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book review of

John Brett: A Pre-Raphaelite on the Shores of Wales; Frederick Sandys and the Pre-Raphaelites; Frederick Sandys, 1829–1904; and Professional Women Painters in 19th-Century Scotland: Commitment, Friendship, Pleasure by Janice Helland

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"John Brett: A Pre-Raphaelite on the Shores of Wales"
National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff
14 August-25 November 2001

Ann Sumner, ed.
John Brett: A Pre-Raphaelite on the Shores of Wales
Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 2001; £15.99
121 pp.; 26 b/w ills., 52 color ills.; £15.99
ISBN 0-720-00507-8

John Brett is one of those interesting secondary figures in Victorian painting who tend to hover, semi-familiar, at the edges of the main areas or concepts that make up the field. This exhibition certainly brought his oeuvre into focus, although it did not—nor did it intend to—make him comprehensively visible. Covering the period 1858-95, during which Brett went from a tentative student of Ruskinian realism to a well-established (indeed, perhaps overfamiliar) seascapist, the exhibition concentrated on the motif with which the public of his own time identified him. Arranged in the newly dedicated Art in Wales Gallery, which consists of one long room, the thirty-seven works were drawn in large part from private collections, notably those of the artist's descendants, whose support clearly was of inestimable help to the curators. Many of the paintings had not been seen by a post-Victorian public until this show, and they furnished a useful and appropriate context for such well-known works as *Britannia's Realm* (purchased by the Chantrey Bequest in 1880 and still in the Tate collection).

As the exhibition's subtitle and venue suggest, geography was the organizing factor of the show. The paintings were identified and discussed chiefly with reference to their subjects, and they reflect Brett's repeated forays to the coast of Wales (a few inland scenes relieved the reiteration of the ocean) for the views he regularly exhibited at the Academy. Long after the shock of Pre-Raphaelite rigor had been accommodated by the gallery-going public and its scientism absorbed into the painting of nature, Brett's sales were such that by 1883 he owned a yacht with a crew of thirteen, which enabled him to enjoy the sea as a sailor while exploiting it as a painter. His enthusiasm for Welsh scenery led to his purchase in 1884 of a farmhouse at Fishguard, where he would go with his wife, Mary, and their eventual seven children (shown in snapshots faithfully trailing in the painter's wake year after year) for extended periods of painting.

The identity Brett initially forged at the Academy was of one of the Pre-Raphaelite realists encouraged by Ruskin in the late 1850s to reinvent British art. His first love was landscape, and though his figure paintings, such as *The Stonebreaker* (1857) and *The Hedger* (1860), gave their landscape settings the prominence that these students of nature made de rigueur for scenes of modern life, nature pure and simple was sufficient subject matter for Brett's more typical productions.

This affinity with landscape had been refined by the end of the 1860s to a specialization in seascape—a product with which he became very well-known and, for a time, commercially successful. The indicative work was *Massa, Bay of Naples* at the 1864 Academy, but the

selection of work shown here suggests that locale was of little importance to Brett; rather, it was his fervor for topography, botany, geology, and meteorology which impassioned him before a slice of nature, wherever he found it. His zeal was somewhat disconcerting, and there are elements of formulaic manufacture in his industry after the 1870s, the commercial ends of which he seems to have accepted with equanimity. A show he staged in 1886, "Three Months on the Scottish Coast," seems to have been designed precisely to show off this professional productivity, in which he took pride and for which he expected public respect. This came through in the Cardiff exhibition as a certain repetition (inevitable, given the curatorial parameters), predictability, and even tedium.

A substantial element within the show was the family memorabilia, which fleshed out the artist himself, and in this respect the exhibition's aim was a conventional one: to show the life—work of a specific practitioner whose treatment of the subject was the core interest of the show. Regrettably, however, this picture of Brett as a living individual failed to bring into view other contemporary individuals crucial to his endeavor and achievement. These include his sister Rosa, alongside whom he formed himself as an artist in the early 1850s; John Ruskin, who took on the shaping of Brett's abilities after the appearance of *The Glacier of Rosenlau* at the 1857 Academy; and closely comparable contemporary nature—painters such as Anna Blunden, George Boyce, John Inchbold, and Thomas Seddon.

These works of Brett's, brought together as a set or series, remind one forcibly of the Victorian public's intense taste for pictures of the sea, and particularly of what they learned to call the seaside—not in a Frithian sense but in the fashion that was created by the Victorian development of the coastal summer holiday, which became such a fixture of British life (a point made by the title of *Summer on the Cliffs*, 1891). Although vacationers do not people Brett's sweeping panoramas, they are so highly observed that his images impress primarily as the result of his scrutiny, the object of the gaze as it were. Before his carefully worked canvases the viewer takes on the part of the stroller on the cliffs (see, for instance, *Fishguard Bay*, 1883), the wanderer on the beach, the shell-gatherer or the beachcomber, pausing to take in, as minutely as possible, every vivid facet of the glory of communing with nature. Brett's personal earnestness seems to be echoed in this approach to his subject matter—faithful to the point of pedantry, realistic to the point of servitude, recalling Ruskin's oft-quoted dismissal of the Val d'Aosta (1858-59) as "Mirror's work, not Man's" and his later verdict on Brett's entire oeuvre that "he took to mere photography of physical landscape" (*Works*, vol. 14, p. 293).

A catalogue, the first ever monograph on Brett, has been published to accompany the exhibition. The recent reissue of Allen Staley's *Pre-Raphaelite Landscape* (2001) was a reminder of the dearth of scholarly writings on this artist, and this catalogue—written by NMGW curator Ann Sumner, marine painting expert David Cordingly (whose study of Brett is long-standing), and Victorianist Christopher Newall—will go a long way to remedying that lack. It will correct the lopsided image of Brett that many have had because of the relative familiarity of *The Stonebreaker* (1857) and *Val d'Aosta* (1858-59) in the heyday of Pre-Raphaelitism. Its bias toward identifying Brett as a marine painter—understandable given its role as catalogue to the exhibition—adds another dimension to the spectrum of Pre-Raphaelitism as the movement has heretofore been discussed. Whereas other Pre-Raphaelite landscapists (Blunden, Hunt, Inchbold) produced only a few significant

individual pieces of seascape within a larger devotion to the depiction of nature, Brett forged a conspicuous oeuvre out of this style and genre. The catalogue's plentiful illustrations will ensure that further discussion of this artist and his contribution to the present-day understanding of Pre-Raphaelitism can continue from a more complete knowledge of his oeuvre.

"Frederick Sandys and the Pre-Raphaelites"
Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery
15 October 2001-6 January 2002

Betty Elzea, *Frederick Sandys, 1829–1904: A catalogue Raisonné*
Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 2001
350 pp.; ill. (some color); \$89.50
ISBN 1-851-49397-2

Works by the English painter Frederick Sandys have become increasingly conspicuous in London salesrooms in recent years but not more visible in museums, where he continues to languish in the shadow of the primary Pre-Raphaelites, especially Dante Gabriel Rossetti. This will surely change as a result of this impressive exhibition (sadly, not touring and with no London venue to display its merits to a wider public) and the major work of scholarship that accompanied it, Betty Elzea's long-awaited catalogue of the artist's oeuvre. Curator Charlotte Crawley and Betty Elzea have pooled their skills very effectively in this joint endeavor.

Hung in a two-room, T-shaped gallery in the recently refurbished Norwich Castle Museum, the exhibition brought together well over a hundred pieces of Sandys's work in oil, watercolor, engraving, and other graphic media. Arranged chronologically, it took the viewer through Sandys's apprentice work of the late 1840s (he was born in 1829), through his introduction to Pre-Raphaelitism and his establishment of a particular place within its second or Rossettian phase, to the consolidation of his gift for portraiture and his interesting development of an Aesthetic style. Sandys is here confirmed as another Millais—exceptionally gifted yet intellectually and spiritually lagging behind his talent, and an unashamed producer for the market.

The show reminded the viewer initially of the importance of landscape to any Pre-Raphaelite—even a portraitist. It covered Sandys's early topography in the Turner tradition for his first benefactor, James Bulwer; minor works that seem to show the artist just keeping his hand in or filling in hours between commissions; and eventually to the vivid, minutely delineated backgrounds to his patrons' likenesses (*Mrs Bedingfield*, 1859) and his literary heads (*Oriana*, 1861). The seductiveness of color, the fineness of touch—in short, the magic of mimesis—cast their spell over the hard-headed modernist and smart post-modernist alike, even where the meaning of their exercise eludes the interpretive instinct, as in the Castle Museum's own *Autumn* (1860), a well-known outdoor family group.

Then the show made one think about the importance to any Victorian artist of the difference—or, perhaps more precisely, the tension or even the abyss—between provincial

centers such as Norwich, Sandys's birthplace, and the capital city. Sandys's aspiration to be a metropolitan dandy, his ambition to shine at the center of the contemporary art scene, and his blatant and reckless adoption of the Bohemianism that was presumably nowhere to be found and/or too close to family scrutiny to pursue in Norwich is disconcerting. No wonder the talent became stretched rather thin at times and the creativity applied rather dully to vulgarities and vacuity—Sandys made being a contemporary artist a very expensive business, both monetarily and spiritually. His frequent use of Mary Jones, his lover and later his wife, for fancy heads and his scarcely veiled repeats of facile pictorial ideas (*Weeping Magdalene/ Tears Idle Tears, Proud Maisie, Love's Shadow*) in the 1860s make the point sadly clear, as do, in their own way, the serried ranks of portrait drawings of national worthies and self-made Victorian gentlemen and their children in the 1880s and 1890s.

A more intriguing aspect of Sandys's career, and one little considered before now but which the exhibition makes clear, is his participation in the trend that became labeled Art Nouveau. His 1892 *Nepenthe*—a head-and-shoulders drawing which calls up irresistibly the characteristic work of the Belgian artist Fernand Khnopff—develops the hint in the full-length figure composition entitled *Lethe* (1874) that Sandys may well have been the unsung bridge between the Rossettian Pre-Raphaelitism of which Edward Burne-Jones became the hero and the Continent's development of Aestheticism and thence Symbolism. That one feels sure that Sandys was not necessarily in command of the message or meaning in these seductive examples of his lyrical draughtmanship does not take away from their authority as markers of aesthetic trends in the last quarter of Victorian art. If he created fashionable images containing gratuitous detail or background before deciding on the identity under which he would offer them for sale, he would only have been working like many of his contemporaries did in the commodified climate of nineteenth-century art.

Selected works by fifteen of Sandys's contemporaries in the Pre-Raphaelite circle—among them his sister, Emma Sandys, as well as Ford Madox Brown, Burne-Jones, Arthur Hughes, William Holman Hunt, Rossetti, and William Bell Scott—were exhibited amongst his own in an attempt at comparison and contextualization. While the art historian may have found this more comprehensible than the lay viewer (there were reports of visitors having taken all the works exhibited to be by Sandys, despite the labels), this gambit was effective in its treatment of the most familiar (should that be stale?) element of Sandys's reputation, his debt to Rossetti. The exhibition should, indeed, have put this notion into its proper perspective once and for all, and this is one of the questions that Betty Elzea's catalogue raisonné deals with usefully and informedly. There is no one better placed to produce this book, which follows from her 1974 exhibition of Sandys's work at Brighton Museum. Her notes on individual works as well as on the principal issues of Sandys's career are detailed in the extreme—sometimes, it has to be said, to a fault and at the cost of repetition—and must install Sandys once and for all as one of the most productive and responsive painters of the period in which the commodification of fine art shaped the development of Realism, transmuted Pre-Raphaelitism into Aestheticism, and provoked the revival of Classicism. Elzea's sympathy with and understanding of her protagonist inform but do not cloud her presentation of him as an almost exemplary illustration of the realities of the Victorian art world as a place of work. Some aspects of her treatment will incur debate—the close connections of his oeuvre with the work of his sister Emma and of Simeon Solomon are underplayed, and the interpretation of imagery and subject is sometimes lacking—but Elzea's book and the exhibition it underpins surely confirm this artist as an important

contributor not only to Pre-Raphaelitism but to the Aestheticism that took over as the avant-garde in nineteenth-century British art.

Janice Helland, *Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland: Commitment, Friendship, Pleasure*

Aldershot, England; Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2000

xii, 212 pp.; ill., maps; \$89.95

ISBN 0-754-60068-8

Janice Helland, though working in Canada, has established herself as an important contributor to the recent surge of scholarship and publication designed to reveal women artists' place in the history of Scottish art. This book joins Jude Burkhauser's *Glasgow Girls* (1990), various scholars' work on sisters Frances and Margaret Macdonald, and Elisabeth Cumming's and Ailsa Tanner's respective monographs on Phoebe Traquair (1993) and Bessie MacNicol (1998) in its insistence on the importance and interest of female artists in Scotland during the modern period. Coming as it does this late in the development of an art history dedicated to the acknowledgment of female practitioners, it does not content itself with straightforward documentation but attempts to engage with certain themes that have emerged in the development of feminist art history as especially useful to the exegesis of the facts of women's artistic activities. It is thus not so much a seamless survey of its geographical and temporal territory as a collection of separate essays on interconnecting topics.

These topics are suggested by the subtitle and come out clearly in the orchestration of data into seven chapters. One of the author's recurrent interests is women artists as workers, signaled clearly in her introduction: "My intention is to explore a social history which accepts and emphasizes historical women producers of pictures and applied arts as middle-class workers. . . . My contention is that until feminist historians and art historians write about the nineteenth-century artist as a working woman, that is until her place within an economy of production and consumption is insisted upon, women will continue to inhabit an insecure space within society" (pp. 3-4)—and, presumably, within art history. From this position the author embraces a range of media in her gaze, though fine art (painting and watercolor, but not sculpture) does dominate.

Another leitmotiv is the associations, groupings, and relationships which shaped and structured the lives and careers of her subjects, and Helland's approach is typified in her particular examination of the functions and effects of the Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts, whose power to enhance an artist's success has been insufficiently explained perhaps by other historians of the academy and its imitators, and perhaps even by other historians of Scottish art. Predictably, Edinburgh and Glasgow loom large as cultural centers, but Helland considers artists' activities outside Scotland as well—not only in England but in France, Japan, Spain, and Switzerland—reflecting the current consciousness of the racial politics of culture or the concept of the post-colonial.

Chapter one's examination of art education, in which it is shown that it was not until about the last quarter of the nineteenth century that what went on in England ceased to be influential north of the border, illustrates how uneven was the provision in Scotland for

women to train as artists. Opportunities depended very much on individual opinion and initiative and personal connection (and the Nasmyths are a surprising omission in this respect). Chapter two looks at the artistic societies that existed north of the border at the time, finding much discrimination—both formal and informal—against women, which did not necessarily abate in proportion to the steady liberalization of the situation in England. In chapter three, Helland considers the Mackintosh phenomenon, terrain she has already covered to great effect (*The Studios of Frances and Margaret Macdonald*, Manchester University Press, 1996), which she tackles here provocatively and with a fresh eye.

Chapter four considers three watercolorists through the genre they had in common, landscape. Though Georgina Greenlees, Kate Macaulay, and Christina Patterson Ross will be names new to most readers, their oeuvres represent stock elements of the Scottish tradition. Indeed, the degree to which the evidence of Helland's subjects requires any change in the image of the Scottish tradition and the degree to which it confirms it is a question that the book continues to raise. In this the study is characteristic of the feminist art history whose principal aim is recuperation, although it is intended that such recuperation should force theoretical change on the discipline.

In chapter five Helland again embeds individual artists in an essay on a theme or subject: Mary Burton and Florence Haig are the figures who emerge most clearly from this discussion of the friendships and collegiality that advanced the working lives of women in the nineteenth-century Scottish art world.

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Despite the promise of its title, "Afterthoughts," chapter seven does not sum up the picture that Helland has drawn of her subject; rather, it introduces two additional artists, Susan Crawford and Emily Murray Paterson. This decision reflects the author's seeming ambivalence toward the interest and value of facts on the one hand and of interpretation on the other. The few figures from Helland's territory who have become visible—Jessie King, the Macdonald sisters, MacNicol, Traquair—are emphatically not (with the exception of the first) her preferred subjects. Within her chosen parameters the groundwork still has to be laid, and she does that here with a wealth of information that will expand most readers' knowledge enormously. At the same time, she provides immediate interpretation of her research findings, and her use of topics as prisms through which to view her individual subjects can be understood as a strategy to achieve this aim. She shows, consciously or not, an instructive open-mindedness about the relative usefulness of specificity and generalization, about how to interpret "difference and sameness amongst women" (p. 11), and about how necessary theoretical exegesis may be to render art historical material worthwhile. It is difficult nowadays to assert art historical information as sufficient in itself, but it is also hard for the historian of women artists to build much of a discursive edifice when the subject matter is completely new to her readers. Presenting a challenging interpretation of the work of Degas, Reynolds, or Warhol, for instance, is far easier than

trying the same with respect to such artists as those introduced here, of whom the reader has probably never before heard and whose works they have never seen in the flesh.

Equally symptomatic of the methodological problems that continue to make the job of women artists particularly hard is the conspicuous absence from this study of any appraisal of the merit of the work under discussion. Springing perhaps from this is the insufficient aesthetic discussion linking or contextualizing the author's subjects with other artists, such as the already mentioned Butler or Bonheur, and trends, such as the Newlyn school or Impressionism. While having obviously made a decision to see the artist not as a heroic, self-determining individual but as the vehicle for phenomena such as modernity, national identity, professionalism, femininity, and so on, Helland seems to have studiously avoided the question of quality. This may be a question which has been a trap laid by intransigent "old" art historians for those of us committed to the "new" art history, but it is also a factual aspect of the historical situation which the student of the past should scrutinize as her subjects surely did. Fearing the answer should not make us afraid to pose the question, and Helland's lack of resolve with regard to this issue seems to show itself through the illustrations. Whereas the absence of color cannot be laid at the door of the author, the choice of images presumably can, and the illustrations do not collectively present the reader with an exciting and impressive trove of previously unsung art—and, perversely, it is not necessarily the strongest work that is illustrated full-page.

This book will add considerably to the existing picture of women artists' activities in the nineteenth century, fulfilling the author's stated ambition to disrupt both the recycling of a certain number of artists as an adequate cast of characters for a sound history of nineteenth-century art, and the ghettoization of female artists in some other, discrete territory not that which contemporary male artists occupied. At the same time, it demonstrates that the history of women artists is still one of the most thought-provoking areas of the discipline.

Pamela Gerrish Nunn