

REVIEWS

Pre-Raphaelite Sisters: Art, Poetry and Female Agency in Victorian Britain edited by Glenda Youde and Robert Wilkes. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022. xxvii, 461 pp. 100 b/w illus. ISBN 978-1-80079-565-5 (ePDF). \$102.65.

Pre-Raphaelite Sisters: Art, Poetry and Female Agency in Victorian Britain seeks to rescue neglected women artists associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, shifting the focus away from their embodied roles as muses and models and towards their work as accomplished artists and writers: active participants rather than passive objects. The women considered here have often been identified as one thing by the critical reception, while their other talents have been obscured, arguably to bolster the long tradition of masculine genius at the heart of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. This volume adopts an engaging and personal tone, especially in Part IV, “Personal Essays,” at the end of the book. Yet, even before that final section, the approach is refreshingly personal and warmly appreciative, a tone that is signally lacking in many art historical overviews. This accomplishment comes in part by way of the use of first names instead of surnames, a practice which also obviates the difficulty of names and the changing marital status of many of these women artists.

In his introduction, Robert Wilkes acknowledges the ground-breaking work of feminist art historians in the late twentieth century, including Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, and notes that up to the mid-1980s, most scholarship on the Pre-Raphaelites had been by and about men. By the twenty-first century, however, the culture surrounding the PRB had evolved, and there are now numerous exhibitions, articles, and monographs on the women in the movement. The first part of the book, “Making Art,” includes chapters on Evelyn De Morgan, Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale, Mary Seton Watts, and Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon. The chapters here explore the connections between politics and art, including issues such as women’s suffrage and education. The second part of the book, “Poetry and Writing,” is richly interdisciplinary, encompassing art, writing, and craft. Three of the four chapters in this section are devoted to Elizabeth Siddal, two of them dealing with her association with Georgiana Burne-Jones and Christina Rossetti. The third part, “Female Agency,” includes a chapter on fashion and Pre-Raphaelite women. Finally, the closing section, “Personal Perspectives,” comprises two chapters detailing personal experiences of twenty-first-century people in engaging with Pre-Raphaelite art today.