



Rossetti: Painter and Poet

J. B. Bullen

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Dante Gabriel Rossetti is the most intriguing and flamboyant figure in nineteenth-century British art. He inspired the first Pre-Raphaelite generation of 1849 and the second generation ten years later and both brought about significant changes in British art. His poetry, too, acted as a stimulus to many writers at the end of the century, who saw in his subtle manipulation of the sonnet and the ballad forms ways of giving expression to issues that were peculiar to the that century.

Dominant among those issues was that of sexual desire, for Rossetti, more than any other artist in this period, struggled with the contradictions of sexuality. When he died in 1882 people knew of him as the painter of alluring women with exotic names - Lilith, Monna Vanna, Fiammetta - and the writer of subtly erotic verse. He projected onto women his anxieties, his pleasures and his needs. He also mythologized them, so that Elizabeth Siddal, Fanny Cornforth, Jane Morris and others became for him Beatrice, Guenevere, and Isolde. In doing so he shaped them, he changed the direction of their lives, and in some cases he both made and destroyed them.

This richly illustrated book, by tracing the development of Rossetti's painting and poetry in the context of the drama of his life, follows this powerful thread. Sometimes sensual, at others spiritual, Rossetti's mission was to transcend the Manichean division that separated body and soul and, through the visionary power of art, reconcile what he saw as elements fundamental to human experience.

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