of John Everett Millais. The group, all in their teens and twenties and all loosely associated through England's Royal Academy, shared for a brief time the same rather hazy ideas. Their youth and zeal often made for juvenile antics: the "secret" PRB signature on their paintings, covert meetings, their rankings of immortals in history (they awarded zero to four stars to notables like George Washington, Fra Angelico, and Jesus Christ). And they treated the women in their lives, the wives, mistresses, and models, with the same awe accorded the immortals.

For the women, however, life on a pedestal took its toll. You need look no further than a West End milliner's shop, circa 1849, to find the most adored of the so-called Victorian Stunners, Lizzie Siddal. Plucked from her job as a shopgirl by artist Walter Deverell, Siddal was thrown headlong into the Pre-Raphaelite circle, first as a model. She never had a chance. Her constitution was what the Victorians called "delicate," and it can't have been helped by her position as the idealized female within this elite group of well-educated men unused to the company of women.

The Pre-Raphaelites had a tradition of sharing—swapping drawings, sharing studio space, and trading props. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's red beads found their way onto the necks of many women, turning up in his *Monna Vanna* and Frederick Sandys's *Medea*. The men shared their models, too, and Siddal sat for or inspired many of the most recognizable Pre-Raphaelite works created in the 1850s and early '60s, like Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* and Millais's *Ophelia*. No doubt she enjoyed the attentions of the dashing artists, but they exacted a high price for their adulation.

In turning to literature for inspiration, the Pre-Raphaelites revealed much about their notions of womanhood. Siddal, said to be captured best in *Ophelia*, is also seen as Beatrice in Rossetti's many Dante-inspired works and as St. Catherine. The fates of these women were sad indeed, but none was more tragic than Siddal's.

Her Ophelia pose would have persuaded many another woman to quit the modeling trade.

In a bathtub filled with water, Siddal reclined for hours mimicking the fair Ophelia lying dead in a stream. Millais placed lamps under the tub to try to warm the chilled water, but the flames flickered out at times, and as Millais worked, Siddal shivered.

His timing couldn't have been worse for the consumptive Siddal. In a January 1852 letter to fellow Pre-Raphaelite William Holman Hunt, Millais wrote: "I recd. a letter from Miss Siddal by which (owing to the death of her brother) it appears she cannot sit to anyone for a fortnight." Assuming that the next sitting took place about two weeks after the date of the letter, Siddal would have found herself up to her long, lovely neck in bath water in late January or early February. It's no surprise, then, that she fell ill soon after, but it's comforting to know that her father, after threatening to sue Millais, is thought to have been given fifty pounds for his daughter's troubles.

Although the demands upon Victorian-era models were great, the women were paid for their labor and immortalized as well; today they are seen in all the world's great Pre-Raphaelite collections. (One is at the Delaware Art Museum in Wilmington; another, in England's Birmingham City Museum, begins a U.S. tour in March at the Seattle Art Museum.)

Often the task of modeling fell not to professionals, but to the artists' wives. Ford Madox Brown's model-turned-wife, Emma Hill, sat for his *The Last of England*. The situation must have become unbearable for her, as Brown recorded in a diary that "Emma would not sit, so I worked from feeling."

Though painting in the open air when the weather is disagreeable may seem odd to us today, the Pre-Raphaelites sought to portray Truth in Nature in their paintings. Stephen Wildman, curator of paintings and drawings at the Birmingham museum, points out that the woman in Brown's painting has a bluish hue to her face. "Of course," he adds, "the Pre-Raphaelites believed that 'If it goes blue, you paint it blue.'"

Marriage certificates alone testify that the models were more than work-mates to the Pre-Raphaelites. Considering the repressed sexual climate of Victorian England, romance had to have some sort of societal approval. How many men of that period were able to spend extended time alone with a beautiful woman, lovingly tracing her face on paper and canvas? For Rossetti, these hours were often spent falling in love, first with Siddal in 1851. He sought his brother William's help in finding time alone with her, beseeching him to keep intruders at bay, "as I have Lizzie coming, and do not of course wish for anyone else."

Theirs was a marathon engagement, extended by Siddal's frequent illnesses and Rossetti's heel-dragging. Exactly when she began taking laudanum—the liquid opium widely prescribed for a bevy of women's ailments in the Victorian Age—is not known, but by the time they were wed in 1860, it appears likely that Siddal was in the grips of the drug.

The intense devotion Rossetti had felt for Siddal could not survive a decade-long courtship, and it seems he had taken up with another woman even before the wedding. During an estrangement from Siddal, around 1859, Rossetti, who often searched the streets for models, found Fanny Cornforth. The women could not have been less alike. Where Lizzie was reserved, untouchable, chaste—the Victorian ideal of Woman—Fanny was a former prostitute with a bawdy sense of humor.

When Rossetti met Cornforth, according to his friend the Scottish painter William Bell Scott, she was "cracking nuts with her teeth and throwing the shells about; seeing Rossetti staring at her, she threw some at him. Delighted with this brilliant naiveté, he forthwith accosted her, and carried her off to sit to him for her portrait." The contrast between the models must have delighted Rossetti.

ALTHOUGH THE PRE-RAPHAELITES WERE PROGRESSIVE AND UNCONVENTIONAL IN THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN, FANNY CORNFORTH WAS TOO MUCH FOR MANY OF THEM. BUT ROSSETTI ADORED HIS MODEL FOR HER LOOKS AS WELL AS A RATHER BAWDY SENSE OF HUMOR. ◆

Although the Pre-Raphaelites were unconventional and progressive in their views on women, Cornforth proved to be too much for several of them. William Rossetti claimed she had no charms other than the obvious physical one, "no charm of breeding, education or intellect." The art critic and Pre-Raphaelite friend John Ruskin railed against her, writing to a friend: "I don't object to Rossetti having sixteen actresses, but I won't have Fanny." Many in Rossetti's circle truly didn't care for her—but it's strange that Cornforth's deficits were an issue, inasmuch as the Pre-Raphaelites' history was full of uneducated women of low social station.

This class disparity was not totally repressive: The painters didn't want the models to remain at a rank lower than theirs, but dreamed of elevating the women. One way to do this was by encouraging artistic leanings. With a talent for imitating Rossetti's drawings, Siddal became an accomplished artist, even exhibiting five works of her own with the Pre-Raphaelites in the summer of 1857. Later, when she and Rossetti were married, she accompanied him to William Morris's famous Red House, near the village of Upton in Kent. There they set their hands to decorating the house, covering the place with their beautiful friezes and embroideries. Working with Edward Burne-Jones and Morris (who both worshiped Rossetti) and their wives, Jane and Georgiana, the Rossettis helped turn Red House into a medieval-inspired wonder.

What must it have been like for these women, models all, surrounded by men of great intellect and outsized ego? Georgiana Burne-Jones sounded overwhelmed when she wrote, "I never saw such men. … And I was a holy thing to them—a holy thing." When Morris read to the group from his book *The*

Earthly Paradise, she recalls "biting my fingers and stabbing myself with pins in order to keep awake."

This circle had other diversions that prevented them from nodding off. Rossetti made many paintings of Jane Morris, his friend's wife—including eight versions of her as Proserpine—and he fell hard for his model. And Morris, in turn, perhaps following his one-time idol's lead, sought comfort from another friend's wife, Georgiana Burne-Jones. Both men were smitten, but in neither instance is there evidence of unchaste love.

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Even as they adored these women and wished to improve their social station, the Pre-Raphaelites also wanted to perfect them through art. Recreating the same woman over and over was one way to do it. Working on *The Last of England*, Brown wrote: "The head of Emma struck me as very bad and made me miserable all night. This morning I scraped at it with my penknife and so widened the cheeks some and improved it."

Though there is no doubt that men like Rossetti and Morris loved their wives and other women, they were perhaps more devoted to the *idea* of these beauties than to the flesh and blood of them. These were real, flawed women, Siddal perhaps more flawed than the rest, and for Rossetti especially, it was difficult to keep the perfect woman alive.

In addition to her opium use, which worried Rossetti, after a miscarriage in 1861 she slid into a depression. According to Wildman, "She probably suffered from what we would now call manic depression. Someone as volatile as Rossetti may not have been the best companion for her." Indeed, that year Rossetti, hard at work writing poetry, did little to lift his wife's despondency. One imagines her sedated, lying alone in her room, while Rossetti was off somewhere else rhapsodizing in verse about her virtue. She died the next year, of an overdose, thought to be a suicide. Perhaps the grief and guilt Rossetti felt prompted him to what must have seemed the greatest act of love: He entwined the only manuscript copy of his poems in his wife's hair, to be buried with her.

More than a century later, the works of the painters endure. The women endure also, through the many renditions of them made by their worshippers. Perhaps Rossetti understood the immense importance of what he had recorded in his paintings and poems; in any case he was loath to part with any of them. Years after he had buried Lizzie Siddal, when a publisher became interested in his writings, Rossetti did the unthinkable. Once again he called on his brother William, the man who had once helped ensure private time with his model. The faithful William had Siddal's grave opened so he could retrieve the poems for his brother—and for posterity. As in life, Siddal lay perfectly compliant before Rossetti's will, still an obedient beauty in the service of art. □

Top: Frederick Sandys's Medea *(1868) shows off Rossetti's red beads, which appeared in several paintings by the Pre-Raphaelite circle. Bottom: An ethereal beauty in* Veronica Veronese *(1872) by Rossetti.*