

A Pre-Raphaelite Marriage: The Lives and Works of Marie Spartali Stillman and William James Stillman by David B. Elliott. Woodbridge, U.K.: Antique Collectors' Club, 2006. 248 pp. + 21 colour plates. ISBN 1-85149-495-2. \$69.50; £35.00.

In her role as a journalist and art critic, the protagonist of Ella Hepworth Dixon's 1894 "New Woman" novel, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, visits a popular painter's studio. There she finds the half-completed image of

a convent garden in the grey crepuscule of a summer evening. The pale pensive faces of young nuns, faces of unnatural loveliness, with haunting eyes and flower-like mouths, shadowed by wide blue head-dresses, were seen bending over beds of tall white lilies, while here and there a transparent hand was stretched to gather the passionless, immaculate flowers. This picture, destined for next year's Academy, was to be called "The Hour of Lilies."

This imaginary painting, which presents a group subject, is in some ways unlike Marie Spartali Stillman's actual watercolour, titled *Cloister Lilies*. Yet Stillman's 1891 painting, which was exhibited in Liverpool in Autumn 1892 – thus at the very time when Dixon was writing her novel – could well have inspired the description. With its representation of the "pale pensive" face of a young woman who holds a rosary and missal and who turns her "haunting eyes" toward the "tall white lilies" in her "transparent" hand, Stillman's painting contains all the standard gender conventions of which Dixon made gentle mockery. It is a work of uncomplicated, "unnatural loveliness" that reaffirms, rather than challenges, the problematic identification of young women with flowers and with purity, as well as the restriction of women to a merely decorative role.

Is Stillman an important artist to study? Is her work in any way feminist? If hers was an art that bore the mark of particular cultural limitations, should we examine it further, if only to understand better the culture that imposed these limitations? These are questions that, frustratingly enough, David Elliott's book does not even begin to pose until its final chapter, which is titled "Marie Spartali Stillman, the Artist." Surely anyone but a specialist in the Pre-Raphaelites and their circle will be unacquainted with (and probably uninterested in) William J. Stillman and his wife as a couple. General audiences are more likely to be curious about Marie Spartali Stillman as a painter, thanks to the reproductions of her pictures that have appeared, among other places, on greeting cards sold in museum shops. Why wait so long to address, and why spend fewer than fifteen pages discussing, what readers most want to hear? A savvy editor might have suggested re-ordering this volume and moving the analysis of her art to an earlier, more prominent location. (A careful editor might also have noticed and corrected the consistent misspelling throughout of