Further reviews

_Dante Gabriel Rossetti; Vita, arte, poesia._
Edvige Schulte, Liguori Editore, Via Mezzocannone 19, 80134 Napoli Lire 15,500
1986 ISBN 88 207 1459 0

Professor Schulte’s biography of Rossetti is the first monograph to give an integrated account of his life and work in Italian. It is also of wider interest; up to date in its use of the latest research, it is seen from an Italian perspective which brings out some neglected features of this Anglo-Italian artist.

Virginia Surtees’ _œuvre_ catalogue of 1971 began a new era of Rossetti studies. The Tate gallery exhibition of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1984, the accompanying volume of ‘Pre-Raphaelite Papers’, the release and publication of private correspondence as well as more general factors such as the revival of interest in figurative painting and in alternatives to the modernist canon and let us hope, a more sympathetic understanding of human dilemmas, all make this a good moment for a revision of the accepted portrait of Rossetti. In linking painting and literature Rossetti moved in the opposite direction to that taken by the subsequent mainstream of art. Now that the power of that combination is once again recognised and Professors of Literature expound on modern art while journals with titles such as ‘Word and Image’ flourish, it is important to note that Rossetti, following Blake, was there a century ago. Similarly the blend of conflicting emotions which he refined and that had long been thought overtaken by post-Freudian enlightenment is once again seen as relevant to our stage of society. As in her recent work on Morris, Professor Schulte’s writing is concise and well balanced, based on thoughtful, judicious and sensible opinions with a clear exposition of the evidence, it presents a necessarily tentative but certainly important step towards establishing the features of a ‘new’ Rossetti.

Some admirers of Morris tend to a jaundiced view of Rossetti. Charismatic maybe, but flashy, an opportunist, a shallow, brittle Bohemian without true grit or depth, an irresponsible Latin lover with no understanding of philosophy or interest in politics, justly stewing in self-induced melancholy and deserved ill health while painting outré pot boilers from his exhausted imagination to get himself out of financial stews. Doesn’t Holman Hunt even deny him a significant role in the Brotherhood?

This is grossly unfair to a serious artist, one of the greatest and most original of the century, who succeeded in creating meaning in an apparently meaningless world and who was chosen by Morris as his preferred companion.

Professor Schulte begins with an account of the Brotherhood and their paintings and very fairly presents the evidence for and against Rossetti’s leading role. It is surely amongst the strangest effects of the great upheavals that began the century, that brought this stranger with his unique admiration of Blake and knowledge of Dante to join the young Turks of the Royal Academy. The upheavals of the modern world, one might add in parenthesis, have similarly affected contemporary art, a German currently represents Britain at the Venice Biennale, and a Japanese, the United States. Professor Schulte sees Rossetti as an English artist with an affinity for the South and emphasises his cultured background and education as well as the importance of his
visits to Paris and to Bruges. In Manet's studio, admittedly, he found 'for the most part mere scrawls' but many other comments are much percipient. The influence of these visits, as the author points out, has never been fully evaluated.

She discusses the paintings, sensibly dividing them into various loosely chronological phases and making a case for the importance of the relatively neglected later ones. Janey preferred the early work but Swinburne and others rightly saw the importance of the later work. This is followed by the 'House of Life' and his poetry generally, and here her specialist skills come to the fore; at least to your reviewer who has a great respect for professionals, the author's flexing of her literary muscle in analysis and comparison is the most exhilarating part of the book.

This is followed by a discussion of Rossetti's correspondence, above all with Janey Morris which the author uses as evidence for Rossetti's character and state of mind. She sticks to the evidence, speculates sparingly, makes no excuses and is generally convincing. One cannot call it a well rounded portrait because it is angular, awkward and has loose ends and unanswered questions but it is a very honest biography which respects its subject. It takes Rossetti seriously as an artist and rightly is concerned with his work much more than his life. In his case, perhaps more than with anyone else, life and art are directly related but she understands the artist's privilege and burden: it is the work not the life that matters.

All the Pre-Raphaelite aims, to affect heart and understanding, to heighten ideal with real, to join the purity of expression of the past with a modern sensibility, were subsumed for Rossetti in the female face. He was obsessed by symbols of female excellence; his portraits, like Monet's Haystacks or Rothko's Cathedrals are an infinitely varied series of meditations on what he saw as the ultimate theme of beauty. It became of course, embodied in personal tragi-comedy: 'To marry one woman and then find out when it is too late that you love another is the deepest tragedy that can enter into a man's life' he confessed late in life and Professor Schulte points out that from 1867 this was at the heart of his poetry and his painting, to a monotonous extent as it was in his life. This was no doubt as important a formative factor as the series of misfortunes which continually brought death close and the hypersensitivity which increased his isolation: it was all grist for this art. His poetry was unique in combining sensual and spiritual, real and visionary elements; he was a pioneer in the exploration of the psyche who tried to record sensation directly as it came from within and held that 'the pleasure of the senses is nothing if not ennobled by sentiment'. All this is embodied in his paintings, above all of Janey, 'They that would look on her must come to me'. Even this provided a further twist to his personal tragedy, he was too honourable to exhibit these paintings which would have compromised her.*

He was a dreamer of absolutes who had the rare gift to be able to objectify feelings and give expression to profound beauty in which, in a very un-English way, sensuous and spiritual qualities co-exist. Mrs Morris's features became the prototype of the Symbolist femme fatale much as women took to wearing the loose drapes in which he had portrayed her. Ruskin was convinced that Rossetti was one of five geniuses he had known: it is the virtue of this book to make the claim credible.
Professor Schulte is well served by her bibliography and by her choice of illustrations, alas, poorly reproduced. The Royal Academy should not be confused with the British Academy. At 15,500 lire (about £6) this book is excellent value.

Hans Brill

* Rossetti exhibited no work in public after the Pre-Raphaelite exhibition of July 1857—ten years before he even painted Janey.  R.W.

Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s, and the Arts and Crafts

Many books, of course, have been published on William Morris and the Arts and Crafts. The aim of this one, however, which includes ‘the 1880’s’ in its title, is to discuss ‘certain of the organisations that came about under his [Morris’s] sometimes reluctant influence’, to set these in ‘the political and aesthetic atmosphere of their time’, and to demonstrate how the English, with ‘their belief in amateurism and their difficulties with questions of class, were not fully able to benefit from the revolution in design they had themselves brought about’.

The title of the book, Redesigning the World, indicates its ambitions: focussing on attempts to ‘institutionalise’ and disseminate Morris’s ideals and achievements, Peter Stansky sets out to describe how ‘under Morris’s aegis a new public was being created. It might not be considerable in numbers, but it exercised an important influence on how the world looked and how it was looked at toward the end of the century, and ultimately much of the look of the world in the twentieth century.’ Professor Stansky therefore, proposes a work of vast scale, and inevitably, with such ambitions, he fails to achieve his intentions. There are, of course, innumerable reasons why the world ‘looks’ as it does, and Peter Stansky would be the first to acknowledge that the sentence just quoted is simplistic. Morris may well have influenced how the world looked and how it was looked at towards the end of the century, but it would need far more evidence than is presented here to sustain this thesis.

The problem, therefore, lies in the dislocation between intention and achievement. The title—Redesigning the World—and the claims of the introduction imply a re-examination of Morris’s ideals, work and achievements, as well as the role ‘the Arts and Crafts’ played, or failed to play in their attempts to ‘institutionalise’ these ideals. What we are given, however, is a work of diligent archival research—a detailed description, based on examination of the source material—of the formation of the Art Workers’ Guild and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, as well as equally thorough accounts of the aims and achievements of those designers who contributed to attempts to ‘redesign the world’ through strategy rather than revolution. The ambiguity of these activities, however, is implied rather than discussed, so that the book raises more questions than it answers.

Peter Stansky first focusses on the ‘intellectual, social and political restlessness’ of the 1880’s in order to set the context of Morris’s conversion to socialism. He covers all too familiar ground, however: the third Reform Act, Gladstone, Blatchford, Toynbee
Hall and the political refugees are briefly discussed; Pugin, Ruskin, Crane, Lethaby et alii. Henry Cole, the Select Committee and the Schools of Design are all referred to, equally briefly, in the section on 'design', and the various stages in Morris’s political activism are indicated. These summaries are essentially factual; most of the information presented is well known, and the commentary is tantalisingly brief. It was obviously Peter Stansky's intention to provide a framework for his discussion of subsequent developments; equally obviously he could not assume that all his readers were familiar with the work of Philip Henderson, E. P. Thompson, Paul Thompson on Morris.

At the same time, however, his approach calls into question the nature of his intended readership. For students and scholars of British design at the end of the nineteenth century, the chapters on The Century Guild, the Art Workers’ Guild and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society present valuable documentation that either has not been published, or is not easily available. Such documentation provides useful information, but Peter Stansky aims to interpret as well as to inform, and at this stage in nineteenth century design scholarship, interpretation, or at least enquiry, should be as stringent as research. For example, discussing A. H. Mackmurdo, Stansky describes how his ‘intellectual influences’ were Herbert Spencer, Matthew Arnold, Auguste Comte, and John Ruskin. All were ‘critics of the Victorian age’—Spencer and Comte felt that it was not scientific enough, while Ruskin and Arnold ‘criticized it for its moral inadequacies’. ‘Spencer and Comte’ Peter Stansky continues ‘helped to make Mackmurdo sympathetic toward a geometrical style, while Ruskin made him receptive to irregularity and experiment’. An opportunity is lost, therefore, to discuss the range of ideologies and attitudes to design in Britain in the nineteenth century. The ‘Pugin, Ruskin, Morris’ succession has been examined and re-examined; we cannot, of course, take their theories and influence for granted, but at the same time ‘alternative’ approaches—the influence of evolutionary theories on design, for example, and the search for scientific or ‘rational’ solutions has been largely overlooked. Mackmurdo himself, in a passage quoted by Stansky, provides more than a lead. In his ‘Notes on Morris for Pevsner’ (unpublished; in the William Morris Gallery), Mackmurdo describes Morris’s rejection of science and philosophy (‘these subjects were banned from his table’ Mackmurdo records), and continues: ‘He knew nothing of science or philosophy. I as a pupil of Herbert Spencer was nurtured on these . . . he had no hope for the world except through Revolution. I had great hope for the world through Evolution.’

Admittedly, Mackmurdo’s ‘evolutionary’ theories, like his social and economic theories, could be considered eccentric and Quixotian. Nevertheless, Mackmurdo was by no means the only designer/theorist in Britain in the nineteenth century to consider design as an evolutionary process. Gottfried Semper, the refugee from the Dresden revolution who taught in the South Kensington Schools of Design, believed that ‘styles . . . develop in various departures from a few primitive types, according to the laws of natural breeding, of transmission and adoption. Thus the development is similar to the evolutions in the province of organic creation.’ Before the impact of Arts and Crafts commitment, therefore, several of the designers and theorists associated with the Schools of Design were searching for a ‘method’ on which to base the teaching of design, or for a ‘language of form’: hence their concentration on
‘grammars’ of ornament, and the ‘principles’ of decorative design. It is misleading, therefore, to criticize these schools, as Stansky does, for their ‘obsession’ with ornament, and to condemn them for restricting ‘their teaching to the decoration of objects’, since the activities of the Schools of Design have viable, or at least explicable theoretical antecedents that merit more discussion. Again Professor Stansky maintains that before the Schools of Design were set up ‘the only art instruction provided by the government had been at the military training schools of Woolwich and Sandhurst’. The teaching of drawing (not art) was, of course, part of military training both in England and on the Continent, because it was important as a means of communication; the skills required for military, mechanical, engineering and medical purposes were not considered ‘art’, and it is understandable that these techniques should be adopted and adapted for the purposes of ‘trade’.

The problem, which is not fully discussed in this book, lay in the status of the ‘designer’, and the purposes of ‘design’; the French and Italians may well have established ‘aesthetic atelier training’, and the English may well have failed ‘to match continental design throughout the century’, and this may well have something to do with ‘the ingrained snobbism of the English gentleman’; but there is surely more to it than this. Writers such as E. P. Thompson and Maxine Berg have examined social and political as well as economic theories in industrialising Britain. Maxine Berg’s analyses of the ‘machinery question’ are vital to an understanding of those concepts of political economy rejected by Ruskin and Morris, and Martin Wiener’s English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit is a recent commentary on British attitudes to industrialisation (extending Raymond Williams’ theses in his Culture and Society). With the exception of E. P. Thompson, however, none of these writers are referred to; some acknowledgement of their work, however, is surely necessary to an understanding of British attempts to ‘redesign the world’ in the nineteenth century. By concentrating on Morris and the Arts and Crafts, Peter Stansky assumes their mantle, and tends to see the developments they condemn through their eyes, or through those of Pevsner. For although he acknowledges that Pevsner sees the genesis of the Modern Movement ‘in somewhat historically deterministic terms’, his own judgements are essentially Pevsnerian: Arts and Crafts exhibitions abroad were ‘a notable progressive influence on the Europeans’; Century Guild designs ‘were among the earliest in creating the look of the modern world as we know it now’; ‘as Pevsner has argued in his Pioneers of Modern Design, the Arts and Crafts Movement provided a bridge to the Modern Movement’.

The ‘pioneers of modern design’ thesis has surely now run its course. Its assumptions have dominated too many books on the Arts and Crafts Movement (including the one written by the reviewer, and published in 1972). If more ‘theoretical’ books on the Arts and Crafts Movement are to be written, they should surely attempt to explain and analyse the ‘historical determinism’ that relates protean arts and crafts activities to concepts of ‘modern design’; they should consider the conservatism of the crafts and the radicalism that inspired them; they should pay more than lip-service to relevant social, political and economic developments, and they should at least acknowledge alternative design philosophies. This work has been done, and continues to be done, by specialists, as well as polemicists. (Raymond Williams, for example, combines commitment with scholarship, and his book on Cobbett—in OUP’s ‘Past
Masters' series—is an admirable example of how to present biographical, economic and social history from a clearly defined critical standpoint.) What is needed is an approach that acknowledges specialisation and commitment. Professor Stansky's documentation is undoubtedly useful, but his interpretation is all too predictable.

Gillian Naylor

Inspiration for Design: the influence of the Victoria and Albert Museum

Should anybody imagine that an account of such an institution is at all parochial or inward, a look at the headings under which the short sections of its five chapters develop would show that its content, like that of the Museum, ranges widely. We begin with ‘how it happened’ and end with ‘what came of it all’ like a good Victorian book.

Origins of the V & A go back to William Ewart's House of Commons Committee to inquire into the state of design and manufacture in that aftermath of the Napoleonic wars which found our trade and manufacture no longer ahead of all other but threatened by the new industries of Germany, Belgium, the United States—and not least, defeated France, all equipped for competition because our engineers had sold them newer engines, newer looms, newer lathes and borers than we continued to use ourselves. Concern was expressed by merchants and manufacturers, civil servants and legislators; not least by the Gradgrinds. Many believed that it was not simply technical advance that would regain our lost lead, but better design of the products, especially of the textile trades which had given us enormous wealth. Among the concerned were a young pushing Civil servant, Henry Cole, and the Prince Consort. Their serious interest led to new legislation for design education and to the Great Exhibition of 1851, as Ewart's legislation had led to the founding of the Government School of design which, on the basis of the existing Mechanics' Institutes and local Academies, presently created a network of schools all over the country, directed by Cole.

Out of all this came at last the Royal College of Art (as the original School of Design became in the 1890's under Walter Crane) and the V & A itself, always intimately connected with it, since it was set up to serve it. The beginnings of the V & A were in the Marlborough House Collection of examples of architecture and design brought together for the use of students, and the profit from the 1851 Exhibition funded first the ‘Brompton Boilers’ and then the V & A as we have known it: that institution of which Morris observed that it had been brought together chiefly for the benefit of himself and half a dozen friends: an institution of which he made continuous use, and to whose collections he made important contributions as advisor and buyer—acting also as an Examiner, as did William Bell Scott and Lewis F. Day among other of his friends.

By the 1880's, the work of English designers and the creation of this museum had brought about such changes and such a reputation for our design that for the next thirty years manufacturers, designers, art educators came from all over the world to
study what we did, report upon it, go back home and set up equivalent museums and schools working on similar principles of design. The Arts and Crafts Movement was for twenty years the great exemplar of the western world, until overtaken by ideas and institutions—its own children—but with different faces—in Germany, Holland, Belgium.

All of this is set out in two hundred pages with ample illustration. The pace of the text quickens, as we move into this century and designers and their products multiply, until the latter part becomes a rather dense summary, coming to climax in 'The Post-war Period' and the Postscript in which half a dozen designers say something of their diverse fields of work and their debt to the Museum. There are some eighty full pages of illustrations, of which fourteen in colour, and fifty thumbnails in monochrome: rough alternation between larger and smaller illustrations allows a useful threading of them in the text. The monochrome illustrations, regrettably, are of that milky pallor which reduces so many illustrated books printed by photolitho to ghostly faintness and does less than justice to the robust objects they should show. But this will be an invaluable handbook to design students. Nobody could be better qualified than Barbara Morris to make such a survey of this loved Museum from its origins to the present moment; working there from 1947 until she retired in 1978, she has singular advantages for the task not least of which was her training as a painter at the Slade School.

And a footnote. Her Kelmscott Lecture of 1985, on *Morris and the V & A*, will presently be published by the Society.

Ray Watkinson

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**Ornate Wallpapers**

*Victoria and Albert Colour Books*, Webb and Bower. £4.95 hardback; 1985

This pretty little book consists of wallpaper samples taken from the pattern books at the V & A of Jeffrey & Co. for the period 1837 to 1852. There are 36 pages of illustrations, but no list of contents; the order is not chronological. The brief Introduction (which can be discovered to be by Gill Saunders by those prepared to scan the title verso) is very general, and fails to give the information one would like about the book's contents. It does, however, quote William Morris on designing paper-hangings: 'accept their mechanical nature frankly'—though giving no source for the quotation. The designs exhibit no discernable coherence, and are presumably the work of several designers: they include both abstract and flowery motifs in a wide variety of colour, with a good deal of brown. They provide an interesting context for Morris's work, but the book itself is hardly one for the scholar—rather an agreeable if tiny one for the coffee table.

Peter Faulkner
William Morris. The Ideal Book. Essays and Lectures in the Art of the Book
Edited and introduced by William S. Peterson. University of California Press. £13.50 paperback; 1986

This interesting and well-illustrated volume of Morris's writings, with Professor Peterson's informative Introduction, was fully reviewed by Ray Watkinson in The Journal, Vol. V, No. 4, on its original appearance in hardback; it is now available in paperback at a price which should bring it nearer than the original £38.50 to the ordinary Morris enthusiast. Attractively produced—if by offset lithography—it is to be thoroughly recommended in this form.

Peter Faulkner

Received as we go to press—The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, Volume VI, no. 2: May 1986. Francis and Barbara Golffing and their Associate Editor Ann C. Colley continue to issue their well-produced indispensable Journal, in which wide-ranging papers on individual artists and writers of or near to the PR circle are presented with generous illustration. Most material is generated in the USA but work from other sources by no means ignored: Tim Hilton’s new book on John Ruskin (Vol.I) and the Catalogue of the 1984 Whitworth Art Gallery ‘William Morris and the Middle Ages’ Exhibition are reviewed at some length. Subs are: Individual $15, Institutional, $20: single copies $10 from: 272 Middle Hancock Road, Peterborough, New Hampshire 03458, USA.

.... and Stop Press!

From July 1st 1987, the Journal of P-R Studies will be produced at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, under the editorship of William E. Fredemann and Ira B. Nadel. Francis Golffing, who founded it nearly ten years ago and has produced and edited it ever since, will still be associated with the Journal, and Associate Editor Anne Colley, will be Corresponding Editor with responsibility for Book Reviews. The Journal will enlarge its title to indicate a wider field of commitment, adding the words—“and Nineteenth Century Aesthetics”. The first issue under the new regime will be a festschrift for its founder-editor, who has given unique service to us all.

RW

The Latham William Morris Bibliography (1981–1983) in our last issue closed with a short list of Exhibition and Sales Catalogues, one of which is that of the 1981 William Morris and Kelmscott exhibition held at the West Surrey College of Art and Design, Farnham, in November 1981. Fifteen essays on different aspects of Morris are referred to, and the authors named—all but one. Most regrettably and unaccountably, the name of our member Joseph Acheson, who wrote the paper on Rossetti and Kelmscott, was omitted. This was doubly unfortunate in that Joe was the initiator and guide of the exhibition and its catalogue from the outset—negotiating for the display of the material from the Manor itself, arranging photography, selecting contributors, supervising the erection of the exhibition; and not least, spending incalculable effort in raising the money without which it could never have been the splendid show it was; one of the finest ever devoted to Morris and his work and friends.