

Rossetti and *The Blue Bower*: Pre-Raphaelite symbolism and ideals of beauty with a single female muse



The Blue Bower, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1865, oil on canvas, 84 x 70.9 cm, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello, and a warm welcome to the first of the online Tuesday Talks given by staff at the Barber Institute, the art gallery located in Birmingham on the University of Birmingham's Edgbaston campus. I'm Helen Cobby, Assistant Curator, and I'm pleased to have this opportunity to talk to you about the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti - whose birthday it is today, 12th May - and to discuss his painting called 'The Blue Bower' in the Barber's collection. It was acquired for the gallery in 1959 and is one of the many highlights in the collection. I'll begin with a brief introduction to Rossetti before considering 'The Blue Bower', focusing on the sitter and her costume, and some of the possible symbolic meanings suggested by the ornamentation, composition and accessories. If you have any questions, or would like to put forward ideas and continue discussions after hearing this short talk, please feel free to email the gallery (at info@barber.org.uk) or post to our social media platforms.

Rossetti is one of the best-known and most popular of the Victorian Pre-Raphaelite painters. He was born in London on 12th May in 1828, which would make him 192 years old today. He came from a talented middle-class family. His father was an Italian political refugee and a scholar of the famous Renaissance poet, Dante, and his sister Christina was a prestigious poet. Rossetti was initially torn between whether to become a painter or poet himself. He decided to focus on painting, although often wove literature into his artworks through the subject matter or with poetic accompaniments - from the paintings' titles to actual poems composed to accompany the canvases. He entered London's Royal Academy Schools in 1845, but quickly became unhappy there, with its emphasis on drawing from antiques, and its academic focus on historical subjects and ancient classical art. So, swiftly, he became a private student with the slightly older artist Ford Madox Brown, before moving into a studio in 1848 with his almost exact contemporary, William Holman Hunt. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood grew out of this association.

These English artists shocked the art world with their new subject matter and styles, which reacted against the accepted artistic conventions and academia of the time. They believed British art needed to be revived by looking back to early Italian paintings produced before Raphael and the

High Renaissance. They admired these works for their commitment to a tradition of simplicity and realism, which they felt later periods had lost. The Pre-Raphaelite's paintings were also characterised by intense colours and exquisite details, which paid particularly close attention to nature and botany. Such rich details were used to enhance the stories the artists explored in their work, which they typically took from myths, legends and the literature of Shakespeare or Keats. The paintings are certainly a feast for the eyes, so it can be difficult to imagine today that these works were considered revolutionary and provocative during their own time. The art critic John Ruskin set himself up as the advocate for these young artists, defending them as 'serious' painters and playing a big part in bringing the Pre-Raphaelites to more positive public attention.

Perhaps because of these early attacks on his work, Rossetti was reluctant to exhibit his paintings. However, he was aware of the need to market himself, and was one of the first artists to use photography as a vehicle for disseminating knowledge of his artwork. By the mid-1850s, he became a dominating presence in British art, and by the end of the decade, was earning around £3,000 per year, a vast sum for the time. Around this period, he began to focus on making paintings depicting a single female figure, typically in a bust-length format, set against a lavishly decorative background. He looked to Venetian Old Masters, such as Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese, to inform his vibrant colour palette and the bold poses and luxurious accessories for his sitters.

Many of these paintings also evoke literary references and are full of symbolic meaning, inviting complex layers of interpretation. Yet, they have a critical history of being dismissed or explained as studies of purely sensual beauty, devoid of any meaning beyond the aesthetic. Charles Dickens, famous for his moral narratives, was among those who criticised Rossetti for this apparent superficiality. Ideas of 'beauty' can, however, be a productive way of exploring these paintings, as they were - at least in part - intended to be exquisite objects in their own right. This is an early example of the notion 'art for art's sake', which would become key to the Aesthetic Movement, in which art (to use the critic Walter Pater's later phrase) 'aspires to the condition of music'. These paintings occupied the longest phase in Rossetti's career, and are now considered some of his most compelling works.

The Barber's example, 'The Blue Bower', made in 1865, is one of these alluring paintings. It has been described as a masterpiece that marks the climax of Rossetti's achievements during the 1860s. Painted in oil on canvas, it measures 84cm high by 71cm wide (a bit bigger than a washing machine at home). This excludes the original, highly decorative frame, which is Venetian in style. Filling the composition, which is almost overpacked and bursting at its edges, is an alluring, voluptuous woman draped in a shimmering green jacket, which provides a startling contrast to her bright, wavy red hair. The tilt of her 3/4 profile highlights her angular jaw, full lips and blue eyes, which look straight out of the painting in an assertive, and yet slightly vacant, gaze. The smooth texture of her pale skin is offset by the thick furry lining of her jacket, which leads the eye along her torso and down to the Japanese musical instrument - called a *koto* - stretched along the picture plane. It is much shorter than a real koto, indicating artistic license is at play.¹

The woman's strong and statuesque characteristics are typical of Rossetti's portrayals of beautiful women. She is certainly presented as an 'artwork' or object to admire, while at the same time she appears to tease the viewer with her aloofness, confidently occupying her own space, separated from us by the musical instrument. In this way, the work privileges a male gaze at the same time as suggesting that beautiful women can have a powerful hold over men.

This sitter was Fanny Cornforth (christened Sarah Cox), Rossetti's muse, mistress and housekeeper. She was 30 when this work was painted; the small scattering of blue cornflowers in the foreground allude to her surname and her blooming youth. The other flowers in the composition, passion flowers and wild convolvulus blossoms, indicate her fiery nature. She was dismissed by many of Rossetti's associates and later art historians because of her working-class background and presumptions that she was a sex worker. Myths certainly surround Fanny Cornforth because, at least until recently, facts were few.

¹ Although kotos are usually much longer than the one depicted in *The Blue Bower*, short versions were made in Japan up to the mid-19th century for use by courtiers on pleasure trips on ships or carts.

Although this painting presents an intimate portrait of one woman, it is not an individual portrait of the sitter. Rather, an idealised woman is transported to a symbolic setting in which stories and qualities of beauty and love are explored. The word 'bower' in the title encourages these themes, being a private medieval retreat for lovers in a castle or a garden associated with trysts. The erotic intent is echoed by the musical instrument, music being a food of love. Although she is fully clothed, her oversized jacket is also suggestive of a passionate sexuality, or, rather playfully, a loose nature.

The cultural setting is clearly exotic - styles and features associated with the exotic and the Orient were intertwined and popular in Britain at the time, and often wrapped up with ideas of sensuality and opulence. The hexagonal tiles in the background suggest an Islamic origin, yet are decorated with a motif of Chinese cherry blossom, a pattern found on the blue and white Chinese ceramics that Rossetti loved to collect. Fanny Cornforth's clothes also signify Chinese culture: her jacket is a Chinese mandarin's informal silk robe, perhaps bought at London's recently opened department store, Liberty's, which specialised in importing such items. On the other side of the small round gold buttons on this robe there would be small loops - similar buttons and loops were the usual closure on Chinese robes. In her hair, she wears a Chinese kingfisher hair ornament, probably made for the Western export market.

Rossetti does not seem to be interested in presenting these exotic features with authenticity. For instance, the Japanese stringed instrument, originally used in court music, is not depicted, positioned or played in the correct manner. Here, it has fourteen strings, yet the usual number is thirteen. Perhaps he made a mistake, or perhaps he was using the instrument as a decorative still-life object, favouring the *idea* of music, that is, its performer and the setting in which it is made.

Overall, therefore, it seems that Rossetti was not aiming for cultural accuracy, as elements from different times, places and societies - Islamic, Chinese and Japanese - are combined. This approach, which may seem problematic and Orientalist from a modern perspective, would have been a British crowd-pleaser at the time; Japan was opening up and Western consumption of largely Asian material culture, known as *Japonisme*, was

widespread in the 1860s and 70s (hence the success of Liberty's).

There are so many layers of interpretation and rich symbolism to explore in this painting. No wonder it is a favourite with visitors to the Barber Institute, and is often requested for loan to exhibitions at other galleries. Most recently, the painting featured in the National Portrait Gallery's exhibition, 'Pre-Raphaelite Sisters', which ran from 17 October 2019 to 26 January this year.²

Thank you very much for listening. I hope you can come back next week for the following online Tuesday Talk, which will be given by my colleague Beth Brankowski, who will be discussing the artist John Sloan with a close look at one of his prints from his 'New York City Life' series made in 1905.

² The National Portrait Gallery's exhibition was a big critical success and received 71,167 visitors.

Speaker info

Helen Cobby joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as the Assistant Curator in the summer of 2017. She works on a variety of projects including the care, interpretation and display of the Prints and Drawings collection, the digitisation of the collections, and research into new acquisitions. She has also curated an exhibition about the Scottish Colourists with the Director, and assisted with the curation of the most recent exhibition, 'Cornwall as Crucible: Modernity and Internationalism in Mid-Century Britain', as well as contributing essays to the accompanying exhibition booklets. Her research interests also include Rodin's sculpture and photography, JMW Turner's early prints and drawings, feminist art history and criticism, and 20th-century American women printmakers. For the latter, she was recently awarded a Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Grant from the Art Fund to undertake research in New York City.

Prior to the Barber, Helen worked in a variety of museums, including Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum - as a research curator, Cheltenham's Art Gallery and Museum, and most recently the Ashmolean Museum, where she curated a touring exhibition of Turner's early architectural work.

Music

'Mexicana' from 'Twelve Inventions for Solo Guitar' composed by Peter Nuttall, played by Jack Davies.

Select reading list

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Graham, Wendy. 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Aesthetic Celebrity' in *Critics, Coteries, and Pre-Raphaelite Celebrity*. Columbia University Press, 2017.

Johnson, Henry. 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Japan: The Musical Instrument Depicted in "The Blue Bower" and "A Sea Spell"' in *Music in Art*, Vol. 30, No. 1/2 (Spring-Fall 2005), Research Centre for Music Iconography, City University of New York, pp. 145-153.

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Stein, Richard. 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painting and the Problem of Poetic Form' in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 10, No. 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 1970), Rice University, pp. 775-792.

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