

The Nun and the Convent In Pre-Raphaelite Art

Although scholars have recognized the diversity and richness of Pre-Raphaelite iconography, little attention has been paid to the role of the nun in their work. This is rather puzzling in view of the fact that she makes her appearance on a number of occasions, especially in the oeuvre of John Everett Millais. Considering the Pre-Raphaelites' well known anti-religious sentiments, such works would appear to demand further study.

Frankly Pro-Catholic artists associated with the Pre-Raphaelites experienced great discomfort in their circle. Charles Collins was one such example. His 1851 *Convent Thoughts* is remembered as much for the stir it caused as for the merit of the work. In keeping with the title of the painting (Plate 1), a young nun, cut off from the world by a brick wall densely covered with foliage (a *hortus conclusus* without even a gate), is totally absorbed in religious contemplation, invoked by the passion-flower which she holds in her hand. Her purity of thought is symbolized by the white lilies to her right, while her devotion to God is emphasized by the missal she holds in her left hand: an expression of Collins' Catholic leanings in 1851, adopted when he became a High churchman.¹ Not well received, the painting immediately aroused the anti-Catholic sentiments which were in the air at this time. *The Spectator* noted sarcastically that her "country-girl" appearance did not make her "eligible as the ideal of a bride in heaven,"² while *Punch* was even less kind to her in its review of 1851.³ Criticism of the painting was extended to the entire Pre-Raphaelite group, to whom the critics attributed Tractarian or openly pro-Catholic sentiments. *The Times* saw this painting as one of a group that exhibited "monkish follies"⁴. *The Art Journal* in 1851 belittled the painting as "a composition in the taste of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood."⁵ Even Ruskin, who came to the PRB's defence at this time, not only confessed that he had "no respect for Mr. Collins' lady in white, because

her sympathies are limited by a dead wall, or divided between some gold fish and a tadpole" but, before discussing the group, he disassociated himself from "their Romanist and Tractarian tendencies."⁶ This taint of Catholicism was so strong that as late as 1859 the Pre-Raphaelites were described by one critic as the "Peel party in painting."⁷ None of this criticism was valid, however, since the Pre-Raphaelites were in fact far from sympathetic to Romanist principles.

Not only was Collins rejected as a substitute member for the Roman Catholic Collinson in 1850⁸ since, as Hunt noted, he "would be out of his element with us,"⁹ but Hunt described his painting as "puerile" while Millais called it sheer "folly."¹⁰ Millais' own anti-Catholic feelings were well expressed in a letter to Mr. Combe on February 15, 1853:

I have lately become acquainted with a very busy Roman Catholic, a most mysterious-looking individual. . . he called to ask me to accompany him to Cardinal Wiseman's this evening, but I excused myself. I believe him to be a Jesuit. He has a most extraordinary appearance. . . altogether looking very like a stage Polish Count, who murders everyone and then goes down a trap-door with blue light upon him. I expect he looks upon me as a promising convert. He smiles at the notion of my attending Wells Street Church and, no doubt, pictures in his imagination my sitting on a three-legged-stool, painting a Holy Family for the only church.¹¹

Millais' negative attitude towards the Catholic Church was widely shared by his fellow Pre-Raphaelites.¹²

In view of these sentiments, Millais' own interest in the theme of the convent, demonstrated by his two drawings of *St. Agnes* (1854 and 1856) and his *The Vale of Rest*, (1858) seem all the more strange and indeed