

Ut Pictura Poesis: Rossetti and Morris: Paintings into Poetry

Ut pictura poesis, "as in painting, so in poetry," is a segment of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, one of several, where he refers to painting as a parallel reference for poetry.¹ It is a minor aspect of this critical commentary, a parallelism also cited by other classical critics, such as Simonides, Plato, Aristotle, and Longinus. However, this cross-referencing of the arts became a central practice of neoclassicism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with some opposition from Lessing.² Thus "picturesque" and "sublime" were terms equally applicable to a landscape or a pastoral poem. With the growing popularity of subject painting, an artist was expected to depict a story as much as adhere to strictly artistic canons of composition, line and color.

In the nineteenth century the May exhibitions of the Royal Academy grew larger each year, drawing increasing numbers of viewers and purchasers from all classes. Even the working man might win the Art Union lottery and be granted funds to buy a painting or an engraving.³ On public view days eager crowds hovered about the canvases of the most popular subject painters, reading and commenting on the narrative meaning of their works more than on the artistic values displayed therein.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of 1848-53 used a wet-white technique with concentrated eye for detail that made their brilliant canvases outshine their rivals.⁴ Their literary and biblical subject paintings endured critical attacks until their competitors became their imitators. Since Dante Gabriel Rossetti and others of the group also wrote poetry, *ut pictura poesis* certainly seems an applicable judgment.

Unsure of his technique in oils, Rossetti soon found a more congenial medium in watercolor where, in smaller size, he could indulge his natural bent for medieval dream-worlds from Dante, Malory, or the ballads. His poetry paralleled his painting, centering on passion and piety often in a medieval setting. As one who moved freely between two arts, mingling qualities of one in the other,

Rossetti would certainly seem the perfect embodiment of Horace's dictum.

In 1856 Rossetti met two young Oxford students whose discipleship would bring new life to his art and fame. William Morris and Edward Jones changed their career plans from the church to the arts under the influence of Ruskin's writing. In January 1856 they initiated a monthly, *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. The first issue included a flattering comment on Rossetti's work by Jones.⁵ It was sent to the artist who responded by offering some of his poems for the magazine. Jones sought out Rossetti in London, and by late summer both Jones and Morris were studying art with Rossetti, even living in a studio he once occupied. The wealthy Morris became a patron as well as a pupil, purchasing a number of the master's watercolors.⁶ Morris was in full flower as a poet, and he wrote poems to accompany two of the Rossetti watercolors he purchased. By 1858 he published his first volume of poetry, *The Defense of Guenevere, and Other Poems*.⁷

Morris's was the first book of Pre-Raphaelite poetry, and reviewers tended to equate the poems with painting. "'Golden Wings' . . . seems to conduct us through a long gallery of Mr. Rossetti's works, with all their richness of colouring, depth of pathos, poetical but eccentric conception, and loving elaboration of every minute detail," said the *Literary Gazette*; and in *The Tablet*: "The 'conscientious rendering of the actual', in its minutest details, is observed . . . in the description of gestures, attitudes, features, and garments, so that many passages read like descriptions of a Pre-Raphaelite picture."⁸

There can be no real quarrel with the fact that the Pre-Raphaelites were literary painters and painterly poets, exemplars of *ut pictura poesis*. But in terms of two poems in the volume that Morris based on Rossetti paintings, there is yet something to be said for recognizing the separate artistic motives of artist and writer. In *The Blue Closet* and *The Tune of Seven Towers*, Rossetti's artistic