



# THE ART NEWSPAPER

70, SOUTH LAMBETH ROAD, LONDON SW8 1RL, TEL: +44 (0)20 7735 3331, FAX: +44 (0)20 7735 3332

## Victorian art history and criticism

### Innocent as charged

*Two books attempt to correct views of pre-Raphaelite art—held by no one*

The pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood lasted a mere five years, but the influence of that band of earnest and aspiring young artists remained vital through the first decades of the 20th century. The fascination with all things pre-Raphaelite has lasted even longer, as seen in the steady stream of books on these artists and their circle since the 1960s, when rising respect for Victorian art brought serious critical attention to their lives and their work. Over the past 40 years, pre-Raphaelite art scholars have employed modes of analysis that range from the traditional—biography and connoisseurship—to the trendsetting—critical theory and post-modern analysis—with varying results.

The common argument for yet another book on the pre-Raphaelites is that a particular point of view, long neglected, must now be addressed. This rationale provides the premise for the two books under review, *Worldwide pre-Raphaelitism*, edited by Thomas J. Tobin, and *Pre-Raphaelite painting and 19th-century realism*, written by Marcia Werner.

In his introduction to *Worldwide pre-Raphaelitism*, Dr Tobin positions his multi-author, 13-essay anthology as an essential argument against the “traditional” understanding of pre-Raphaelitism as a “brief, reactionary, and nar-

rowly defined English artistic movement...outside the ‘mainstream’ development”. Given the vast body of literature—both scholarly and popular—on the pre-Raphaelites, it is hard to imagine that anyone holds that opinion today, but the collection does succeed in presenting a diverse group of essays that confirm the book title’s boast of a “worldwide” point of view. Although most contributors hail from English-speaking nations, there are also submissions from the Netherlands, Hungary, Croatia, and Martinique. The topics constitute a global tour, ranging beyond the expected locations for pre-Raphaelite interest in North America and Australia, to tracing the influence across the breadth of the European continent to parts of Asia

The best of the essays demonstrate that in the most inventive hands, pre-Raphaelitism was an obliging chimera, willing to change shape and acquire new parts on demand. In her densely informative essay, “Symbolist debts to pre-Raphaelitism”, Susan P. Casteras reveals the importance of pre-Raphaelite influence as a pan-European art movement, while, in “Pre-Raphaelitism’s farewell tour”, Margaret D. Stetz argues that pre-Raphaelitism worked as a liberating force for women. The finest essay in the collection, Florence S. Boos’s

“Morris’s later writings and the Socialist Modernism of Lewis Grassic Gibbon”, sticks close to home, but through a meticulous reconstruction of what James Leslie Mitchell (who wrote as Gibbon) read and a close reading of what he wrote, Dr Boos explores the patterns of influence that kept pre-Raphaelitism alive well into the 1930s.

In *Pre-Raphaelite painting and 19th-century realism*, Marcia Werner also seeks to correct a long-standing fallacy, that “the pre-Raphaelites never developed a coherent theory of art” and that the nature of “realism” in pre-Raphaelite art as an artistic idea and an aesthetic characteristic has never been fully explored. Like Dr Tobin’s premise, this assertion is debatable, but Dr Werner carries out her investigation in detail, exploring how the pre-Raphaelite Brothers absorbed the intellectual climate of their day, assessing the cohesiveness of shared ideas, and interpreting “representative” pre-Raphaelite paintings. Dr Werner’s prose is weighted down with the dulling habits of academic exposition: the repeated need to reprise the argument and the constant marshalling of theoretical support from late-20th-century art scholarship. The murky, illegible quality of the black and white illustrations (one that occurs in Dr Tobin’s book as well) is emblematic of Dr Werner’s enterprise. The issue at the core of her investigation is pre-Raphaelite scholarship, rather than pre-Raphaelite art. **Debra N. Mancoff**

Newberry Library, Chicago

□ Thomas J. Tobin (ed.), *Worldwide pre-Raphaelitism* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 2005), 326 pp, 11 b/w ills, \$65 (hbk) ISBN 079146265X

□ Marcia Werner, *Pre-Raphaelite painting and 19th-century realism* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005), 286 pp, 58 b/w ills, £50 (hbk) ISBN 0521824680