

PRE-RAPHAELITE HAIR RELICS  
AND THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF MEMORY

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Coiled under glass, stitched to silk, tied with blue ribbon: hair cut from the heads of Pre-Raphaelites can be found in museums and archives across Britain and the United States. Objects crafted to hold the hair of William and Jane Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal, John Ruskin, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and others might easily have featured in scholarship on Victorian mourning practices, the veneration of artists' and authors' body parts, or the Pre-Raphaelites' obsession with women's hair (Pointon "Secular Memorials" and "Casts"; Lutz; Matthews; Watson; Gitter; Ofek). Yet, curiously, to date they have escaped scrutiny. Certainly, these are "artifacts at the edge," to use Marcia Pointon's telling phrase: a combination of physical remains, decorative object, and inscribed text ("Casts" 170). But perhaps another reason for their neglect is that they date from the edge of the Victorian era, from the last years of the nineteenth century to approximately the end of the First World War. Their makers and owners seem belated associates of the Pre-Raphaelite movement: Charles Ricketts, the artist, writer, and designer for the theatre; Sydney Cockerell, friend of Ruskin and Morris's private secretary, who in 1908 became the director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; and Robert Catterson-Smith, who worked with Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, and from 1903 headed the Birmingham School of Art.

Six Pre-Raphaelite hair relics form the focus of this essay.<sup>1</sup> Gilded, hammered, engraved, and enamelled, these containers present locks of hair as something special and to be revered, although this reverence is implied using different strategies, with different effects. It should also be noted that a more prevalent category of relic exists, where a tuft of hair is folded in paper, annotated with a name and date, and stored away.<sup>2</sup> For example, Emery Walker, Morris's collaborator in typography and fellow socialist, stored a piece of Morris's hair at his death in a small cardboard box in a drawer at his home.<sup>3</sup>