

“Pre-Raphaelite Sisters.” Exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, London, 17 October 2019 – 26 January 2020. Curated by Jan Marsh.

*Love hath a chamber all of imagery;
And there is one dim nook,
A little storied web wherein my heart
From leaf to leaf is read as in a book.*
– D.G. Rossetti, “Last Love” (Canzone)

This remarkable exhibition is bracketed by two works of art that embody many of its themes – one at the entrance, the other at its triumphant conclusion. The first is a vastly enlarged detail from Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s illustration for the death of King Arthur, one of his contributions to the 1857 Moxon edition of Tennyson’s *Poems*. The other is Edward Burne-Jones’s *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1872-77). They both provide a view of gender relations that lies at the heart of the show. In the first, Arthur’s identity is drowning in the hugely abundant hair of the weeping queens that surround him. It tumbles down from their bent heads onto and around the King’s supine figure. At the far end of the show are three large pictures, among them Burne-Jones’s *The Beguiling of Merlin*. In this picture the male figure is once again supine. Merlin is tangled in the branches and roots of a hawthorn tree, the energy draining from his effete limbs. He is hypnotized by the sensual figure of Nimuë, the Lady of the Lake, with her Gorgon-like hair. Tired of his sexual advances, so Malory records, Nimuë transfigured Merlin using his own magic, just as Maria Zambaco, who sat for Nimuë, obsessed and almost destroyed Burne-Jones. Both images concern females that are empowered, and between them the exhibition is populated by females whose very presence radiates strength and influence.

The Pre-Raphaelite sisters meet the visitor in a series of chambers “all of imagery.” Each one is occupied by a woman who has exerted power or influence as mother or mistress, model or manager, sister, artist, aunt, wife, or friend. The “air” of each chamber is determined by its occupant, but each chamber leads into another which is influenced by those around it. These chambers provide an ironic comment on the domestic spaces to which Victorians relegated women, but the spaces here are conceived in quite a different spirit. Each one is an emotional centre of power, a place of nurture which is managed and organized by its occupant. The interlocking nature of the chambers reflects the complex social network of Pre-Raphaelitism itself, revealing the dense and tightly knit web of friendships, acquaintances, familial relations, loves, and hates.

The single most prominent group comprises artists’ models. They were