

ALPHONSE LEGROS, THE ROSSETTI BROTHERS,  
AND LEGROS'S *STUDY, HEAD OF A BEARDED MAN*

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A Frenchman by birth, Alphonse Legros is remembered today for his major contributions to art education in Britain, especially at the Slade School of Fine Art where he influenced a generation of artists. He taught not only draughtsmanship, painting, print making, and sculpture, but was instrumental in the revival of the art medal in Britain in the late nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Legros settled in London in the 1860s and became a naturalized British citizen in 1881. He died at Watford in Hertfordshire in 1911. Legros did many portraits of his colleagues within the Pre-Raphaelite circle but surprisingly his portrait of Dante Gabriel Rossetti is virtually unknown.

Born in 1837 in Dijon, Legros attended the art school in Dijon and was apprenticed to Maître Nicolardo, a house decorator and a painter of images. In 1851 Legros left for Paris and by 1853 he was attending the Petite École de Dessin, studying under the influential teacher Lecoq de Boisbaudran, where his fellow students included Auguste Rodin, Jules Dalou, and Henri Fantin-Latour. In 1858 Legros formed a friendship with James McNeill Whistler and in 1859 formed with Whistler and Fantin-Latour the Société des Trois. The three exhibited together until 1863 when Legros moved to England at the suggestion of Whistler. Whistler noted at the time that Legros was “at one moment in so deplorable a condition that it needed God or a lesser person to pull him out of it. And so I brought him over to London, and for a while he worked in my studio” (qtd in Pennell and Pennell, *Life* 77). Whistler introduced him to a number of fellow artists and generous patrons. Although Legros did receive a few commissions for paintings after his move to London, particularly from the Greek community,<sup>2</sup> he lived primarily during his initial years in London by his etching and by teaching. His early students included Edwin Edwards, George Howard, Maria Zambaco, and the surgeon Sir Henry Thompson. He started teaching at the South Kensington School of Art in 1871 and by 1876 he replaced Edward Poynter as the Professor of Fine Art at the Slade School of University College London where he remained for the next sixteen years.