

THE CONTENT AND FORM OF FURNITURE IN ROSSETTI'S ART OF 1848-58

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Roger Fry is famous for introducing avant-garde French art to England before the First World War. He and his Bloomsbury friends rejected Victorian art as literary and aesthetically insignificant. Instead, they admired the art of the Post-Impressionists and their followers, Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, in which they found "significant form." It is surprising therefore to find Fry, in 1916 in *The Burlington Magazine*, praising a group of Rossetti's watercolours of 1857 on the occasion of their acquisition by the Tate Gallery. His praise is, however, qualified:

To those who, like myself, think that the 20th century has brought about a renaissance of the art of expressive design--a liberation of this element in painting from all kinds of interfering accessories--the case of Rossetti is of peculiar interest. For Rossetti, more than any other English artist since Blake may be hailed as a forerunner of the new ideas. And yet one can imagine how bitterly, how violently he himself would have resented our conceptions of purity.

His case, then, puts the eternal question of content and form with a certain piquancy. (Fry, 100).

Fry goes on to discuss the group of watercolours which include some of Rossetti's most exciting works, *The Chapel before the Lists* (1857-64), *The Tune of Seven Towers* (1857), *The Blue Closet* (1856-57), and *The Wedding of St George* (1857). Fry observes that these works were created from the artist's inner passion, from his inspired imagination. But Fry feels that Rossetti's expression of "passionate desire" leads to weakness of form: "Now, what struck me most in the examples at the Tate was that Rossetti's form became clear, definite and truly expressive almost exactly in proportion as he was concerned with the accessories of his drama--that just when he was most occupied with the central core of his theme, with the passion, his form fell to pieces, he became a mere illustrator and not a very good one" (100). So, in *The Chapel before the Lists*, Fry admires the placing of the pyramid of the two lovers in the parallelogram of the tent opening and the