

THE UNEXPLORED CORRESPONDENCE OF SIMEON SOLOMON

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Even before his death in 1905, Simeon Solomon was relegated to a minor, if not closeted, role in the history of the Pre-Raphaelites. His homosexuality, in particular his arrest for homosexual crimes in 1873, was considered the indelible mark on Pre-Raphaelitism. After Solomon's arrest, Algernon Charles Swinburne distanced himself from him and, in letters to George Powell and Theodore Watts-Dunton, encouraged them to do the same. William Holman Hunt, despite his granddaughter's claim that her grandparents had high regard for Solomon, does not once mention Solomon's name in his two-volume tome on Pre-Raphaelitism. In 1903 William Michael Rossetti reluctantly discussed Solomon with Julia Ellsworth Ford for her book on him, but as late as 1912 in an unpublished letter now in the Colbeck Collection, Rossetti wrote to an unknown recipient of Solomon, "After certain incidents in his life I dropped him, & wish never to hear or think any more about him."

With this attempted erasure of Solomon by his contemporaries it requires diligent detective work to piece together his scattered correspondence. Because there is no single public repository of his work, his letters inevitably have turned up as items in the collections of others or as general manuscripts in archives. These letters provide important information that helps to explain his personality and his art. In this article I am publishing for the first time excerpts from some of Solomon's letters, specifically those written to William Makepeace Thackeray, Mr. Arthur J. Lewis, James Leathart, and Mrs. Eleanor Tong, and suggesting their significance within the broader context of the Pre-Raphaelite world. I also assign dates for some of these letters, a difficult task because Solomon rarely dated his letters. Before exploring these unpublished letters, however, it is worth contextualizing them with the fourteen previously published letters.

Solomon was born in London in 1840 to a middle-class Jewish family. His mother, brother Abraham, and sister Rebecca were also artists. He exhibited