

MAKING AN UNFREQUENTED PATH OF ART HIS OWN:  
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI'S  
PAINTINGS IN THE AESTHETIC MODE

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In a brief article entitled "Mr. Rossetti's Pictures" in the 21 October 1865 number of the *Athenaeum*, F.G. Stephens provides analytical descriptions of three recent paintings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti: *The Blue Bower* (c.1863-65), *Venus Verticordia* (1863-68), and *The Beloved* (1863-66). In doing so, Stephens usefully identifies the characteristics of Rossetti's single-woman portraits in the emergent Art-for-Art's-sake tradition and establishes the terms in which they can be discussed and judged:

- 1: "The scale of the pictures is almost that of life";
- 2: They are pictorial equivalents of "lyrical poem[s] [that] aim ... at effect quite as much by means of inherent beauty and melodious colouring as by the mere subject, which is superficial"; and
- 3: "Inasmuch as its subject is defined," a painting is "somewhat less purely lyrical" than one whose subject is not defined. (545, 546)

On the basis of these characteristics and criteria Stephens pronounces *The Blue Bower* the most "lyrical" of Rossetti's three paintings because its subject is least "defined" and *The Beloved* the least "lyrical" because its subject is most "defined." The analytical descriptions that support these judgements remain remarkable for their perceptions and insights and cumulatively constitute a model for the appreciation of Rossetti's paintings in the aesthetic mode. That they are also consistent with the painter's own aims is apparent from letters written in response to Stephens's article in which the painter thanks his one-time Pre-Raphaelite brother for "so full and friendly description of ... [his] paintings," declares himself "completely gratified ... with all" that the article