

PRE-RAPHAELITE WOMEN COLLECTORS AND THE FEMALE GAZE¹

Dianne Sachko Macleod

We know a good deal more about the men who collected Pre-Raphaelite art than we do about the women. Males such as James Leathart figure prominently in the memoirs of Pre-Raphaelite artists, whereas his wife Maria Hedley Leathart is a shadowy figure who is known primarily today as the passive subject of portraits by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Arthur Hughes. Further investigation, however, suggests that women were more instrumentally involved in the collecting of Pre-Raphaelite art than has previously been acknowledged. The wives of collectors, particularly those who enjoyed close relationships with their husbands, not only participated in the selection of the art which entered their homes, but they also coached their spouses in viewing it as an integral aspect of their lives together. My argument is based on the premise that the decoration of the private sphere fell under the purview of the female gaze. Therefore, in order to recover the women collectors of Pre-Raphaelitism, I will first define the term 'female gaze' in relation to art collecting.

Theories of the gaze appeared in the field of film studies in the 1970s to describe the male viewer's response to screen images of women. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian principles, such writers as Laura Mulvey have argued that the masculine gaze objectifies the female image by projecting desire onto it (Mulvey 57-58). Mulvey and other guardians of the gaze, however, reject the possibility of women reversing the relationship and appropriating the gaze for themselves. Mary Ann Doane and Ann Kaplan, for instance, insist that until the patriarchy is overcome, there is no way to represent desire other than through the symbolic phallic order inscribed by the male.² Remarkably, even though the male gaze was defined to describe representations of women in the popular films of the 1940s and '50s, it has been transferred with impunity backward and forward in time to a variety of cultural expressions, ranging from Renaissance paintings to contemporary photographs. Relying on the common denominator of the symbolic order to buttress their arguments, defenders of the politics of vision have ignored the reductiveness of the proposition that men exercise sexual power over subordinate women who are devoid of pleasure.