

D.G. ROSSETTI'S  
RUSKINIAN WATERCOLOURS OF 1855

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1855 was a benign and transitional year for Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In the past lay the trials and triumphs of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the tedium of *plein air* painting in oils that had led to the abandonment of *Found* in December 1854 (see Surtees 64). In the future lay the friendship with William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones that would lead to the jollity and folly of the Oxford Union frescoes (1857-58). In the meantime, Rossetti's guiding lights were Elizabeth Siddal and John Ruskin and his medium of choice was water-colour. "I love him and her and everybody and feel happier than I have felt for a long time," he told Ford Madox Brown on 13 April 1855, and on 3 May he wrote to his aunt Charlotte Polidori of the good fortune that had befallen Siddal and himself: "Mr. Ruskin has ... settled on her £150 a year, and is to have all she does up to that sum. He is likely also to be of great use to me personally (for the use to her is also use to me) and I am doing two or three watercolours for him. He is the best friend I have ever had *out of my own family*" (*Correspondence* 2:35). Of course, the impact of both Ruskin and Siddal on Rossetti's life and work was not confined to 1855, but in that year it resulted in several watercolours that warrant consideration together not only because of their date and medium, but also because they frequently employ Siddal as a principal model and, much more important, were either commissioned or purchased (and in at least one case both) by Ruskin himself.

Although Ruskin played a crucial role in promoting the Pre-Raphaelites in the early 1850s, he did not enter Rossetti's life in a personal way until the Spring of 1854, when he wrote expressing his admiration for *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice* (1853) ("a thoroughly glorious work," qtd. in Troxell 25-26) and announcing that he would call at Rossetti's studio in "a day or two," an intention that he fulfilled on 13 April (*Correspondence* 1:335-37). Despite finding Ruskin "hideous" to look at,<sup>1</sup> Rossetti pronounced his "manner ... more agreeable than [he] had expected" and observed that "he