

“PERFECT MARVELS”: SCHOLARLY RESOURCES AT THE DELAWARE ART MUSEUM

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Topsy [Morris] has had some furniture, chairs and a table, made after his own design; they are as beautiful as medieval work, and when we have painted designs of knights and ladies upon them they will be perfect marvels. (Edward Burne-Jones, qtd. in *Memorials*, 1:147)

On 29 October 1997, the Delaware Art Museum acquired at auction two extraordinary chairs of singular importance in the history of Pre-Raphaelite art and the Arts and Crafts Movement (“Chair,” 30). Within the community of scholars and admirers of English Pre-Raphaelite Art, the acquisition has been unanimously lauded as an appropriate addition to the Delaware Art Museum’s exceptional Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Collection. However, the strategic decision to acquire the Morris-Rossetti chairs was also motivated by a set of museological considerations. Among them the aspiration to create fertile new arenas for research, publications, exhibitions, and programs that had the potential to engage all of the Delaware Art Museum’s audiences from novice to expert. The Morris-Rossetti chairs were identified as a critical nexus through which discrete and ostensibly disparate specialty components of the museum’s collection, shaped by nearly ninety years of growth and development, could be meaningfully interpreted. In particular, the chairs are central to a vibrant, dynamic conceptual framework that elucidates the impact of Pre-Raphaelite art and ideas in American art and culture.

By necessity, The Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Collection of English Pre-Raphaelite Art, donated to the Delaware Art Museum in 1935, was the first consideration. Amassed by Wilmington industrialist Samuel Bancroft beginning in 1885 and augmented by his widow and children following his death thirty years later, the collection is a unique resource in the field of Pre-Raphaelite studies.¹ The Bancroft Collection not only provides an overview of seminal philosophical and aesthetic hallmarks of Pre-Raphaelite art as they were defined by the movement’s premiere figures. But also, it bears the imprint of a remarkable American collector