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RE-PRESENTING ROSSETTI: THE ART OF FRANK CADOGAN COWPER

by

Lail A. Marmor

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in Art History
at

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May 2013

ABSTRACT
RE-PRESENTING ROSSETTI: THE ART OF FRANK CADOGAN COWPER

by

Lail A. Marmor

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2013
Under the Supervision of Professor Kenneth Bendiner

The art of Frank Cadogan Cowper is virtually unknown, yet his paintings attest to a post-modern presence in British art during the rise of High-Modernism. Cowper maintained a 19th-century style during the development of formalism and was not alone. The artist belongs to a wider, loosely formed group of marginal, British painters who drew inspiration from the art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Like Rossetti, Cowper was particularly fascinated with the cultural phenomenon of the femme fatale, whose iconography forms a pervasive motif in the artist's oeuvre. Against the wider cultural context, one of the more salient transformations in social stratification during 1890-1914 is the emergence of the New Woman. Encoded in the artistic representations of Cowper is fear, yet fascination with female sexuality; his imagery throws into relief a set of interrelated preoccupations and anxieties, which are part of a larger ideological and artistic structure. This thesis offers the first analysis of Cowper's paintings within England's fin-de-siecle discourses on sexuality

and art. Using Royal Academy archival letters written from Cowper to his mother during the early years of his career and through the study of his patrons, I position Cowper's paintings within an interpretive framework. What emerges is an imaginative collision of ironic, irrational, yet traditional and highly decorative imagery, which engages with culture in a distinctive way. Yet, beyond the obvious cultural and artistic implications of Cowper's many paintings, the artist's imagery ultimately opposes the separation of art from life, a central theme of Post-modernity.

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To
strength, perseverance and
my siblings

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*Re-Presenting Rossetti: The Art of
Frank Cadogan Cowper*

*The genius of our greatest painters was always romantic.
--Herbert Read, Contemporary British Art, 1951*

*This world's a fiction and is made up of contradiction.
---William Blake, The Poetical Works, 1908*

Frank Cadogan Cowper has been called, “the last great artist of the Victorian age,”¹ yet his paintings are virtually unknown. Creating highly decorative compositions grown out of portraiture, Cowper relentlessly maintained a 19th-century, academic style during the rise of formalism; his paintings are a remarkable example of Pre-Raphaelite endurance as late as the 1950’s, and he was not alone. The artist belongs to a larger, loosely formed group of British painters whose imagery demonstrates a wide latitude of aesthetic taste in the early decades of the 20th-century that is often overlooked. Although trivialized, Cowper created unexpectedly resonant, powerful expressions of a particular historical, cultural period that tell of fantasy and the role art plays in the face of modernity.

Largely dismissed by modernist-orientated critics as irrelevant, out of touch and escapist, Cowper and the wider group of

¹ Scott Thomas Buckle, catalogue to *Frank Cadogan Cowper & Arthur Joseph Gaskin*. (London: Campbell and Wilson Art Gallery), p.1.

traditionalists operated against the grain of European and American art of the period, yet articulated a particular ethos present at the turn of the century. Deeply rooted in the art of the past, these painters were concerned with the preservation of a rapidly dissolving tradition; their imagery is a tribute to the old structures of art at the moment of their collapse. Although understudied, these artists attest to a kind of underbelly of the Modern, a Post-Modern presence during the rise of formalism. Such marginal groups attest to the partisan ways in which the history of art has been written, demonstrating that attitudes to Modern Art were complex, not easily compartmentalized and often times rife with fascinating overlaps of starkly contrasting values.

Since the mid-1960's, the re-assessment of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood has increasingly secured their work into the British canon. Though now recognized as an English avant-garde touchstone, critical interest in the Pre-Raphaelites waned during the early years of the 20th-century. During this period, the rise of formalism eclipsed the contributions of the PRB, resulting in a critical hiatus that lasted more than 60 years. For example, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's last major exhibition since 1883 was not until 1973. A memorial exhibition was held at the Royal Academy at the Winter Exhibition of 1898 for John Everett Millais, yet it was not until 1967 that another major exhibition would devote itself entirely to the artist's work. It is within this

interval that Frank Cadogan Cowper and a larger surrounding group of British fin-de-siecle painters emerged.

While much of the art at the turn of the century in England was breaking with the past, Cowper spent his career forging a link to it. Representing literary themes in an age when the time-honored iconographies were losing their currency and many doubted the validity of treating such themes at all, Cowper tended to see the Pre-Raphaelites as a phenomenon ripe for revival. Fusing Millais's technique of hallucinatory vividness with Rossetti's vague, poetic medievalism and romantic archaism,² Cowper achieved a stylistic hybrid, which he adhered to until his death in 1958. Cowper lived during a period when the old order had started to disappear, an age that would not only see the ascendancy of Modern Art, but also the birth of cinema and two World Wars, all significant factors in his art.³ Themes of anxiety, disengagement and moral decay are embedded within Cowper's oeuvre, as are emulative delights, hyperbolic humor and the general pleasure of imaginative, visual spectacle.

There are cultural dimensions and historical forces at work in Cowper's imagery. During the late 19th century rapidly changing gender roles gave rise to the ubiquitous femme fatale, with which Dante Gabriel Rossetti was exceptionally fascinated. Signaling a shift

² John Gere, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet*. (London: The Royal Academy of Arts, 1973), p. 10.

³ Buckle, p.4.

to Rossetti's later style, *Bocca Baciata*, (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) (fig.1) painted in 1859 is the first in a long series of half or three-quarter-length pictures of languidly voluptuous women, in settings of richly embroidered textiles, jewels and flowers, to which he became increasingly obsessed. This distinctive series of bust-length female portraits established a new mode of female representation, signifying in its day an entirely new idea of woman as femme fatale. Described by William Michael Rossetti as "female heads with floral attributes," these paintings were not seen publicly until just after Rossetti's death in 1882, but, from the beginning, they appeared to be a combination of beauty and neurosis.⁴ Working in the wake of Rossetti, Cowper maintained similar obsessions.

Rossetti's contemporaries seem to have been less susceptible to his direct influence than the artists of the fin-de-siecle. The monstrous, brooding women of his paintings of the 1870's reappear in the paintings of the Symbolists in the 1890's, while the exaggeratedly profuse flowing hair that is one of their most extraordinary features inspired the characteristic undulant line of Art Nouveau.⁵ Cowper drew heavily from Rossetti's late work, whose distinctive and consistent iconography is tied to a specific type of female beauty with

⁴ J.B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry and Criticism*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p.110.

⁵ Gere, 1973, p.15.

long flowing hair, a long throat, a disengaged stare, and most often surrounded by richly decorated surfaces set within a constrictive space.

Against the wider cultural context, one of the more salient transformations in social stratification during 1890-1914 is the emergence of the New Woman. Encoded in the artistic representations of Cowper is fear, yet fascination with female sexuality; his imagery throws into relief a set of interrelated preoccupations and anxieties, which are part of a larger ideological and artistic structure. This thesis offers the first analysis of Cowper's paintings within England's fin-de-siècle discourses on sexuality and art. I will address Cowper's style, as it is one of the most evocative and enigmatic aspects of his art, yet the focus of this analysis will examine how his style operates in the articulation of meaning. Using Royal Academy archival letters written from Cowper to his mother during the early years of his career and through the study of his patrons, I will position Cowper's paintings within an interpretive framework. What emerges is an imaginative collision of ironic, irrational, yet traditional and highly decorative imagery, which engages with culture in a distinctive way.

In 1905 Cowper first painted *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (fig. 2) (private collection); he repeated the same subject in 1926 (fig. 3) and yet again twenty years later in 1946 (fig. 4); all three versions derived from John Keats's poem of the same title published in 1819. Rossetti too created three variations of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, a drawing

from 1848 (private collection), another from the 1850's (British Museum) and a watercolor from 1855 (Lilian Murray). Inspired by Rossetti's works, Cowper's three paintings in their repetition, subject matter and style illustrate striking and critical aspects of the artist's production. The poem describes the condition of an unnamed knight in a barren landscape, who tells of an encounter with a beautiful woman whose "eyes were wild." The damsel told the knight that she "loved him true," yet, having realized something mysterious, the maiden sets the knight to sleep. Through the imagery of an enchantress and a sleeping knight in a desolate landscape, the poem communicates a particularly modern ethos that was present during the fin-de-siecle in England: feelings of emptiness, a mood of disengagement and the cultural phenomenon of the femme fatale.

The Pre-Raphaelites drew upon this literary source, which informed the imagery of artists such as Frank Dicksee, John Waterhouse and Arthur Hughes. Coupled with the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, Keat's poem became a Symbolist trope for the femme fatale. Much like Keat's poem, Cowper's depictions avoid simplistic interpretation. In the December 1, 1920 edition of *Punch* magazine, a depiction of the poem was satirized. This satirical layer increases the interpretive complexities operating both within Cowper's production as well as his own historical context. By 1926 and most definitely by 1946, Cowper's narrative imagery was grossly outdated

and was interpreted by critics as irrelevant and escapist. It was not until the 1960's that the idea of the Pre-Raphaelite dream world as an escapist antidote to the horrors of industrial Britain would become a popular theme, forming the basis for much of the research on the Pre-Raphaelites.⁶ Building upon this scholarship, this thesis creates a lens, which views Cowper's anachronistic imagery as not simply retardataire, but rather as a deliberate choice by the artist, one with specific implications that warrants a thorough analysis.



Figure 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Bocca Baciata*, 1859, (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

⁶ Marcia Pointon, ed., *Pre-Raphaelites Re-viewed* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 3.



Figure 2. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, 1905, (Private Collection)



Figure 3. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, (Private Collection)



Figure 4. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, 1946, (Private Collection)

Biographical Context

Cowper's biography establishes several underlying premises in his art. Cowper was born in 1877, in Northamptonshire. His mother, Edith Cowper was the daughter of the Rector of Wicken. Cowper was raised with radical and strict religious upbringing in the faith of the Plymouth Brethren, a conservative, Evangelical Christian movement. The Plymouth Brethren emphasized fellowship over membership, avoided traditional religious symbols and believed in separate roles for

men and women.⁷ Cowper's father, Frank Cowper, was a successful author of travel books. Edith Cowper was also an author, who wrote successful children's adventure stories.⁸ In Cowper's letters to his mother there are numerous references to her writing for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge. Raised in a literary household, Frank Cadogan Cowper was a storyteller and many of his depictions are often moments within a larger narrative. In addition, it appears that Cowper's father was not a faithful husband; his wife accused him of violent behavior toward her and frequent adultery and the two divorced in 1890.⁹ However, writing was the major source of income for Edith Cowper and her nine children.¹⁰

Cowper lived most of his life in London, living in a succession of studios in St. John's Wood, Kensington and Chelsea. Later in life, Cowper acquired a house and studio in the Cotswolds at Cirencester and could frequently be spotted riding to the shops in town upon his bicycle. The shy, old, bespectacled Academician was well loved and his good sense of humor often remarked upon.¹¹ Cowper's dress was marked by a preference for very high collars, long after they had become unfashionable.¹² In a 1913 letter, the aged Pre-Raphaelite

⁷ Elizabeth Livingstone, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.112.

⁸ The Bodleian Library catalog lists 49 of Edith Cowper's books.

⁹ Cowper's Family Tree, London: Royal Academy Archives.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Buckle, p.4

¹² Ibid.

painter Arthur Hughes recalls that Cowper “is delightful but stammers most fearfully.” Cowper served in the army during WWI, where, amongst other things, he was engaged in painting camouflage; however his bad stammer and poor health disqualified him from front-line active service, and as a result was eventually invalided out.¹³ This is a portrait of an artist with a taste for tradition and eccentricity.

In 1896, Cowper studied at the St. John’s Wood Art School, which exposed him to a wider group of Pre-Raphaelite followers and various offshoots, such as the Slade School Symbolists.¹⁴ Artists including John Waterhouse and Frank Dicksee also attended St. John’s Wood. Although Cowper was from a later generation, they all shared a broadly similar approach to both their depictions of female figures as well as their more general Pre-Raphaelite heritage.¹⁵ Cowper entered the Royal Academy Schools in 1897, and upon leaving five years later, held a six-month apprenticeship in the Cotswold studio of Edwin Austin Abbey, the American muralist who, like his friend and compatriot John Singer Sargent, had settled in England. Cowper completed his artistic education with a trip to Italy.

¹³ Ibid, p.4.

¹⁴ The Slade School Symbolists were a group of painters from the Slade School at the turn of the century in London who were highly influenced by the art of Puvis de Chavannes. The precise and voluptuous figure drawings of Augustus John are the hallmark of the Slade School manner. Contemporary acknowledgement of this group of painters is found in the ‘Introduction’ to the exhibition catalogue, *Twentieth Century Art, a Review of Modern Movements* and the exhibition catalogue, *The Last Romantics*.

¹⁵ Mary Anne Stevens et. al., *The Last Romantics* (London: Lund Humphries and Barbican Art Gallery, 1989), p.12.

In 1899 Cowper exhibited his first works, two portraits, at the Royal Academy. Cowper would return to portraiture in the 1920's as subject pictures fell out of fashion, yet the artist's compositional formats are rooted in portraiture. From the artist's first major success in 1901, Cowper created a succession of highly acclaimed paintings for the RA's summer exhibitions. Two were bought with funds from the Chantrey Bequest for the National Collection. In 1904 Cowper was made an Associate of the Watercolour Society along with Henry Scott Tuke and John Singer Sargent.¹⁶ While Cowper's painting *Vanity*, 1907 was to become his diploma work for the RA, it was not until 1934 that he became a full member of the Royal Academy. Although Cowper exhibited widely at the Royal Watercolor Society, the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolors and the Paris Salon, he remained loyal to the Royal Academy, exhibiting regularly from 1899 until his death nearly sixty years later at the age of 81. The sale of his effects by auctioneers two years later listed the artist's oil paintings in the catalog as "suitable for re-use."¹⁷

Cowper began his career with strong affinities to the Pre-Raphaelites. At the time of his correspondence with his mother, Cowper was still a student at the Royal Academy. In a letter dated Jan. 27, 1899 Cowper describes a poignant visit to the critic F.G. Stephens, during which he and William Denis Eden drank tea from

¹⁶ Buckle, p.2.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.4.

Christina Rossetti's cups and handled Millais's pen drawing for the *Carpenter's Shop*. Cowper writes that he "felt as if they had dropped in on what was left of the Pre-Raphaelite world."¹⁸ That year Cowper would also see a retrospective exhibition of works by Rossetti and Millais, and two years earlier he had seen paintings by Ford Madox Brown. All of which had a tremendous influence on the young artist.¹⁹

Even at the beginning of Cowper's career, the PRB was a fading presence in English art. Nonetheless, the Pre-Raphaelite influence was far reaching with a strong and enduring presence in small, certain circles, which went against the grain of what was then the development of the formalist discourse. As Modernists resisted narrative in favor of "significant form," Cowper and the traditionalists embraced it, which caused them to fall out of favor, appearing irrelevant, and retardataire against the formalist tide. Yet, it was their conservatism that distinguished them and ultimately begs the question: what does it mean to be modern?

At its inception in 1848, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood looked at pre-High Renaissance art and were effectively Britain's first modern art movement.²⁰ Led by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais, the Pre-Raphaelites railed

¹⁸ Frank Cadogan Cowper, Letter Edith Cowper, Jan. 27, 1899, Cow 2/ 1, Frank Cadogan Cowper Letters, Royal Academy Archives (London).

¹⁹ Cowper, 1899, Cow 3/1.

²⁰ Tim Barringer et al., Introduction to *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*. (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), p. 2.

against the contemporary art establishment of their day and were committed to the idea of art's potential to change society.²¹ The Pre-Raphaelites focused on serious and significant subjects and were best known for painting directly from nature with tremendously detailed subjects from modern life and literature often using historical costumes. Many were inspired by the advice of John Ruskin, art critic and theorist in *Modern Painters* to “go to Nature in all singleness of heart, rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing.”²² Unified by their aims, rather than their style, the PRB was a reform movement generated by the idea of archaism. The emphasis on nature waned in the late phase of Pre-Raphaelitism, which is characterized by a stylistic split as Millais and Holman Hunt maintained an interest in naturalism while Rossetti and the second generation Pre-Raphaelite, Edward Burne-Jones tended to work in a more Romantic vein. In spite of the individual stylistic differences, however, implicit in Pre-Raphaelite art is the quintessentially modern articulation of cultural inadequacy. Archaism for the Pre-Raphaelites was an expression of their desire to return to a place before modernity.

As a reform movement, the PRB had a tenuous relationship to the Royal Academy, rejecting the Grand Style, which the RA promoted. Although Rossetti was never a member, Millais became an ARA as early as 1853 and in 1896 was elected President of the Royal

²¹ Ibid.

²² John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1870), p. 112.

Academy. Like Millais, Cowper was deeply committed to the RA throughout his career. In a letter to his mother dated June 17, 1906, Cowper defends the Academy. He wrote, “whenever a really good man appears anywhere whether he is hotly anti-Academy or not, the RA’s elect him to their body!!!” Cowper went on to explain: “whatever principles he [the artist] may have aired before, he never refuses this honor, and his interest becomes one with the Academy. So that the Academy has gone on electing to itself the best artists of the day ever since it was founded in Reynolds time. And it will go on doing so.”²³ This close adherence to the Royal Academy is revelatory of Cowper’s approach to the Pre-Raphaelite heritage and much like the larger group of artists who shared a stylistic aesthetic, Cowper believed that style should be based on an intelligent study of the art of the past, seeing his role as protecting tradition.

Despite the aims of the early Pre-Raphaelites however, Cowper’s contextual milieu had changed dramatically from that of the original PRB. Most of the Pre-Raphaelite leaders were already dead during Cowper’s production. Though not a member of the Royal Academy, Dante Gabriel Rossetti was, nevertheless, one of the most prominent members of the Pre-Raphaelite movement and died in 1882, and both Ford Madox Brown, Millais and Burne-Jones in the 1890’s. Only Holman Hunt was active (until 1910). Younger artists who were

²³ Cowper, 1906.

compelled to follow in the PRB footsteps tended to be of two types. The Birmingham group, most of whom were born in the 1860's, had met Burne-Jones as students and saw Pre-Raphaelitism as a living tradition, one that they could develop by exploiting its Arts and Crafts dimension. The others, generally slightly younger having no personal contact with the Brotherhood, regarded the movement as a phenomenon ripe for revival, going back to the early work of the PRB and attempting to reinterpret it.²⁴ Cowper belonged to this group with two other artists, Byam Shaw and Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale.

Shaw, Brickdale and Cowper all exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy, and in 1908 all three artists received a prestigious public commission for murals in the East Corridor of the House of Commons in the Palace of Westminster to be supervised by Cowper's former master, E.A. Abbey, who was the chief advocate of mural painting at the Royal Academy.²⁵ Cowper selected the subject of *Erasmus and Thomas More visit the children of Henry VIII at Greenwich, 1499* (fig. 5) as his subject, drawing directly upon Holbein's portraiture to obtain authentic likenesses.²⁶ Cowper's mural is one of six, for which each artist agreed to a palette of predominantly red, black and gold and a uniform height of the figures, thereby

²⁴ Stevens et al., 1989, p.12.

²⁵ Alan Powers, "Public Places and Private Faces: Narrative and Romanticism in English Mural Painting 1900-1935," *The Last Romantics* (London: Lund Humphrey and Barbican Art Gallery, 1989) pp.63-64.

²⁶ Buckle, p.2

unifying all six of the murals.²⁷ Characteristic of Cowper is a large decorative window in the background, which overlooks a highly detailed naturalistic landscape. One of the most distinctive aspects to Cowper's production is his concentration and rendering of highly detailed, ornate patterning on rich and opulent textiles, which, in this case is displayed wonderfully in the fashion of the figures in the foreground. The number of studies for this work demonstrates Cowper's thoroughness in his working practice.²⁸

Mural painting was also a primary concern of the Birmingham School of painters, who drew heavily from the Arts and Crafts movement and combined an intense interest in the social function of art with historical subjects and research into older techniques.²⁹ Method and technique were also of vital significance to Cowper and in a letter to his mother dated August 13, 1899 the artist explains, in part, his attraction to the Pre-Raphaelites. Cowper writes: "Now I feel what I have never felt before and that it is confidence in painting, because I have got a method and understand it." Cowper explains further:

Certainly Eden³⁰ and I understand the Pre-Raphaelites perfectly now, and as far as the method of painting is concerned we understand it better than all the P.R.B. (except Millais) did themselves, and Millais either painted in the

²⁷ "Parliament History," <http://www.parliament.uk/tudorhistory/>.(accessed April 10, 2013).

²⁸ Buckle, p.2

²⁹ Powers, 1989, p. 64.

³⁰ William Denis Eden, (1878-1949) was a painter and illustrator who worked in a similar vein as Cowper. Eden was of the same generation as Cowper and is also under-represented in the art of this period.

proper way unconsciously because it came easiest without knowing why, or else he understood it thoroughly having found it out from the early Italians [...].³¹

Cowper's interest in method can, in part, be traced back to the Birmingham Group who actively researched the traditional Italian technique of the use of tempera and applied it vigorously to their art.

The Birmingham Group was an outpost of Burne-Jones influence whose earliest style is modeled on Rossetti's Arthurian watercolors of the 1850's. Like Rossetti, Burne-Jones by the 1860's was increasingly influenced by early Italian Renaissance art and consciously incorporating its pictorial elements. Burne's Jones's *Sidona von Bork*, (fig. 6) (Tate Gallery) from 1860 is an example as it borrows motifs from Giulio Romano's portrait of *Isabella d'Este at Hampton Court* from 1531 (Royal Collection), which would inspire Cowper's diploma work from 1907, *Vanity* (fig.7). Cowper too continually returned to the Renaissance, a period when the category of "beauty" and the domain of beautiful objects were first constituted. Furthermore, the availability of Renaissance imagery offered an expansive range of visual delights and emulative possibilities for the young artist.

Vanity embodies many of the underlying themes running throughout Cowper's oeuvre and is a subject he would re-visit in 1919.

³¹ Cowper, 1899.

The painting exhibits Cowper's characteristic concentration of highly detailed and decorative, rich brocaded costume displayed on specific types of female figures. The figure of *Vanity's* long golden hair parted in the middle recalls Millais's *The Bridesmaid* (fig.8) from 1851 (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) as well as Rossetti's *Bocca Bociata* (fig.1) from 1859 (Boston Museum of Fine Arts), which established a prototype for the femme fatale.³² The figure of *Vanity* exposes one shoulder, recalling Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (fig.9) from 1866-68, (Delaware Art Museum). An exposed shoulder was also at the center of a controversy surrounding John Singer Sargent's *Madame X* (fig.10) from 1883, (Tate Gallery). In addition, there is a stylistic affinity between Cowper and Frank Dicksee, a former student of St. John's Wood. Both artists worked in the same Pre-Raphaelite vein and share an interest in lush costume pieces, though Dicksee was from an earlier generation. Nearly all of Cowper's works boast this use of lush and opulent textiles.

The figure of *Vanity* represents a specific type of ideal female beauty with long flowing, golden hair, a rosebud mouth, holding a mirror and looking at herself within a nocturnal setting, surrounded by grapes and foliage. The placement of fabric behind the figure's head recalls Renaissance women's fashion and is also utilized in Giulio Romano's portrait of *Isabella d'Este*, 1531(Royal Collection) (fig.11),

³² Virginia Allen, "One Strangling Hair," *Art Bulletin*, Vol.66, Issue 2, (New York: College Art Association of America, 1984), 28.

yet is rather strange, as it seems to hang somewhat magically behind the figure's head. Nevertheless, the effect lends a saintly/ icon appearance to the female figure. The use of historical costume is a characteristic of the PRB and is also a distinctive aspect to Cowper's production. The figure's eyes are averted, which allows the viewer to gaze upon her without being implicated. What is on display here is beauty; the beauty of the figure and of the opulence of her jewels and enveloping, lush textiles. Yet, the question emerges: what is the setting? The figure appears to be outside at night but it looks as though she is at her dressing table. Upon closer examination the scene appears strange and somewhat fantastic. This is an image of a dream world filled with beauty, where things do not necessarily need to make sense, a reoccurring theme for Cowper and one that becomes more distinct throughout the development of his career.

In the wake of the Pre-Raphaelites a strand of late Victorian and Edwardian art developed, including artists such as Cowper and the other artists who shared his 19th-century disposition. Though not a stylistically coherent school, these artists followed the example of Rossetti and subsequently, Burne-Jones who was a crucial link to the immediate past of Rossetti. This was a generation of younger artists who turned away from the representation of contemporary life in favor of a Symbolist creation of an idealized, stylized world of visual beauty, drawing its inspiration from the art of the Renaissance. To call

these artists Pre-Raphaelites seems an inappropriate designation, as it links them to the strident naturalism of painters such as Millais and Holman Hunt. The term Aesthetic, in use from the 1870's onward, suggests their preoccupation with the overall harmonious arrangements of form and color and hints at their eclecticism, but does not define their often intense interest in specific iconography, or their links to literary sources. Aestheticism and Symbolism are seemingly opposites, the former emphasizing the absence of meaning in a painting and the latter its presence, even if in ambiguous form. Yet, in practice the two ideologies tended to overlap as in the case of Burne-Jones, Rossetti, Whistler and Leighton who created compositions that are highly decorative, yet, hint at dimensions beyond the formal plane.³³ Such is the context of Cowper, in the proverbial cracks between Pre-Raphaelitism, Aestheticism and the Symbolists, yet within increasingly modern milieux.

³³ Peter Brown, "Frank Cadogan Cowper, Victorian & British Impressionist Pictures," <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/paintings/frank-cadogan-cowper> (accessed October, 2012).



Figure 5. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *Erasmus and Thomas More Visits the Children of Henry VII at Greenwich, 1499, 1908*, (East Corridor of the House of Commons, Palace of Westminster)



Figure 6. Edward Burne-Jones, *Sidonia von Bork*, 1860, (Tate Gallery, London)



Figure 7. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *Vanity*, 1907, (Royal Academy, London)

Humor

Irony, satire and hyperbolic humor emerged early on in Cowper's career and parallels Rossetti who made numerous humorous drawings, which were tongue in cheek in character. Most often Rossetti's comedic depictions were caricatures of his friends and acquaintances. Yet, the role of humor for Cowper was more subversive as his jokes are most often directed toward religion, the aristocracy and themes of the 'fallen woman.' On one level Cowper's satire is meant to be funny, however its greater purpose is often constructive social criticism, which echoes theories of cultural degeneracy prevalent at the turn of the century. As early as 1901, Cowper's first critical success, *An Aristocrat Answering the Summons to Execution* (fig.12) (Leeds Museums and Galleries) is characteristic of the tone of Cowper's humor, which at first glance seems tongue-in-cheek, yet upon deeper inspection hints at a more veiled, skeptical and cynical attitude about society. The rich textiles and intricate patterning of the aristocrat's costume is a hallmark of Cowper's. Cowper's sympathies clearly lie with the working class as the painting depicts an ornately dressed aristocrat about to be executed, yet who is utterly oblivious to his fate evidenced by the figure's haughty disposition.

In 1907, Cowper exhibited a somewhat humorous and unusual work, *How the Devil, disguised as a vagrant Troubadour, having been entertained by some charitable Nuns, sang to them a Song of Love*

(fig.13) (private collection). Subtly disrupting convention and undermining the subject matter, Cowper often gave his paintings long titles. In the 19th century the title of an artwork composed a crucial and considered aspect of its public presence; artists had the power to incite controversy with titles they chose when exhibiting their work.³⁴

The scene represents the interior of a convent refectory. In the foreground the wandering minstrel has mounted the table and is singing a love song. The nuns display a range of emotions from hilarity to horror. In the background the large and majestic stained glass window represents the Last Judgment. The window is a faithful copy of the 15th-century stained glass in the west window of the Fairford Church in Gloucestershire. The painting was praised in the *Art Journal* in 1907 for Cowper's rendering of "the great flaming window," and "the clever grouping of figures." The critic wrote, "Mr. Cowper has realized [the] fantastic and decorative possibilities in quite the right vein." Yet, there was criticism regarding Cowper's subject as the reviewer remarked: "we wish that the painter's qualities would go to [...] a subject more worthy."³⁵ This painting was not the only instance of Cowper's satiric presentation of religious subject matter.

A second Chantrey Bequest painting was purchased for the Tate Gallery titled, *Lucretia Borgia reigns in the Vatican in the*

³⁴ Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 3.

³⁵ *The Art Journal*. London: Hodgson & Graves, (1907), 206.

absence of the Pope Alexander VI (fig.14) from 1908-14. Exhibited at the RA at the onset of WWI, this painting apparently documents an actual event from Renaissance times, although Cowper invented the precise moment depicted, a Franciscan friar kissing Lucretia's feet. The figure of Lucretia Borgia came to symbolize a femme fatale, while her family was characterized by ruthlessness and corruption, Cowper's presentation undoubtedly addressed questions of fraudulence in the church. The painting is also an opulent display of Renaissance subject matter. Like *How the Devil, disguised as a vagrant Troubadour....* this work explores a religious subject, with particularly Catholic overtones somewhat tongue in cheek. Engaging in the contemporary Catholic and Protestant conflict, Cowper exploits the decorative possibilities of Catholic pomp, while making fun of pretense. Despite the artist's proclivity for satire however, in 1913 Cowper received a commission to paint an altar triptych for Godalming Church, which was dismantled and sold to a private collector in 1964.

Cowper's hyperbolic tendencies were far reaching, woven into his imagery at times more subtly than others, yet beyond the obvious irony of many of the artist's depictions, Cowper's satire exposes the ways in which he saw the world: rife with inadequacies and cultural contradictions. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud cites the German philosopher Kuno Fischer's

speculation that “a joke is a playful judgment.”³⁶ Henri Bergson in his “Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic” stressed that, “to understand laughter we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function...it must have a social signification.”³⁷ To laugh in the face of it all, Cowper’s humor is a defense mechanism, which embodies the artist’s alienation and is a very human way of coping. For Cowper, the social significance of a tongue-in-cheek presentation of religious subject matter was a subtle jab; a dig, which exposes a deeper, more veiled attitude toward culture. Like Rossetti and Oscar Wilde, Cowper may be toying with Victorian shock.

More than any other artist Cowper drew upon Rossetti, particularly Rossetti’s principle motif of the ‘fair lady.’³⁸ Yet, unlike Rossetti, Cowper self-consciously relied on parody in alluding to the artificiality of his paintings. Cowper’s depictions from Faust are good example of this impulse. Rossetti drew heavily from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust* as early as 1848, the Romantic tragedy serving as a literary source for 7 of his works. By the 1860’s *Faust* had reached a peak of popularity in England. Charles Gounod’s score

³⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,” (1905), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. VIII (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1960), p.9

³⁷ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1911), p.7-13.

³⁸ David Sonstroem, *Rossetti and the Fair Lady* (Middletown Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1970), pp. 1.

for the opera was published and publicized in London in 1859, and the opera itself played to rave reviews in London and the provinces beginning in 1864.³⁹ At the same time a number of popular plays based on *Faust* were produced, popular music stemmed from it, and a number of paintings on *Faust* subjects began to appear at the Royal Academy exhibitions.

A Rossetti drawing from 1848 *Margaret in the Church* (fig. 15), (Tate Gallery) serves as a source for Cowper's much later painting of 1919, *The Cathedral Scene from Faust—Margaret Tormented by the Evil Spirit* (fig.16) (private collection), which follows a similar format as *How the Devil, disguised as a vagrant Troubadour...* in that both works feature a decorative stained glass window. Like Rossetti, Cowper depicts the diabolical moment in which the devastated Margaret has gone to church to seek comfort in prayer only to be followed by the demon, Mephistopheles. In a preparatory sketch for this work Cowper illustrates the scene somewhat differently as Margaret is shown kneeling in the pews amongst the church congregation with Mephistopheles whispering in her ear. The painting however, was been modified and the figures of Margaret and Mephistopheles are separated for more dramatic effect. In addition, the entire church congregation appears to be composed of women. On one hand we are meant to laugh at the hilarity of all those women

³⁹ *Illustrated London News*, July 9, 1864, 48; Feb. 16, 1864, 154; Feb 20, 1864, 194; Oct. 29, 1864, 571.

going to church to rebuff their proverbial Mephostopheles. On the other, Cowper's deliberately exaggerated and theatrical style results in a campy presentation of Rossetti's central Faustian themes of seduction and redemption. Is Cowper making fun of the idea of women and morality, or is he mocking Rossetti? By 1919 this type of imagery was grossly outdated.

A late work by Rossetti from 1868, *Risen at Dawn* (fig.17), alternatively titled *Gretchen Discovering the Jewels* (Tullie House, Carlisle Museum and Art Gallery) represents his final effort to illustrate Goethe's *Faust*. The painting depicts the half-length figure of Gretchen in a partial state of undress, one shoulder exposed. The figure almost completely fills the pictorial space and the features of a strong jaw, wide neck and long flowing hair are characteristic of the Rossettian female type. The painting relates to a whole series of pictures and poems in which a female figure severely judges a male-dominated world. Cowper appropriated this type of female and like Rossetti, was particularly drawn to the subject of the 'fallen woman.'

Like the Pre-Raphaelites, Cowper derived much of his subject matter of the 'fallen woman' from literature. Cowper's diploma work, *Vanity* from 1907, based upon Burne-Jones's *Sidona von Bork* (fig. 6), 1860 (Tate Gallery) illustrated the German novel, *Sidonia the Sorceress* by Wilhelm Meinhold published in 1847 and translated into English two years later. Rossetti also admired this novel, which

chronicles the 16th-century career of the beautiful Sidonia, a heartless enchantress of aristocratic birth. Following Rossetti's 1860's and later series of compositions centered on a single female figure, Burne-Jones made this virtually a portrait of a fictional character of the *femme fatale*. Her hairstyle is derived directly from the novel where Sidonia wears a "golden net...drawn over her almost golden hair." The braided loop motif in her garment is borrowed from Romano's portrait of *Isabella d'Este*, a powerful Renaissance woman.

Cowper painted two versions of *Vanity*, yet Cowper depicted the subject endlessly. The hand mirror appears throughout Cowper's oeuvre. The title and subject of *Vanity* reflects a well-known bible verse, Ecclesiastes 1:2, which states: "Vanity of the vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of the vanities, all is vanity."⁴⁰ The verse seemingly references several key subjects in Cowper's art: religion, women and emptiness. The verse as expressed in art in the first decades of the 20th-century also carries specific significance. Cowper's symbolic reference to vanity through the image of a beautiful woman is an obvious dig at female vanity, yet ultimately attests to the futility and meaningless inherent in early 20th-century culture. Alternatively, Cowper turns away from 20th-century reality and focuses on an Aesthete's creation of stylized world of beauty fused with a dark and eccentric humor. Ultimately, Cowper's art is one of disengagement.

⁴⁰ Ecclesiastes 1:2 (Revised Standard Version).

Behind many of Cowper's works there is almost always a story. The stories tend to be borrowed or adapted rather than original, and their heroines are familiar literary or historical figures. Using literature, Cowper adapted the decorative and fanciful possibilities of various scenes from legends, fairy tales and poetry. The late Victorian and Edwardian period was a golden age for book illustration, stimulated, at least in part, by the founding of the Kelmscott Press in 1891 and brought to a close by the end of the First World War. Many artists in Cowper's circle illustrated books. Illustration was often the medium for their most imaginative and fanciful depictions.⁴¹

Illustrating stories Cowper fused the fantastic and realistic, resulting in a stylistic hybrid. Cowper contributed to Sir Sidney's Lee's, *The Imperial Shakespeare*, an edition, which also includes images by Frank Dicksee, Frank Brangwyn and the widely regarded fairy tale illustrator, Arthur Rackham.

Fairytales provided Cowper a wellspring of inspiration. Cowper's painting, *Rapunzel* (fig.18), 1900, (The De Morgan Foundation) depicts the fairy tale subject of a maiden imprisoned in a tower to which her lover gains access by climbing her long, flowing hair. The painting elaborates on obsessive themes captured in Rossetti's paintings of longhaired women in claustrophobic interiors. Unlike Rossetti's females however, Cowper portrays this particular

⁴¹ John Christian, *The Last Romantics* (London: Lund Humphries and Barbican Art Gallery, 1989), pp.15.

figure in the act of singing, rendering her more animated than the works of Pre-Raphaelite predecessors.⁴² Rapunzel's dramatic, sweeping sleeve of red and gold exemplifies Cowper's proclivity for rich, opulent fabrics and compositional format of 16th-century Venetian portraits, a preference of Cowper's. Palma Vecchio's *Portrait of a Poet* (fig.19), c. 1516 (National Gallery, London) is an example.

In 1908 Cowper exhibited a watercolor titled, *The Morning of the Nativity* (private collection) at the Royal Watercolor Society. In mood and color the painting is unusually restrained, but included are some visual quotes from Pre-Raphaelite artists. The sheep's head looking over the wattle fence is borrowed from Millais's, *The Carpenter's Shop* (fig.20) from 1849-50 (Tate Gallery). The foliage that frames the patches of sky resembles the vine in Rossetti's, *Girlhood of the Virgin* (fig. 21), (Tate Gallery) from one year earlier. The pose of the Virgin and the hanging behind her suggest the influence of early Flemish painting, and the form and presentation of the baby recalls the new-born child in Ford Madox Brown's unsettling painting, *Take your Son, Sir* (fig.22), 1851 (Tate Gallery). Cowper's

⁴²Gail-Nina Anderson and Joanne Wright, *Heaven on Earth: The Religion of Beauty in Late Victorian Art* (London: Djanogly Art Gallery, 1994), p.58

painting seems to be the first of several versions including *Our Lady of the Fruits of the Earth* (fig.23), which repeats the same design.⁴³

Painted at the height of WWI, *Our Lady of the Fruits of the Earth* (private collection) was exhibited at the RA in 1917. The painting was completed at 2 Edwards Square Studios, a southerly outpost of the artist colony in Holland Park that had sprung up in the late 19th-century under the leadership of the President of the RA, Frederic Leighton.⁴⁴ It was one of four paintings Cowper submitted that year, the others being portraits. Themes of motherhood, fruitfulness, regeneration, and hope are reinforced throughout the painting. Patriotically the Virgin wears England's red, white and blue colors. The Virgin is depicted against the "cloth of honor" frequently found in Renaissance and Flemish portraiture. Cowper came to rely heavily on these rich brocades for decorative effect as his study of Flemish and Italian prototypes deepened.⁴⁵

Cowper's letters suggest that he was particularly aware of Flemish examples of the Virgin and he may well have seen the exhibition of Flemish art at the Guildhall Art Gallery in London in May 1906, which contained works by Jan Van Eyck, Hans Memling,

⁴³ Peter Brown, Frank Cadogan Cowper, Victorian & Impressionist Pictures, Christie's Auction House, <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/paintings/frank-cadogan-cowper>, (accessed October 18, 2012).

⁴⁴ Buckle, p.4.

⁴⁵ Peter Brown, Director in Victorian Pictures, "Discussion of Frank Cadogan Cowper's *Our Lady of the Fruits of the Earth*," <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/paintings/frank-cadogan-cowper>, (accessed October 18, 2012)

and others. Furthermore, numerous Italian examples, nearly 20 by 1917, were available to him in the National Gallery.⁴⁶ The frame is original, but was almost certainly not made for the painting. Cowper was in the habit of buying old frames and painting pictures to fit them.⁴⁷ This may have been the case here since Cowper has arranged the composition as if it was an altarpiece; the painting and frame are integral. This arrangement is indicative of Cowper's interest in display like the early Pre-Raphaelites who were interested in both picture and frame, and their frame designs frequently emulated altarpieces and church windows. The painting, however, was certainly incongruous amongst the many realistic paintings about the war.⁴⁸

In the year following *Our Lady of the Fruits of the Earth*, Cowper moved even further away from current events with *The Blue Bird* (private collection) (fig. 24) exhibited at the RA in 1918. The painting illustrates a fairy tale by Madame d'Aulnoy, first published in 1697. The two paintings have significant points in common. The model appears to be the same, woman and in each case she wears a white coif and sits before a brocaded hanging. This is set immediately behind her in *The Blue Bird*, precluding any hint of distance, but in *Our Lady of the Fruits of the Earth*, is pushed back, allowing vistas to open up on either side.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The Blue Bird tells of a beautiful young princess, Fiordelisa, who falls in love with a handsome prince who returns her love. However, the princess's wicked stepmother, wanting the prince to marry her own ill-favored daughter, Turritella, locks Fiordelisa away in a tower. The prince, who refuses to marry Turritella, is transformed into Blue Bird and flies into the tower bringing Fiordelisa jewels as tokens of his affection. Cowper illustrates the moment when the lovers are enjoying one of these trysts, the princess holding the rope of pearls that the blue bird has evidently just given her.

Formally, the image is a good example of Cowper's style. *Blue Bird* repeats the same formula the artist had established with *Vanity* eleven years earlier. Like *Vanity*, the female figure in *Blue Bird* is looking downward, averting her eyes from the viewer. The story of a woman and jewels touches upon the theme of vanity. Cowper pays homage to Rossetti's half-length likenesses of beautiful models with exotic accessories, an idiom itself owing much to 16th-century Venetian painting. Like Rossetti, Cowper gives his compositions a decorative, almost pageantry-like character, and reduces the picture space to a narrow foreground plane. Both objectives are achieved by introducing a backdrop of the rich brocade that is Cowper's signature.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Ibid.

The figure in *Blue Bird* wears a turban that recalls the decorative, round placement of fabric behind the figure's head in *Vanity*. In addition, portraits of the Renaissance period, particularly those of early German masters, inspired such details as the woman's slashed red sleeves, her close fitting coif and the chemise gathered around her neck. As for the blue bird's crown-shaped collar, intended to symbolize his royal status, this recalls medieval livery badges in which such collars are often worn by animals. A likely possibility of a source is the *Wilton Diptych* (fig.25), from 1395-99, (National Gallery, London), where in all the angels and the figure of Richard II wear badges in the form of deer wearing crown collars.⁵⁰ Cowper's *Blue Bird* and his earlier *The Morning of the Nativity* also share some compositional similarities with *The Child Enthroned* (private collection) (fig.26), from 1894 by the Symbolist artist T.C. Gotch, who was dedicated to expressing the sacredness of childhood.⁵¹

By 1917 art critics were no longer writing the long reviews of RA exhibitions that had been the norm in the 19th century. The types of archaizing images that Cowper was painting tended to be dismissed in a sentence or two, if mentioned at all. However, *Our Lady of the Fruits of the Earth* did receive attention in at least one review in *The Times*. The writer described it as a "ritual picture," that belonged in

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ John Christian, Introduction to *The Last Romantics* (London: Lund Humphries and Barbican Art Gallery, 1989), p.11.

the same genre as works by John Lavery and Robert Anning Bell. The writer felt that works by both Cowper and Lavery were essentially tableaux vivant and were a “mixture of ritual and realism,” and “utterly unreal.”⁵² Cowper’s less realistic subject matter made for a more consistent effect. Yet, there was some discrepancy between the lifelike fruits, which “would make by themselves a very good dessert piece,” and the “less real.” Cowper’s style and subject matter essentially hinge on this tension between the real and the unreal. The philosophical query of what is *real* is intimately tied to 19th and 20th-century European art and provided the philosophical underpinnings of international movements such as Cubism. Picasso, no doubt recognizing an affinity in the way these groups of Pre-Raphaelite offshoots were attempting to create an autonomous visual world, tried to purchase paintings by Joseph Southall, one of the leading members of the Birmingham Group.⁵³

⁵² Peter Brown, Frank Cadogan Cowper, Victorian & Impressionist Pictures, Christie’s Auction House, <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/paintings/frank-cadogan-cowper>, (accessed October 18, 2012).

⁵³ The link between Southall and Picasso was first established by Charlotte Gere; see her intro. to the Fine Art’s Society’s *Earthly Paradise*, exh. cat. 1969, p.2, quoted in Mary Anne Stevens, et. al., *The Last Romantics* (London: Lund Humphries & Barbican Art Gallery, 1989), p.28



Figure 8. John Everett Millais, *The Bridesmaid*, 1851, (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)



Figure 9. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*, 1866 (Delaware Art Museum, Delaware)



Figure 10. John Singer Sargent, *Madame X*, 1884, (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)



Figure 11. Giulio Romano, *Portrait of Isabelle d'Este*, 1531, (Royal Collection, Windsor)

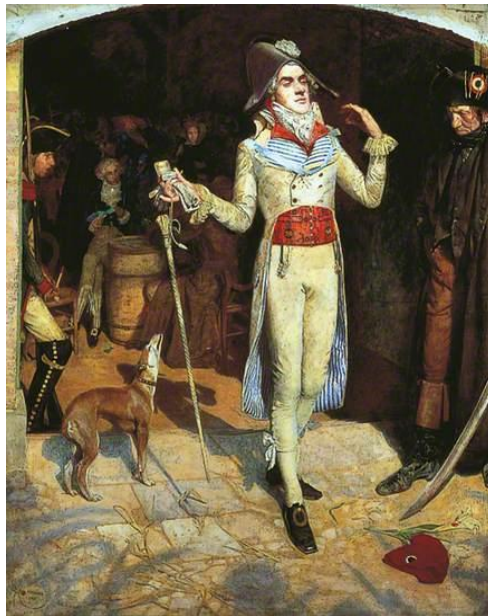


Figure 12. *Frank Cadogan Cowper, An Aristocrat Answering the Summons to the Execution*, 1901, (Leeds Museum and Galleries, Leeds)



Figure 13. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *How the Devil, Disguised as a vagrant Troubadour, having been entertained by some charitable Nuns, sang to them a Song of Love*, 1907, (Private Collection)

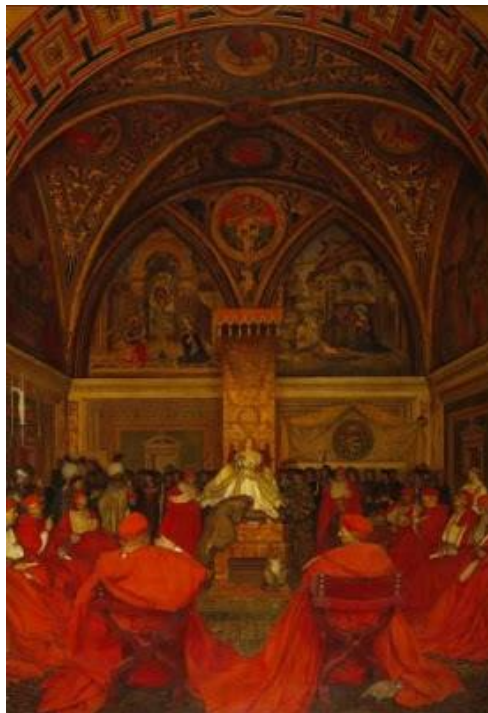


Figure 14. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *Lucretia Borgia reigns in the Vatican in the absence of the Pope Alexander VI*, 1908-14, (Tate Gallery, London)



Figure 15. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Margaret in the Church*, 1848, (Tate Gallery, London)

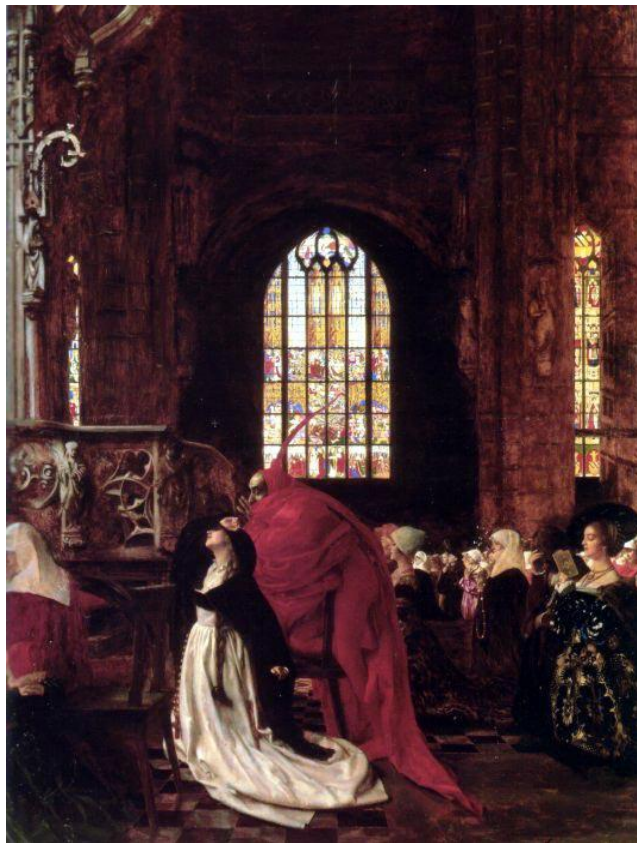


Figure 16. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *The Cathedral Scene from Faust*, 1919, (Private Collection)



Figure 17. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Risen at Dawn or Gretchen Discovering the Jewels*, 1868, (Tullie House Carlisle House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle)



Figure 18. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *Rapunzel*, 1900, (The De Morgan Foundation, London)



Figure 19. Palma Vecchio, *Portrait of a Poet*, 1516, (National Gallery, London)



Figure 20. John Everett Millais, *The Carpenter's Shop*, 1849-1858, (Tate Gallery, London)



Figure 21. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Girlhood of the Virgin*, 1848-49, (Tate Gallery, London)



Figure 22. Ford Madox Brown, *Take Your Son, Sir*, 1851-1856, (Tate Gallery, London)



Figure 23. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *Our Lady of the Fruits of the Earth*, 1917, (Private Collection)



Figure 24. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *The Blue Bird*, 1918, (Private Collection)



Figure 25. *The Wilton Diptych*, c. 1395-1399, (National Gallery, London)



Figure 26. T.C. Gotch, *The Child Enthroned*, 1894, (Private Collection)

Symbolist Context

The mood of Symbolism assumes clear contours in the art of Cowper. Symbolism was one of the major cultural movements of the second half of the 19th-century. Essentially redirecting the viewer's attention to a realm beyond that perceived by the five senses, Symbolist art is "inseparably linked to the implicit conflicts of modernity."⁵⁴ The observation has been made that "Symbolism represents a dreaming retreat into things that are dying."⁵⁵ Cowper's context was, in a sense, dying, changing dramatically in the early years

⁵⁴ Rodolphe Rapetti, *Symbolism*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (Paris: Flammarion, 2005), quoted in Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009), p.2.

⁵⁵ Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1931). p.21.

of the 20th-century. Not only was the Pre-Raphaelite style absconding into obscurity, but Cowper's cultural milieu was rapidly changing as well. Thwarting this reality, Cowper created imagery derived from make believe, withdrawn from the realistic in favor of the eerie, strange, fantastic, theatrical, ironic and beautiful--- retreating into a private world of art and literature. Though few scholars have fully considered artists outside France and Belgium into their discussion of Symbolist art,⁵⁶ *The Last Romantics*, an exhibition held in 1989 positioned the Birmingham Group as a link between the Romanticism of the late Pre-Raphaelites and the later Slade Symbolists.

While there is little evidence that the work of the English poet William Blake was widely known to artists outside of Britain, scholars recognize Blake as the "forefather of contemporary Symbolists."⁵⁷ In England, the 1863 publication of Alexander Gilchrist's biography of Blake brought the artist to the attention to progressive cultural circles in London and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in particular, as it was William Rossetti who finished the biography upon Gilchrist's unexpected death in 1861. The adult world, for Blake, was an alienating realm governed by false values; true liberation was attained through the embrace of sensual pleasure and the human imagination.

⁵⁶ Facos, 2009, p. 4.

⁵⁷ Martin Bidney, "A Russian Symbolist View of William Blake," *Comparative Literature*, Autumn (Oregon: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 327-39. The Russian Symbolist poet Konstantin Bal'mont (1867-1942) translated Blake's poetry and included a chapter titled "The forefather of Contemporary Symbolists: William Blake, 1757-1827" in his 1904 book *Mountain Summits*.

Blake was critical of organized religion and parallels can be drawn from Blake's arguments for sensual pleasure and the imagination and Cowper's attraction to Aestheticism and his imaginative, fanciful works as well as Cowper's subversive religious depictions.

The broad and sweeping artistic and intellectual precursors of Romanticism provided the conceptual framework for Symbolist imagery during the fin-de-siecle period across Europe. Political, psychological and social tensions generated a charged atmosphere of uncertainty that fed central themes of Symbolist art.⁵⁸ Schopenhauer's conceptions of women provided the philosophical framework for the femme fatale, while his system of aesthetics offered legitimacy to Aestheticism's ideas that art should provide a contemplative refuge from the degeneration of the modern existence. Myth, nostalgia, psychological states and spirituality provided recourse for the Romantic resistance to a culture dominated by rationale and the promise of progress.⁵⁹

The Symbolists belonged to a generation hooked on the concept of the femme fatale, which the imagery of Rossetti's female portraits helped to establish in the 1860's and thereafter. The enduring iconography of the destructive feminine beauty became a central motif in the art of the late Pre-Raphaelites, Aesthetes, Decadents, and

⁵⁸ Facos, 2009, p. 62

⁵⁹ Hans Hofstatter, *Symbolismus und die Kunst der Jahrhundertwende* (Cologne: DuMont, 1978), quoted in Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p.1.

Symbolists, and a familiar figure of Art Nouveau. Questions of sex and gender informed, if not pervaded, European culture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The destabilization of gender in an age obsessed with female power and its threat to men characterized the lives and work of many artists and writers.⁶⁰

Such 19th-century discourses on sexuality reverberate throughout Cowper's letters to his mother and provide, in part, a contextual interpretive framework for the artist's numerous depictions of women. In a letter dated May 30, 1906 in response to a conversation between mother and son regarding gender roles, Cowper wrote: "That is a silly argument to say that a woman is only inferior to a man now because women have been kept in the inferior position for all time till the present." Cowper explained further:

A girl wants to be a mystery to her lover of course, but all the same she has contempt for him if he doesn't know his true position and that is her master. I am certain that in old days, when everyone knew a woman's position and there were "no bones" about it, it was far more satisfactory, and the women were much happier because it was natural. They have got the new thing in its highest pitch in some American cities now. The women are supposed to be on an equality with the men, there is no feeling of chivalry at all, the women are about everywhere and do everything by themselves, make themselves a thorough nuisance, and are (so I read in the paper the other day) thoroughly unhappy. (...) The next step of course is degeneracy---- the sexes turn from each other.

⁶⁰ Olga Matich, "Gender Trouble in the Amazonian Kingdom," *Amazons of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2000), p.75.

It always ends so when a nation is over civilized of course. This has been going on in England and America for the last fifty years or more. And yet, the women produced have not proved equal to men, and they have generally turned out uninteresting women. I was very much interested to hear that father held the same idea as mine regarding women.⁶¹

Cowper's references to degeneracy are derived, in part from 19th-century dialogues on sexuality and rigid conceptions of gender roles. During this period, sexuality, formerly a private matter, assumed social significance in light of the degeneration discourse. The liveliest topic in this context was homosexuality, which came to represent disorder among those who felt that it imperiled the gender balance and accompanied other forms of deviance.⁶²

In the following statement Cowper echoed Schopenhauer's assertion that women "are [...] a kind of intermediate stage between the child and the full grown man," and that women "possess a weaker power of reasoning,"⁶³ Cowper wrote:

I did imagine that the age [of a perfect woman] ended at 45 or thereabout. Shakespeare makes his heroines start at 13 or 14 sometimes! But when I said women think about "love" from childhood to middle age, I didn't mean at all that I thought young girls or even many girls, had a definite conscious passion. Goodness no! No one with any sense could think that the usual

⁶¹ Cowper, 1906.

⁶² Victoria Thompson, "Homosexuality in France, 1830-1879," in *Feminism and History*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 398-428.

⁶³ Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Women," *Essays and Aphorisms* (London: Penguin Group, 1910), p.

soft pink and white girl has anything definite or conscious about her at all. But an indefinite, subconscious, nebulous sort of feeling that makes them want to hang on the opposite sex as much as possible (so much so that no girl can ever excel in any art of any kind, except acting if it can be called art.)

Yet, Cowper explained, “Women certainly are a [great] temptation for an artist.” Indeed, one of the most distinguishing aspects to Cowper’s art is the abundance of female imagery with a specific concentration on themes of seduction. More than any other image, Cowper painted women in the tradition of Rossetti. Like Rossetti, many of Cowper’s compositions are centered on single female who dominate the picture plane, seemingly belonging to the distant world of ballads, epics and myths.

Changing gender roles and the emergence of the New Woman provide a compelling interpretive context for Cowper’s numerous images of women. Emerging in the late 19th century, the New Woman demanded equality thereby challenging culturally systemic misogyny. In 1869 John Stuart Mill galvanized women who saw no rational basis for their inferior status with the publication of, *On the Subjugation of Women*. Women began to organize, giving birth to the suffragette movement. Confrontation with the Women’s Emancipation Movement and the controversy over family planning in the 1860’s resulted in widespread anxiety, which reverberated throughout the arts. A period of seismic social flux, the emergence of the New Woman at

the end of the century generated images that manifested the neurotic fear of gender reversal.⁶⁴

During this period women were depicted primarily one of two ways: docile or threatening. Of the docile category, females depicted were either saintly or sickly. Ailing women posed no threat due to their physical weakness. Nor did images of dead women like Ophelia, an enormously popular subject in the visual arts. Millais's *Ophelia* (fig.28), 1852 (Tate Gallery) established a prototype. Exhibiting this painting at the RA that year, Millais depicted Ophelia at the moment before she drowns, singing dementedly, she floats amid flowers including red poppies, which symbolize death. Cowper's *Titania Sleeps* (Kapitan Museum) (fig.28) adopts a similar format. *Titania Sleeps* was painted in a studio on Tite Street, Chelsea, former home to James Abbott McNeil Whistler, Oscar Wilde and John Singer Sargent.⁶⁵ The painting was shown at the RA in 1928 when the artist was 51. Inspired by 1920's Hollywood cinema, Cowper updated various aspects of women's fashion. In this case, the female's dress is essentially Art Deco, while her abandoned pose and make-up suggest Hollywood at its most glamorous.

While sickly depictions of women posed no threat, images of evil temptresses became a 19th-century hallmark. Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (fig. 9) from 1868 achieved success by giving visual and poetic

⁶⁴ Facos, 2009, p.130.

⁶⁵ Buckle, p.4.

expression to one of the central psychological conflicts of his time.⁶⁶ The painting represents a monumental, modern woman as the figure dominates the composition. Lilith is depicted during a private moment, narcissistically focused on her own image; her shoulder is exposed as she brushes her long, golden hair. A letter, which William Rossetti found dated November 18, 1869, addressed to the editor of the *Athenaeum* confirms the connection between *Lady Lilith* and the Woman's Emancipation Movement in England. The letter opens in the following manner: "Lilith, about whom you ask for information, was the first strong-minded woman and the original advocate of woman's rights."⁶⁷ The letter continues with a long and scholarly description of the folklore surrounding the night demon Lilith.

This early version of the femme fatale embodied not only what men saw in the feminist movement in a broad sense, but also what was understood to be the major hazard of that movement: the escape of women from male control of their sexuality. *Lilith*, and the hundreds of representations of femme fatales that followed not only destroy men, but also their hope of progeny and posterity, the definitive bane of Victorian family values.⁶⁸ Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* is alluring as well as dangerous, as are Cowper's numerous female depictions. Images such as *Lady Lilith* may be viewed as a Victorian sex object who

⁶⁶ Allen, 1984, p.28.

⁶⁷ W.M. Rossetti, *Rossetti Papers 1862-1870* (London: Sands, 1903), p.292.

⁶⁸ Allen, 1984, p. 294.

projected in her being the whole weight of fear and desire that Victorian gentlemen felt in confrontation with a woman's demand for independence.⁶⁹ Lilith's flowing hair was a potent symbol of her sexual prowess and the destructive power possessed by the femme fatale.⁷⁰ The seductive motif of long, flowing hair forms a consistent visual theme in Rossetti's work from this period, which artists such as Cowper drew heavily upon.

In 1909 Cowper painted *Venetian Ladies Listening to the Serenade* (fig.29), (Museo de Arte, Puerto Rico), which appropriates specific motifs from Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*. The painting depicts a nocturnal scene featuring three female figures close to the picture plane listening to a serenade that is sung from below. Cowper's use of space recalls Rossetti's claustrophobic interiors of his 1860's and later female-themed paintings. The posture of the female figure on the right and the way in which she brushes her long hair draws directly from Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*. The figure looks down at her hair suggesting she is seemingly more interested in her own beauty than the serenade. The two women on the left sit together holding hands and a dog in the foreground symbolizes fidelity. The question emerges: to whom are these women loyal, the singer or each other? This is an image of the proverbial modern woman, represented by a range of collapsing values: sexual degeneracy and vanity. In addition, Cowper's

⁶⁹ Ibid, p.292.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p.286.

proclivity toward the decorative is represented by the highly patterned dresses, the tapestry in the background and the decorative rug in the foreground. The dress worn by the central female figure in the foreground recalls Cowper's *Vanity* from two years earlier. The shoulders of two of the three figures are exposed, which eroticizes the image.

Cowper painted saintly depictions of women however, the topic of sexuality was almost always central to the subject. An example is Cowper's *St. Agnes in Prison Receiving from Heaven the Shining White Garment*, 1905 (fig. 30), (Tate Gallery). This painting illustrates a scene from Jacobus de Voragine's 15th-century *The Golden Legend*. Venerated as patron of purity, St. Agnes suffered martyrdom. Having vowed to live a life of chastity, she refused the suit of a Roman youth, who stripped and imprisoned her. In prison an angel brought her a white robe to cover her nakedness.⁷¹ This was the first painting by Cowper to be purchased for the Chantrey Bequest and borrows from Rossetti's *Annunciation* (fig.31) of 1850 (Tate Gallery). Cowper's realistic treatment of the straw recalls Millais's *Return of the Dove of the Ark* (fig.32) from 1851 (Ashmolean Museum in Oxford).

Cowper's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* from 1926 and 1946 was based upon the compositional arrangement of a work from 1924 titled,

⁷¹ Tate Gallery, "St. Agnes in Prison Receiving the Shining White Garment," Frank Cadogan Cowper, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/cowper-st-agnes-in-prison-receiving-from-heaven-the-shining-white-garment-n01961> (accessed Oct. 4, 2012).

The Damsel of the Lake, called Nimue the Enchantress (fig.33), (private collection). All three works draw from the motifs surrounding the femme fatale. The figure of Nimue is wearing a long white gown in front of a lake gazing at her reflection in the mirror. The deer, which sits at her feet, suggest fertility; the poppies symbolize death. The scene is disturbing. Formally, triangular form of Nimue recalls Renaissance compositional conventions, which is echoed in the triangular shape of the mountains. The mountains in shadow and the stark landscape provide an ominous setting. Although an otherworldly subject, Cowper's scene is highly detailed, imparting a palpable sense of reality. The naturalism of the landscape contrasts with the ethereal Nimue. Why is this figure dressed so elegantly in the midst of a desolate landscape? Why is she staring at herself staring in the mirror?

Cowper re-visited the theme of *Vanity* (private collection) (fig. 34) in 1919. Like the artist's earlier rendition, the composition of this painting echoes Rossetti's paintings. Like Rossetti, Cowper concentrates on a single female figure posed close to the picture plane. Cowper's figure wears ermine: a satirical and potent symbol of purity in Renaissance times and most often associated with royalty. Like Cowper's 1907 painting, the figure's shoulder is exposed. Unlike the earlier version however, the figure does admire herself in the hand mirror held in her right hand, rather, she gazes directly and somewhat haughtily at the viewer. This woman exhibits a self-assurance not

unlike that attributed to the New Woman. Like her 1907 predecessor, this woman possesses all the attributes of vanity. Cowper's characteristic lush, detailed and highly patterned textile hangs in the background. The feather in the figure's hair as well as her hairstyle reflects women's fashion in the 1920's. While images of women with mirrors were popular, it should be noted that there are very few examples of men, whether mythical or actual, looking at themselves in mirrors to be found in 19th-century representations.⁷²

Cowper was preoccupied with female vanity. Below is a rare analysis of Cowper's 1907 *Vanity*. Piya Pal-Lipinski writes:

This painting is a treatment of an exoticized Italian woman or courtesan who is monumental in her self-absorption. The mirror, the huge Orientalized Renaissance turban, along with the black and gold serpentine forms wriggling along her sleeves, and highly ornate red and gold barrier over which the woman leans all serve to highlight the artist's anxiety about space claimed by her erotic power and her gaze, which approaches the mirror obliquely. Yet, her self-reflexiveness, as well as what she sees, remains unknowable because the "body in the mirror" cannot be seen by the viewer.⁷³

Like Rosetti's *Lady Lilith*, Cowper's *Vanity* presents the viewer with the "central problematics" of Pre-Raphaelite art, to borrow a term from Griselda Pollock: "woman as visibly different, yet woman

⁷² Martin, Danahay, "Mirrors of Masculine Desire," *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, West Virginia: West Virginia Press, 1994), p. 35.

⁷³ Piya Pal-Lipinski, "Desiring the Exoticized Woman," *The Exotic Woman in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction and Culture* (New England: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005) p.243.

as fantasy, sign of masculine desire.⁷⁴ Cowper's female depictions are part of a larger ideological structure, which is embedded into his artistic imagery. Cowper's art is not simply a reflection of the social and political framework, yet it is not independent of it either. Cowper's female representations are inseparable from the social context of their production and reception in history and ultimately contribute to the cultivation of cultural meanings.⁷⁵ Many artists associated with Cowper engaged in late 19th and early 20th-century discourses on female sexuality. Yet, unlike the psychology of the female depictions of Waterhouse or the sentimentality of Dicksee, much of Cowper's female imagery is psychologically remote and sexually diffused. It is as if the most salient aspect to many of Cowper's female depictions is the opulence surrounding femininity.

Encoded within Cowper's imagery is the argument concerning art and beauty. The Rossettian beauties were derived, in part, from his extensive work in translating Italian Renaissance poetry. In a seminal study published in 1976 titled "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style," Elizabeth Cropper broached the question of gender in aesthetics by reconstructing a complex history of love and beauty that converged in treatises on beautiful

⁷⁴ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.124.

⁷⁵ Pointon, et. al., 1989, p. vii.

women.⁷⁶ Cropper reveals the ways in which depictions of beautiful women during this period came to be associated with the challenges of representing beauty in art and thus became associated with the *paragone*, the debate from the Italian Renaissance concerning which form of art was superior.

The dominant premise of Cropper's study is that literary and pictorial ideals of feminine beauty were part of a constructed set of beliefs most clearly articulated in treatises on women.⁷⁷ Some of these specific and idealized female physical features are: thick, long and curling blonde hair, ranging from gold and honey to the color of bright sunshine; a brow that is twice as wide as it is high, gleaming white and gently curving and serene, unmarked by any line. The eyebrows must be dark and fine and the eyebrows must form perfect arches that taper outward towards the ends.⁷⁸ In her argument, Cropper also employs a contemporaneous analogy between the ideal female form and a beautiful antique vase to demonstrate the 16th-century attitude of female beauty objectified.

Cropper, especially sensitive to early modern Italian gender discourse and how it became encoded in artistic representation,

⁷⁶ Paola Tingali, *Woman in Renaissance Art* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp.12.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Cropper, "The Beauty of Woman: Problems in the Rhetoric of Renaissance Portraiture," *Rewriting the Renaissance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp.759-764.

⁷⁸ Elizabeth Cropper, "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 58, No.3, (New York: College Art Association, 1976) pp.383.

identified a series of problems derived from the *paragone*. Cropper contends that central to Italian Renaissance female portraiture is another series of problems the most salient of which is: pictures of female identity with no identity. These paintings reveal how representations of beautiful women became beauty represented, where richly rendered brocades and the jewels are as relevant symbols of beauty as the female figure.⁷⁹ Female sitters, unlike male sitters, do not need a history, nor a biography, nor have performed great deeds. Their only essential characteristic is their beauty.⁸⁰

In Cowper's paintings, established cultural and moral boundaries are subverted by the representation of sexually transgressive heroines from history and literature. Beyond such cultural implications however, Cowper's numerous female representations may also be interpreted as symbols of beauty and metaphors for art. Entering the realm of the Aesthete, the artist's concentration on symbols of beauty is emblematic of the problems many of the surrounding artists dealt with at the turn of the century: the destruction of beauty and the seismic transformations in the discourses surrounding Post-Impressionism.

Charles Ricketts made gestures in the same direction as Cowper and his statements help to articulate an emotional and

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Cropper, 1986, p. 795-764.

⁸⁰ Mary Rogers, "Sonnets on Female Portraits from Renaissance North Italy," *Word & Image*, Vol.2, October-December, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1986), p.291-305.

psychological undercurrent of the period. Ricketts worked in set and costume design in British theatrical circles and also had ties to William Blake. Ricketts illustrated *The Book of Thel* in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in the 1890's and was also highly influenced by Rossetti. Rossetti's narrative illustrations, his later idealized figures of women and the Venetian aspect also made a unique appeal to Ricketts who was a vocal protestor of modernity.

Upon reading a new novel by Anatole France in March 1914, Ricketts detected in it "a sense of fear, which is, I believe, fairly widespread among thinking men, who dread some sort of de-civilizing change, latent about us, which expresses itself especially in uncouth sabotage, Suffragettes and Post-Impressionism, and Cubist and Futurist tendencies."⁸¹ A few weeks later Ricketts would hear of a Suffragette attack on Bellini's *Agony in the Garden* in the National Gallery. In 1922 Ricketts wrote to Yeats: "These many years of fear, anxiety, fatigue, and disillusion have had a wearying effect. I know I am a quite useless survival from another age, and because the future has no use for me. I look at it like a sheep in a railway truck."⁸² Ricketts sentiments and observations are revelatory of Cowper's context and articulate a particularly latent ethos: an acute sense of alienation induced by the march of modernism, and of fighting a

⁸¹ Cecil Lewis (ed), *Self Portrait*. Taken from the Letters and Journals of Charles Ricketts, RA 1939, pp181-90, quoted in John Christian, introduction to *The Last Romantics* (London: Lund Humphries & Barbican Art Gallery, 1989), p. 20.

⁸² Christian, 1989, p.21.

rearguard action on behalf of an older, richer and hopelessly doomed culture.⁸³

Other contemporaries were of similar mind. J.M. Strudwick, another painter who worked in the Pre-Raphaelite vein, seems to have stopped painting years before his death, most likely due to discouragement, and Graham Robertson, yet another artist with similar affinities, abandoned painting around 1920, seeing no place for his art in “this new and beauty hating” post-war world. Lamenting Sarah Bernhardt in 1923, Robertson wrote: “This passing of almost the last Great Romantic Figure of the past century seems to emphasize the death of Art and Beauty and reveal the full dreariness of the ugly desert stretched around us.”⁸⁴ Robertson’s tone was still the same in the 1940’s. “I have lived for long, happy years...in a lovely land of art and literature where men strove earnestly, and I think nobly, to create and perpetuate beauty.”⁸⁵

Burne-Jone’s expressed a similar view with the statement: “the more materialistic Science becomes, the more angels I shall paint.” He claimed to feel “not so much as if I belonged to another time or country but to another planet all together,” and lived to see his reputation, at its height in the 1880’s, decline. When late paintings

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Kerrison Preston (ed), *Letters from Graham Robertson*, 1953, p.104. John Christian, Taken from Introduction to *The Last Romantics* (London: Lund Humphries & Barbican Art Gallery, 1989), p.20.

⁸⁵ Christian, 1989, p.20

like *Love Leading the Pilgrim*, exhibited in 1897, failed to sell, he told T.M. Rooke philosophically that, “I must be prepared for public weariness about me.” He was correct in identifying the chief threat to his position: the advent of Impressionism, “a blow I shall never get over.”⁸⁶ As early as 1904, one critic described Burne-Jones as “the worst artist that ever lived, whether you regard him as a colorist, a draughtsman, a painter, or a designer.”⁸⁷

Of course, one must be careful; such attitudes were by no means universal. Not everyone voiced the anguish and hysteria found in artists such as Burne-Jones and Ricketts, whose articulate responses happen to be well preserved. However, there was wide latitude of aesthetic debate in the early decades of the century that is often overlooked.

⁸⁶ Unpublished section of Rooke’s notes of conversation in Burne-Jones’s studio. John Christian, introduction to *The Last Romantics* (London: Lund Humphries and the Barbican Art Gallery, 1989), pp.20.

⁸⁷ D.S. MacColl, *The Life, Work, and Setting Up of Wilson Steer* (London, 1945), pp.68, quoted in John Christian, introduction to *The Last Romantics* (London: Lund Humphries & Barbican Art Gallery, 1989), p. 20.



Figure 27. John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1852, (Tate Gallery, London)



Figure 28. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *Titania Sleeps*, 1928, (Kapitan Museum, Tokyo)



Figure 29. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *Venetian Ladies Listening to a Serenade*, 1909, (Museo de Arte, Puerto Rico)



Figure 30. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *St. Agnes in Prison Receiving from Heaven the Shining White Garment*, 1905, (Tate Gallery, London)



Figure 31. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *The Annunciation*, 1850, (Tate Gallery, London)



Figure 32. Millais, *Return of the Dove of the Ark*, 1851, (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)



Figure 33. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *The Damsel of the Lake, called Nimue the Enchantress*, 1924, (private collection)



Figure 34. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *Vanity*, 1919, (Private Collection)

Bloomsbury

The Bloomsbury Group coalesced around the belief in the importance of the arts and was of significant importance in shaping the development of British formalism. Some of its more prominent members include: Vanessa and Clive Bell, Virginia Woolf, Roger Fry and Lytton Strachey. Applying the description, “Post-Impressionism” in the two exhibitions of 1910 and 1912, Fry drew his aesthetic language from the Arts and Crafts movement before its demise in the early 20th century. By the second exhibition the discourse had shifted toward formalism, which privileged formal means over content. Clive Bell, in the publication of his book *Art* in 1914 coined the term “significant form,” asserting the most salient quality of a work of art lie in its formal properties. In a letter from 1916 Vanessa Bell describes this position to Roger Fry:

How perfectly awful and how provincial those Victorians were, [...] Burne-Jones himself simply deteriorated into a machine I think. He went on with this incredibly sentimental owl in an ivy bush view of himself and his holy mission completely ignorant of the whole of French art of this time, Impressionists and all...I see the only hope for the English is to get outside their island pretty often.⁸⁸

Such attitudes stand in stark contrast to artists such as Cowper, who relied heavily on narrative content.

⁸⁸ Francis Spalding, *Vanessa Bell* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), p.152-3.

Cowper and his small circle were in mid-career or scarcely launched during this period. A telling aspect is how the group fared in the books of the period. R.H. Wilenski's *The Modern Movement in Art*, published in 1927, which gives them the full Fry treatment. That is, artists such as Cowper were dismissed as irrelevant and considered grossly out of sync. Moreover, there is more than a hint of dissatisfaction in the press comment on Waterhouse's painting *The Dandaides*, exhibited in 1906. *The Times* dismissing it as "a decorative bit of mythology" and the *Anthenaeum* complaining that the figures had the "fretful weariness of Kentish housewives oppressed by eternal cleaning." Byam Shaw saw his early masterpiece *Love of the Conqueror* (private collection), sold off the easel in 1899 for £1,000 and subsequently reproduced in a popular engraving, knocked down to 42 guineas. Charles Ricketts wrote: "Our career has been a constant bluff [...] we have against us the growing public indifference to art, and the hostility of the artistic world."⁸⁹

During this period the novelist, avid collector, and pioneer of the Victorian revival Evelyn Waugh was one of Cowper's most well known collectors. Waugh's views on the antiquated styles of artists such as Cowper provide a defensive counterpart to the dismissive attitudes held by Modernists. Writing social satires, Waugh was

⁸⁹ Cecil Lewis (ed), *Self Portrait*. Taken from the Letters and Journals of Charles Ricketts, RA 1939 pp.129-30, quoted in John Christian, introduction to *The Last Romantics* (London: Lund Humphries & Barbican Art Gallery, 1989), p. 20.

unambiguously hostile to a great deal of what was in vogue in British society in the 1920's. Themes of cultural confusion, moral disorientation, and social bedlam run through many of his novels. Waugh was a well-known conservative who was also deeply interested in art criticism. In 1928 Waugh wrote *Rossetti: His Life and Works*. Waugh ended the book with a chapter titled, "What is Wrong With Rossetti?"

Waugh was deeply troubled by what he saw as the "modern critical attitude." Observing a changing atmosphere in both art and artistic criticism, Waugh wrote that during Rossetti's life there did not exist "an apparatus of artistic criticism." Yet, In Waugh's view, this "modern critical attitude" developed, as admirers of the Post-Impressionist schools of painting required an explanation for their preferences and thus the emergence of what Waugh called the "aesthetic emotion." Waugh writes:

If there had not been an aesthetic emotion they would have had to invent one. Some people's aesthetic emotion might be more easily aroused than others, but, whenever the emotion was sincerely present, there was Art. The intensity of the emotion was the gauge by which the value of the work of art could be assessed. Thus the initial assumption became the foundation on which modern art criticism was built.⁹⁰

Waugh began his book with two profoundly antithetical views of the artistic impulse, one written by Fry and the other, Rossetti.

⁹⁰ Evelyn Waugh, *Rossetti: His Life and Works* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1928), p.222.

Through Waugh's discussion of this dialectic, he articulates a fundamental divide. Waugh quotes Fry, who wrote: "I know that real artists, even if they are destined to paint highly imaginative works and to go mad in the end like Van Gogh, generally begin by making an elaborate study of an old pair of boots or something of that kind."⁹¹ For Fry, art begins with rational faculties. However, directly opposing this notion, Rossetti's conception of the artistic impulse begins with the inspiration of the imagination. Waugh quoted Rossetti, who wrote:

Among my earliest recollections none is stronger than that of my father standing before the fire when he came home in the London winter evenings, and singing to us in his sweet, generous tones: sometimes ancient English ditties---such songs one might translate from the birds, and the brooks might set to music; [...] I used to sit on the hearthrug listening to him, and look between his knees into the fire till it burned my face, while the sights swarming up in it seemed changed and changed with the music, till the music and the fire and my heart burned together and I would take paper and pencil and try in some childish way to fix the shapes that rose within me. For my hope, even then, was to be a painter.⁹²

Rossetti's impulse to pictorial expression came not from the contemplation of form, but through an emotional state of mind evoked by firelight and singing. For Waugh, the implications of Fry's

⁹¹ Roger Fry, *The Artist and Psycho-Analysis*. London: L. and V. Woolf, 1924, quoted in Evelyn Waugh, *Rossetti: His Life and Works* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1928), p.11.

⁹² Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *St. Agnes of Intercession*, quoted in Evelyn Waugh, *Rossetti: His Life and Works* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1928), p. 11.

statement are clear. Fry's conception of an artist is someone interested in the form underlying the appearance of things. A work of art is a statement of such relationships or of a coherent sequence of such relationships, varying from the simplest to the most complex according to the scope of the work. "That," wrote Waugh, "is a fair statement of the modern." For Waugh, Rossetti's work, hence the art of Cowper was counter to Fry's ideas on art, whose very notions led to the hegemony of formalism and the critical derision and wholesale dismissal of artists such as Cowper.

Waugh's discussion of Fry and Rossetti illustrate this binary of logic and rational and emotion and imagination. In their own time Cowper and the wider surrounding group of artists associated with a 19th-century style appeared intensely out of touch. Yet, these artists were very much connected with this dialectical issue. On a theoretical level, Cowper's imagery can best be understood as anti-modernist allegories. Cowper's art emerges from a Post-Modern context, which opposes the separation of art, hence the imagination from life.

The criticism of the first half of the 20th-century was, in a sense, incapable of valuing art such as Cowper's. The theory of modernism, form and methods of logic were developing during Cowper's lifetime and eventually became the dominant paradigm of the art of the 1950's and 60's. The historical circumstances of the turn of the century gave rise to conflicting attitudes about modernism, yet

converged on the same critique: that culture is in a state of decay. Justification for the priority given to form was primarily found in the philosophical writings of Immanuel Kant, which was echoed in critiques of Fry and Bell, culminating in the critical writings of Clement Greenberg.⁹³ Meanwhile, T.J. Clark argued that artistic values must be connected with society in a larger sense; they cannot be autonomous. Clark claimed that artistic value become values only when they stand for something else, when they become “metaphors.”⁹⁴ Cowper’s re-contextualization of the Pre-Raphaelite imagery, with specific emphasis on Rossetti was among other things, itself an argument for beauty within the context of the rapidly changing artistic atmosphere of the 20th-century.

Portraiture

Portraiture was enormously important for Cowper. Although many of Cowper’s female depictions are lacking in specific identity, most of the artist’s compositions follow a portrait format, yet it was not until mid-career that Cowper would return to portraiture. By the 1920’s the market for meticulously painted literary and historic scenes weakened. During this period Cowper turned increasingly to portraiture. Numerous parallels can be made between Cowper and

⁹³ Howard Risatti (ed), *Postmodern Perspectives: Issues in Contemporary Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), p 3.

⁹⁴ T.J. Clark, “Arguments About Modernism: A Reply to Michael Fried,” *Politics of Interpretation*, ed. W.J. T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p.239-248.

Millais, a well-known portraitist in his later career who emulated old masters. Though drawing heavily from the romantic archaism of Rossetti, it is through Millais's technical style of highly detailed vividness that Cowper achieved a tangible sense of reality. Cowper's 1919 work *Portrait of Fraunces, Beatrice, James and Synfye* (fig.35), (private collection) is an unusual work in that it depicts multiple figures, yet strongly suggests Millais's influence who painted numerous portraits of children. This particular work is rather restrained with a black background reminiscent of Flemish portraits. The carpet in the foreground serves as a decorative anchor for the simplified composition.

As the 1920's saw a decline in subject pictures, Cowper continued to receive patronage from the likes of Waugh and the Wills family of Misarden in Gloucestershire. Cowper's *Portrait of Miss Mona Sayer* (fig.36), 1936 (Roy Precious Antique and Fine Art) is representative of the artist's work from this period. The painting combines elements of Cowper's earlier *Vanity* including the medieval style wall hanging and female model whose dress and hairstyle is updated for the period. Cowper became acquainted with the sitter's family in Guernsey and also painted other prominent Guernsey families in the 1920's and 30's.⁹⁵ Exhibited at the RA in 1936, this

⁹⁵ Scott Thomas Buckle, "Letter to Roy Precious," <http://www.sellingantiques.co.uk/antiquedetail.asp?autonumber=74735> (accessed April 4, 2013).

work was still in Cowper's possession at the time of his death and sold with the artist's effects in 1959. This suggests that the sitter's family probably did not commission the portrait, but rather Cowper personally chose to paint her portrait as a possible submission for the Royal Academy summer show.⁹⁶

Cowper's portraiture during WWII deviated from his earlier tendencies toward the fantastic, though his later works returned to it. A late portrait, *The Ugly Duckling* (fig.37), 1950 (Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum) exhibits many of Cowper's earliest pictorial conventions. With an ironic title, the portrait displays Cowper's characteristic female dressed in an opulent, richly textured gown surrounded by symbols of femininity, from the pink fan in her left hand to the flower in her hair. In an interview with the sitter, Valerie Tarantolo revealed some of Cowper's working practices. When asked about her experience as a model for Cowper Tarantolo stated:

[The dress] was all open at the back, he [Cowper] draped it over my shoulders, everything, everything, to the holding of the fan, to the way my hands were and to the draping of the pretty stuff at the shoulders, he put the roses there and did my hair. He told me what he was going to do with the background because of the dress; he wanted the dark background. He seemed very happy with the portrait [and] wasn't flirtatious at all, not at all.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Interview with Valerie Tarantolo and Helen Brown, Commissioned by Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum, by David Grange, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtSc2fDyfzA> (accessed April 22, 2013).

From Tarantolo's comments it is clear that Cowper deliberately selected staging, display and costume for inspiration. Rather than placing the figure in historical costume as was standard in the artist's early working practice, Cowper has updated the fashion, seemingly deriving part of his aesthetic from the glamour of 1950's Hollywood films. The placement of the ornately dressed female figure, however, appears out of place in the swampy, desolate landscape. The juxtaposition of the ornately dressed figure in a stark and empty landscape serves as a metaphor. Further, the highly detailed and meticulously painted murky water of the background recalls Millais's *Ophelia*, while the handling of the trees and sky are loosely painted, resulting in another characteristic of Cowper: a subtly strange image imbued with a palpable sense of reality.

In the 1950's this kind of imagery was outdated. The author of Cowper's obituary articulated some of the perceived problems with Cowper's portraits. He writes:

Of the portraits by which he [Cowper] was generally represented at the RA in later years, it is difficult to speak with enthusiasm, but it can be said that they failed less from lack of ability than from the confusion of aim; a mixture of the decorative and realistic that spoiled both.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ *The Times*, "Obituary for Frank Cadogan Cowper," (London, November 20, 1958).

Cowper's fusion of the "decorative" and "realistic" is derived from both Rossetti and Millais and is also evocative of an alternative way of seeing the artist's imagery.



Figure 35. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *Portrait of Fraunces, Beatrice, James and Synfye*, 1919, (private collection)



Figure 36. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *Portrait of Miss Mona Sayer*, 1936, (Roy Precious Antique ad Fine Art, London)



Figure 37. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *The Ugly Duckling*, 1950, (Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum, London)

Magical Realism

Magical Realism is a movement predominantly associated with literature, yet has been identified in pockets of 20th-century art. In 1943 Dorothy Miller and Alfred J. Barr organized the exhibition *American Realists and Magic Realists*, which presented a particular type of modern realism and an alternative narrative to 20th century art that was marginalized after WWII with the popularization of figurative and abstract styles and the rise of high formalist modernism. Magical Realism, Barr wrote, “[is] a term sometimes applied to the work of painters who, by means of an exact, realistic technique, try to make plausible and convincing their improbable, dream-like or fantastic visions.”⁹⁹ Indeed, Barr’s use of the word “dream-like” is a telling aspect to Cowper’s imagery. One of the hallmarks of Cowper’s iconography is the way in which he merges the real and the unreal in a style of hyper detailed vividness. Implicit in Magical Realism is criticism of society and is a genre where magic elements are a natural part of an otherwise mundane, realistic environment.¹⁰⁰ Though Cowper does not combine the mundane and the fantastic, he does fuse elements of the real and the fanciful with the immense detail of the natural world; blending the realism of Millais’s landscapes with fantastic subject matter in an eccentric display of aesthetic opulence.

¹⁰⁰ Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamore, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), p.5.

As time progressed Cowper rarely deviated from his highly decorative surfaces and fanciful imagery derived from literature. Cowper's *The Four Queens Finds Lancelot Sleeping* (fig.38), 1954 (Peter Nahum, The Leicester Galleries) is a good example of his late style. In an astonishing case of Pre-Raphaelite survival, in subject, mood and technique the painting belongs to the 19th-century. Only the features of the four Queens, who look like 1950's film stars, give a clue to its real date. The subject occurs in the *Morte d'Arthur*. The four Queens find Lancelot sleeping underneath a highly symbolic apple tree; each wants him for her lover. One of the Queens lays him under enchantment and has him carried to her castle where he is asked to choose one of them. Refusing, Lancelot makes his escape. The motif of an armed knight lying full-length echoes Cowper's earlier paintings of *La Belle Dame sans Merci* from 1905, 1926 and 1946. The rich and intricately patterned dresses of the Queens is a hallmark of Cowper's.

Cowper exhibited *The Golden Bowl* (fig.39), (private collection) in 1956 at the RA. The title could refer to a novel by Henry James published in 1904 with the same title. James's novel is a story of marriage and adultery. The novel is an in depth study of the consciousness of the central characters with, at times, obsessive detail and powerful insight. The title is also a quotation from Ecclesiastes 12: 6, which says: "Remember him---before the silver cord is severed,

and the golden bowl is broken; before pitcher is shattered at the spring and the wheel broken at the well.”¹⁰¹ Seemingly referring to death, Cowper painted *The Golden Bowl* two years before his own death in 1958. The painting depicts a female figure within a dark loosely painted background. Wearing a red turban and Cowper’s signature lush and highly patterned and detailed cloak, which falls off her shoulders the figure’s stare is disengaged; she is holding a golden bowl filled with fruit; withdrawn from the world, the fruit is art.



Figure 38. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *The Four Queens Find Lancelot Sleeping*, 1954, (Peter Nahum, The Leicester Galleries, London)

¹⁰¹ Ecclesiastes 12:6 (Revised Standard Version)



Figure 39. Frank Cadogan Cowper, *The Golden Bowl*, 1956, (Private Collection)

Conclusion

Painting for Cowper was a refuge. The idea of the artist withdrawn from the world and living for his or her art was one that persisted throughout Cowper's lifetime. Yet, what does the impulse to look backwards say? Inherent in act of appropriation is the idea of re-contextualization; Cowper re-contextualizes Pre-Raphaelite imagery during a period of increasing transformation both in the visual arts. Like Cowper's predecessors, the Pre-Raphaelites consciously imitated archaic styles in their art, which Cowper was still emulating almost a century later. The Pre-Raphaelites used archaism as an expression of the desire to get back to a place before modernity. Like the Pre-

Raphaelites, Cowper's imagery points to the same impulse. Although Cowper's works seemingly have no real revolutionary impetus behind them, there is something implicitly defiant about them, a refusal of the modern and a very human need for beauty. Cowper's oeuvre not only expands the conversation about early 20th century art, but also communicates a resonant expression of discontent. Themes of power, gender, beauty, issues of display, modernity and irony collide in Cowper's imagery. Yet, beyond the obvious cultural and artistic implications of Cowper's many paintings, the artist's imagery ultimately opposes the separation of art from life, a central theme of Post-modernity.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Risatti, 1990, p. xii.

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