"More Than Pictures": Dante Gabriel Rossetti And The Oxford Mural Project

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"MORE THAN PICTURES": DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI AND THE OXFORD MURAL PROJECT

by

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Introduction

Shortly after Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82) completed work in late 1857 on his mural, *Sir Launcelot’s Vision of the Sanc Grael* (fig. 1), for the Oxford Union Society’s Debating Hall, a contemporary observer noted that it was “beginning to be unintelligible.”¹ This illegibility was attributed to the mural’s deteriorated state, but another reviewer remarked that the glare of sunlight from windows nearby made it “almost impossible […] to be seen”² (fig. 2). Compounding these factors of near invisibility, Rossetti never completed his mural, leaving empty spaces in the bottom left and top right of the composition. In spite of the mural’s ruined, obscured, and unfinished state, it continued to be seen—both during and after the artist’s life—through texts, reproductions of related artwork, and photographs of the mural project.

Though these contemporary sources revealed that problems of visibility began almost immediately, they also modelled ways to view the mural that obviated the need to actually “see” it. One review, for example, did not comment on these obstacles but remarked on the mural’s color and technique, comparing them to “the margin of a highly-illuminated manuscript” with “a voluptuous radiance of variegated tints” that pleased the eye.³ This text, in particular, would become a stand-in for the mural, providing a mental picture of the Oxford work. Other sources emphasized the youthful, creative aspect of the endeavor, seeing Rossetti’s mural as reflecting the new school of British art.⁴

In their constructed ways of seeing, these early sources built upon the reputation that Rossetti had already established by 1857. By that time, he had distanced himself both stylistically and philosophically from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the anti-academic group he had helped form almost ten years earlier.⁵ The Brotherhood eschewed the
standard of Raphael and Michelangelo set by the Royal Academy of Arts, instead embracing the style of early Renaissance art. Though initially enrolled at the Royal Academy, Rossetti left the traditional art school, beginning his self-identification as a rebellious, Romantic artist in need of no teacher. In his departure from the Brotherhood, Rossetti set himself even further apart from the mainstream.

Though he began his reputation with the exhibition of two oil paintings outside of the Academy, along with some writing published in the short-lived Pre-Raphaelite publication, *The Germ*, Rossetti chose to shift his artistic focus to small-scale watercolors, sparingly shown. For those familiar with these watercolors, they were praised for their brilliant color and known for their medieval subject matter. Rossetti had also been engaged with providing some illustrations for Alfred Lord Tennyson’s volume of poems on King Arthur and other topics. Against this background, with no previous experience with either painting murals or working with other artists on a large-scale group project, Rossetti embarked on his Oxford mural.

The mural project was not only a monumental undertaking for Rossetti but also for the other six men involved, who had little to no experience in painting murals. Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98), William Morris (1834–96), Arthur Hughes (1832–1915), Valentine Cameron Prinsep (1838–1904), John Roddam Spencer Stanhope (1829–1908), and John Hungerford Pollen (1820–1902) contributed one mural each with an Arthurian theme for the newly built Oxford Union Debating Hall (see Table 1). This lozenge-shaped building in the neo-Gothic style was an addition to the Union and included ten bays, each pierced by two six-foil windows (fig. 3). Its architect, Benjamin Woodward (1816–61), did not originally plan for the upper-story walls to be covered
with murals, but, according to Rossetti, this concept was suggested to him by “one of his friends,” most likely Rossetti himself. Rossetti also called this project his “labour of love,” which referred to the work being done in exchange for the cost of materials, food, and lodging in Oxford. In addition to the ten murals, the project also extended to a carved tympanum, designed by Rossetti and sculpted by Alexander Munro (1825–71), and a painted ceiling, designed by William Morris and painted by assistants.

The mural’s larger-than-life size and placement in a semi-public building should have made it Rossetti’s most visible and accessible work since his departure from the Brotherhood, but obstacles to seeing the mural began almost immediately. Nevertheless, the mural was employed by biographers, after Rossetti’s death in 1882, to situate him as the leader of a “second wave” of Pre-Raphaelitism. In other words, what might have been considered detrimental to his reputation was actually used to bolster it. This latter Pre-Raphaelite movement was also given greater importance than the first because it had longer-lasting influence, especially in the persons of Burne-Jones and Morris. The Oxford mural project thus became essential to mark a new beginning for Rossetti and for all of British art.

Though Rossetti—and the Oxford mural project—enjoyed a positive reputation early on, by the middle of the twentieth century, both had faded to obscurity and were overshadowed by the modernist movement. Attempts to both restore his reputation and the mural itself were carried out at various times, with work in the late twentieth century being the strongest effort to return Rossetti to prominence. Most recent scholars aiming to reposition Rossetti perpetuated the earlier constructions of “seeing” that placed the Oxford mural project as the beginning of the second, more important, movement.
My research departs from this previous scholarship in my critical assessment of primary and secondary sources from 1857 to the first decade of the twentieth century. My goal is not to examine the positioning of the Oxford mural project in the annals of British art, supported by these writers, but rather to scrutinize how these texts dealt with issues of visibility. In the context of a constantly changing Victorian visual culture, these constructions of “seeing” became as important as the mural itself. These ways of seeing, I aim to show, are evident in the earliest sources that salvaged what could be seen, shifting the focus from Rossetti’s mural to the artist himself or to the narrative surrounding the Oxford project. Later authors, from the late nineteenth to early twenty-first centuries, continued to build upon this foundation, creating even more refined ways to “see.” Using the mural’s visual obscurity as a point of departure, I will analyze how these writers overcame this obstacle and employed the Oxford mural project to create Rossetti’s artistic identity and reputation.
CHAPTER 1 From Visibility to Obscurity and Back Again: A Review of the Literature

Writings about the Oxford murals have become a stand-in for the project itself because of their near illegibility. Examining the scholarly literature offers the opportunity to look closely at how recent sources repeated or edited certain ideas to conform to or challenge a narrative that supported Rossetti’s earlier reputation. This chapter calls for an evaluation of what was written about this mural project, especially concerning issues of visibility. While most authors discussed Rossetti’s mural as part of a larger undertaking, instead of concentrating on it exclusively, their treatment of it merits examination. Of other sources, most works focused on the entire Oxford mural project, with only a few devoted solely to Rossetti’s contribution.

The earliest sources about the mural, from 1857 to 1874, consisting mostly of correspondence, reviews, guidebooks, pamphlets, and diary entries, provide the basic foundation for what is known about this project. From this group, the most well-known and cited work is the 1857 review by Coventry Patmore, which offered a description of color and technique, something that has become vital to our understanding of how the murals once looked. After Rossetti’s death in 1882, several articles and book-length biographies were published, most of which included mention of the mural project. The works on Rossetti continued to appear up until the first decade of the twentieth century, with some written by those still alive, including Valentine Cameron Prinsep and Georgiana Burne-Jones, who were directly or tangentially connected to the Oxford mural project. These sources, from the earliest period to the first decade of the twentieth century, will be discussed in greater detail in chapters 2 and 3 of this essay; what follows
provides an overview of works beginning with the most recent scholarship and extending back to the 1920s.

**Primacy of Subject and a Return to Visibility**

Scholarship in the 1990s often discussed the Oxford mural project in terms of its Arthurian subject matter. Depicting scenes based on Thomas Malory’s fifteenth-century *Le Morte d'Arthur* (Table 1), Rossetti’s contribution portrays Queen Guenevere, in the center, gazing down at a sleeping Launcelot, on the right, with an embodiment of the Sanc Grael (Holy Grail) and angels, on the left. In the Malory text, Launcelot has been forbidden to obtain the Grail because of his affair with Guenevere and has been granted a vision of it instead. Perhaps because of its deteriorated state, the physical and formal aspects of Rossetti’s mural have been less of a focus. His choice and interpretation of subject matter, therefore, became one of the ways that modern scholars saw this mural.

Debra Mancoff, for example, analyzed Rossetti’s mural in the larger context of both Victorian revival movements and issues of gender construction. Mancoff, in her work on Arthurian themes in Victorian art, argued that Rossetti chose an Arthurian subject for the Oxford murals in response to the Palace of Westminster murals in the 1840s, providing the Malorian versus the more contemporary and conservative Tennysonian interpretation of the subject. For Tennyson, as Mancoff pointed out, Guenevere was the only one to blame and Arthur’s forgiveness was seen as the ultimate example of Victorian gentlemanly behavior. Whereas Rossetti placed Guenevere in the center, boldly making her the focal point of the mural and not Launcelot. Instead of promoting the ideals of man’s right and proper duty to country and family, Rossetti’s mural focused on Launcelot’s illicit love of and obsession with Arthur’s wife, Guenevere.
As Christine Poulson proposed, the Oxford murals’ treatment of sex and sin, rather than allegiance to king, country, and chivalry toward women, may not have been entirely decorous in terms of Victorian standards of morality, especially for an upper-class male audience.\textsuperscript{20} Launcelot’s real sin, for example, was that he loved Guenevere more than God, and the knight could not obtain the Grail because he did not renounce carnal love.\textsuperscript{21} In Rossetti’s departure from the strict literalism of the subject, according to Mancoff, he was able to show the complications of Launcelot’s love, revealing a more human and private side of the Arthurian legend.\textsuperscript{22} Furthermore, Rossetti’s ambiguous depiction of Guenevere—as an obstacle to or conduit for the knight’s vision—and the passive, non-heroic characterization of Launcelot challenged the Victorian ideality of the fallen woman rescued by a knight in shining armor.\textsuperscript{23} In both these works, Mancoff and Poulson situated Rossetti as a rebel in his radical interpretation of a traditional Victorian subject.

The scholarship that focused on subject matter dealt less with issues of visibility, mostly noting the mural’s deteriorated state but not dwelling on it. A return to visibility and the physical aspects of the mural was highlighted in Clare Willsdon’s work on 100 years of British mural painting in 2000.\textsuperscript{24} She argued that Patmore’s account of Rossetti’s technique of using small dots of variegated colors “uncannily” foreshadowed French descriptions of pointillism.\textsuperscript{25} She also proposed that Rossetti’s mural, with its large-scale figures filling the picture plane, called attention to the wall surface and thus was “a fascinating prediction of fin-de-siècle developments.”\textsuperscript{26}

Another work that returned to the issue of visibility concerning Rossetti’s mural is Elizabeth Prettejohn’s 2007 comprehensive examination of the Aesthetic Movement.
Prettejohn also cited Patmore’s review but analyzed how his description, emphasizing “a sensuous impact, inexpressible in words,” prefigured the principles of art for art’s sake: “Patmore also draws on a notion that would feature prominently in later Aesthetic art: synaesthesia, the idea that an impression of one sense, in this case vision, may be so powerful as to evoke other senses, here smell and hearing.” For Prettejohn, the Oxford mural project represented one of the earliest experiments in this new movement that would take precedence in British art in later decades of the nineteenth century. Thus even though she noted that the murals are “mere wrecks” now, she emphasized their original appearance and subsequent impact.

In addition to the mural’s stylistic properties, Prettejohn pointed out other factors of the Oxford mural project that influenced this new artistic movement. The group formed there, which merged two artistic circles that revolved around Rossetti and George Frederic Watts, created the relational and philosophical foundations for future projects, including Morris’s design firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. Rossetti would also become the leader of his own circle at Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, that would include Burne-Jones, poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, artists Simeon Solomon and James Abbott McNeill Whistler, among others. Like Prettejohn, Alastair Grieve related the Oxford mural project to the Aesthetic Movement, focusing on the artists’ treatment of subject matter and their bohemian camaraderie as analogous to the “shocking ideas” of Théophile Gautier.

Though not specifically about the Oxford mural project, scholarship in the first decade of the twenty-first century that examined earlier works about the Pre-Raphaelites and Rossetti provides a way to re-evaluate the claims made by scholars such as
Prettejohn, as well as earlier accounts. Michaela Giebelhausen and Tim Barringer proposed that the enormous “body of texts” concerning Pre-Raphaelite artists and their followers “shifted, manipulated, fixed, and re-formed” artistic identities. They pointed out that scholarship on these artists in the 1980s often relied heavily on primary or secondary source material, “treating it as irrefutable evidence rather than exposing it to critical study.” Julie Codell has also written about “the artist as text,” evaluating narratives in context of the Victorian biography genre and how they constructed a national artistic identity. Most texts about Rossetti’s mural fit into this Victorian biography genre and were also written by friends, relatives, and people directly involved in the mural project.

Restoring the Mural, Restoring Rossetti’s Reputation

Before the focus on subject matter in the 1990s and Aesthetic Movement in the 2000s, scholarship on the Oxford mural project stemmed from a re-evaluation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in the 1980s. In 1984, this revival of scholarly interest in the Brotherhood and their followers culminated in the special exhibition *The Pre-Raphaelites*, organized by Tate Britain, in London, which included an exhibition catalogue and a compilation of essays. The exhibition catalogue termed the movement that followed the original 1848 Brotherhood as a “second wave” of Pre-Raphaelitism that was to have a much more far-reaching and international influence. Rosalie Mander’s essay “Rossetti and the Oxford Murals, 1857” not only declared Rossetti as the leader of this “second wave” but also gave this movement its crucial generative moment in the Oxford mural project. Mander argued “that 1857 is of more importance [than the 1848 formation of the Brotherhood] in the history of Victorian art because of what it
inspired.” As Prettejohn would later claim in 2007, Mander proposed earlier that the work of Burne-Jones, the Aesthetic Movement, and the Arts and Crafts Movement originated from this one project, which was orchestrated by Rossetti. As Mander put it, “The link-man of the two movements is Rossetti. Prime mover in the Brotherhood in his twenties, he enjoyed a second flowering of leadership nine years later with different followers: the charisma undimmed.”

One of the ways Mander supported her thesis that Rossetti spearheaded a new movement was to downplay the deteriorated state of the murals. She first hinted at their ruined state in an allusion to their “willy-nilly” technique, specifically Rossetti’s. She did not directly address the issue of decay until the last page of her essay, when she discussed previous restoration attempts. She concluded that the walls had created the deterioration and was hopeful that with repairs and better lighting “the sight of them [can be] enjoyed once more.” Mander also attempted to offer an alternate way of seeing, providing quotes from contemporary observers and Patmore’s review that highlighted the vibrant colors of the murals. This model of seeing, along with her discussion of Rossetti’s role as leader to the group of young artists, further buttressed her argument that this mural project gave birth to a new artistic movement even though she did not address the possibility that the murals started to fade immediately, that Rossetti’s contribution was unfinished, or any other issues of visual obscurity.

Mander’s claim about the role of Rossetti and the Oxford mural project coincided with the agenda of the exhibition, which according to Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock was “to set up a presiding genius whose style and artistic personality is sufficient to link discontinuous practices as two phases of the movement.” In “Patriarchal Power
and the Pre-Raphaelites,” Cherry and Pollock challenged this claim, offering a critical evaluation of the exhibition publications. The authors argued that this positioning of Rossetti in the 1984 exhibition was essentially a “paradox” because his works were not widely known in his lifetime. They proposed that Rossetti’s reputation actually began to be crafted after his death in 1882 with two pivotal exhibitions: the Royal Academy exhibition of Old Masters in late December/early winter 1883 and one at the Fine Arts Club later that year.\footnote{41} In these exhibitions, Rossetti was championed retrospectively as a home-grown genius, to be considered alongside British greats, such as J. M. W. Turner. Cherry and Pollock maintained that the 1984 exhibition continued this same glorification of Rossetti, without examining the mechanisms that created this reputation.\footnote{42}

They further questioned the reliance upon “primary” sources written much later by members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle that supported these claims: “The current literature on Pre-Raphaelitism reproduces uncritically these strategies and thus effaces from their discourse the mark of their historical fabrication.”\footnote{43} As I will demonstrate in chapter 2, Rossetti’s reputation was actually created earlier than the 1882 exhibitions, and the issue of visibility concerning his works and their influence is a complex one. Cherry and Pollock rightly called attention to the “fabricated” nature of Rossetti’s reputation and challenged the central claim of the 1984 exhibition but they did not examine how these stories revealed important aspects of the culture that created them.

The work done by Mander in 1984 related to the scholarship on the murals in the 1970s and early 1980s.\footnote{44} John Renton recounted in his 1983 pamphlet that eight years earlier he had “found the odd beam of sunlight illuminating a fragment of colour and felt that something might still be done with [the murals].”\footnote{45} This revelation prompted a
meeting with Cyril Band, the head of photography at Clarendon Laboratory, to discuss shooting the murals in color. After a light cleaning, the murals were shot, the first time since black-and-white images were taken in 1906. These color photographs by Band were exhibited in 1976. Renton also noted that during the 1976 cleaning the small brushstrokes mentioned by Patmore could be seen. Renton’s publication, reprinted in 1996 and 2005, provided a brief history of the project, a description of the subject matter, and detailed information on previous conservation attempts, the most recent of which was in 1986.

In 1981, John Christian published a definitive work on the murals, where he argued: “Although the venture can only be described as a failure, it remains the major contribution of Pre-Raphaelitism to the revival of large-scale mural painting, one of the most cherished ambitions of English art in the nineteenth century.” Even though he noted Rossetti’s visual “failure” in both its deteriorated and unfinished state, he declared his mural the most important of the group. He seems also to be the earliest scholar of the later part of the twentieth century to connect the Oxford project to the Aesthetic Movement, arguing, like Mancoff would later, that their Arthurian stories differed from those at the Palace of Westminster, which would anticipate the new movement in its lack of moral purpose. Christian also compiled detailed information from disparate sources, offering a concise overview of the mural project, which added to his work on the Pre-Raphaelites in Oxford, published in 1974.

Not all writers during this period had a positive estimation of Rossetti’s role at Oxford. In 1960, Oswald Doughty’s biography on Rossetti included a chapter on the Oxford mural project, entitled “The Jovial Campaign 1857–1858.” This work, which
focused more on Rossetti’s personality than on his painting or poetry, noted that the “failure” of the project, meaning its deteriorated state, was due to Rossetti’s “irresponsible leadership.”\textsuperscript{50} Doughty upheld Rossetti’s reputation as leader of two movements but did not necessarily depict it the same way as others: “Once again, as in his early days, Gabriel was king of a little court. At Oxford, but with greater prestige and greater intensity, he was to play once more the part of ‘leader’ which he had played at the Academy Schools and in the original Preraphaelite circle.”\textsuperscript{51} This characterization seems to undercut Rossetti’s influence, limiting his role to a part he played to a “little court.”

\textbf{“In Real Danger of Extinction”: The Oxford Mural and Rossetti’s Influence}

Doughty’s discussion of Rossetti and the Oxford mural project in 1960 followed several years of either neglect or disdain at the hands of many scholars with few exceptions. In 1948, the centenary of the formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, some writers aimed to correct this oversight. John Gere’s review of the exhibition \textit{Pre-Raphaelites at the Tate} bemoaned the lack of attention paid to Rossetti, “the only man of real, original, genius which the movement produced.”\textsuperscript{52} Though Gere did not discuss the mural project, it was the subject of J. E. Alden’s handbook in the same year.\textsuperscript{53} Unlike most later writers, Alden addressed all the issues of visibility, including the glare of light from the windows and the mural’s unfinished state. Nevertheless, he provided a new way to view the murals, noting “they may perhaps be examined to the best advantage by looking at them obliquely from the level of the gallery which runs round the chamber.”\textsuperscript{54}

About twelve years before Alden’s handbook, Ian Harvey had published a four-page booklet to coincide with the murals’ restoration in 1936.\textsuperscript{55} Unveiled in March of that year, the restoration of the murals, which included new lighting, was a success according
to contemporary observers. Though efforts had been raised to conserve the murals as early as 1869, this attempt was the first one carried out. Restoration of Rossetti’s reputation, on the other hand, was a more complicated venture. By 1934, Roger Fry, artist, art critic, and proponent of the modernist movement, had denounced the Pre-Raphaelites as “artifical hot-house growth.” Although Fry maintained that “the passionate conviction of Rossetti inflamed them all,” for him, the Pre-Raphaelite movement fell short of its ambitions to flee the “artistic Sodom and Gomorrah” of Victorian academic art.

Evelyn Waugh’s article published on the centennial of Rossetti’s birth in 1928 marked a shift in scholarship about the artist. Noting that Rossetti’s reputation was “in real danger of extinction,” he nonetheless posited that the current generation should know about this artist’s works in poetry and painting. Examining Rossetti’s life and influence through five key works, Waugh selected the Oxford mural, even though it was “almost wholly vanished.” Citing Patmore’s description of the once “brilliant colour,” he used the mural to demonstrate Rossetti’s leadership of a new movement. He described why the other artists embraced Rossetti as their leader: “[…]Rossetti, who, in his exuberance, his glowing incisiveness of speech, and his exquisite medieval water colours, seemed the very embodiment of all they had been seeking.” He ended his article by expressing doubt that Rossetti would ever be valued in the twentieth century as he was in the late nineteenth century.

Two other publications dealing briefly with the Oxford mural project appeared in the 1920s: Herbert Arthur Morrah’s history of the Union in 1923 and Max Beerbohm’s *Rossetti and His Circle* in 1922. The former work offered the Union’s point of view, not
entirely uncharitable, yet noting members who thought the murals were “hideous.” Morrah’s publication mostly dealt with the history of the project, instead of reception, yet posited that the murals “always needed something sympathetic in the soul for their understanding.”\textsuperscript{61} The latter publication by Beerbohm featured a color drawing of the mural, which, as Christian argued in 1981, was more widely known than the painting itself (fig. 4).\textsuperscript{62}

Beerbohm’s drawing depicts Rossetti and Oxford professor Benjamin Jowett standing in front of the mural with the following caption: “The Sole Remark Likely to Have Been Made by Benjamin Jowett about the Mural Paintings at the Oxford Union. ‘And what were they going to do with the Grail when they found it, Mr. Rossetti?’”\textsuperscript{63} With Rossetti towering over the short, stubby professor and looking up at the image of Queen Guenevere in the center of his mural, it seems that Beerbohm depicted the artist as above the petty, yet practical question that Jowett posed. Rossetti, caught up in the creative process, is opposed to the rational order that Jowett and, by extension, the Oxford Union members represent.\textsuperscript{64} If Christian’s remark that this illustration would have been more familiar to viewers than the mural itself is accurate, then it is interesting to note that in many ways it replicated problems of visibility. With the mural unfinished (Rossetti is in the midst of painting) and obscured (a ladder masks Guenevere’s body), Beerbohm nevertheless modelled a way of looking, as he shows Rossetti staring up at his work, lost in his inner vision of the mural. As we shall see in the next chapter, this inner vision is critical.
CHAPTER 2 “Clear and Odd”: Problems of Visibility and Ways of Seeing

In the earliest writings about the Oxford mural project, various ways of dealing with problems of visibility were created, laying the groundwork for later writers. As I analyze the sources about Rossetti’s hardly visible mural, I will also take into account the “explosion of visuality” in the Victorian period. How viewers reacted to a seemingly unseeable art work should be seen in light of how vision itself was constructed, along with the scientific developments that highlighted the illusory and often unreliable experience of sight. As Jonathan Crary has pointed out in his seminal work on vision in the nineteenth century, optical devices, such as the stereoscope, diorama, and kaleidoscope, among many others, marked a shift in not only the technology of sight, but perceptions of it, creating fluid and complex visual experiences. In Kate Flint’s work on Victorian visual culture, she focused on their intense “fascination with the simultaneous presence of the seen and the unseen” and investigated how inner vision, imagination, and hallucination were coexistent with scientific models of sight. Sources on visual culture provide a foundation with which to analyze how and why those had who never “seen” Rossetti’s murals created ways to “see” it.

The works by Crary and Flint build on the foundation created by both Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau. Foucault demonstrated that vision is constructed and laden with power. The power of sight, even if it is just the suggestion that someone could be watching, is key. This “functioning of power” is ensured by this “conscious and permanent visibility,” reflected in the panoptic model, whereby one individual controls many, simply by sight. Certeau’s work aimed to show how this gaze could be destabilized. Introducing a way for individuals to challenge such disciplinary gazes,
Certeau discussed the act of walking in a city, where one can take a short cut or not follow directional signs, as a means to create a new text so that individuals can “write without reading” the city. For my purposes, Foucault and Certeau are valuable in their exposure of the discourse of sight, their revelation that it is inherently a construction.

“Almost Impossible … to be Seen”: Light from Windows

The first problem of visibility mentioned by primary sources addressed the physical location and placement of the murals. In each mural bay, sunlight from two six-lobed windows that pierce the middle center obscures the paintings (see fig. 2). In an 1858 article in the Ecclesiologist about the newly built Debating Hall, the reviewer noted, “Of course the position of the paintings renders it almost impossible for them to be seen, owing to the cross lights between and upon them.” A later source in 1904 also noted that these windows were whitewashed while the artists worked on the murals, so that they could see what they were doing.

This problem of visibility was not necessarily an obstacle to vision, however, but rather a way to create a different type of seeing. The Ecclesiologist reviewer, for example, attempted to salvage what could be seen.

But as far as can be judged, these paintings are clear and odd, embodying all the most salient peculiarities of the extreme section of the school from whom they emanate. They are of course valued in proportion by its adherents as the artists themselves. What they will think of them ten years hence obviously depends upon the position which that school may by that time have reached. In the meanwhile no one can grudge these spirited and able young men the happy opportunity which the building of this room afforded of being able to carry out their own notions just as they themselves desired.

While the reviewer acknowledged the light making them “almost impossible” to see, he used a different standard of sight, a non-visual criterion of judging them based on how the artists would be received in the future. He did not name the Pre-Raphaelites
specifically, but as the Oxford artists were not affiliated with any other artistic group at this time, it must be what he referred to. The reviewer was cautious about making any aesthetic or value judgment, leaving the final opinion to someone ten years in the future. In this sense, he appealed to the imagination, thus sidestepping the need to really see the paintings, with or without the light from the windows. He also laid the groundwork for future reviews and interpretations because others would also see the project as the beginning of a new school or second wave of Pre-Raphaelitism. In other words, in the eyes of this reviewer, if the murals themselves could not be seen, at least one could appreciate (or see) them as much as one would the artists who made them.

His last line about the “spirited and able young men […] carry[ing] out their own notions” provided a way to see this mural project as a youthful exploit of creativity, briefly touching on something that would later become a way to evaluate the murals, in spite of their lack of visibility. The radicalness and newness of the Pre-Raphaelite “extreme” school was exemplified by the youthfulness of its adherents. Pollen was the oldest of the group, at thirty-seven, with the rest being in their twenties, and Prinsep being just nineteen years old. With the exception of Rossetti, Hughes, and Pollen, most were just starting out on their artistic careers, something that would become a recurrent mantra invoked by subsequent writers. In mentioning their youth, this early reviewer provided future writers with a framing context with which to view the murals.

The light from the windows, however, could be seen as enhancing rather than detracting from the content of the murals, especially in the case of Rossetti’s mural. This view is suggested by the way in which the mural may have inspired the young Oxford undergraduate Algernon Charles Swinburne to write his poem “Launcelot” in 1857. In
this poem, Swinburne made several textual references that support this idea, including specific adjectives and words that could also be used to describe the mural. In the following passage, where the angel of the Holy Grail is speaking to Launcelot, for example, Swinburne may be referring to the light from the windows:

Where she standeth in the night
Clasped about with solemn light,
Clothed upon with samite bright.
The blessed maiden very white,
This is all the happy sight
That I may bring for thee.  

“Clasped about with solemn light” certainly seems to describe Guenevere’s position in the center of the mural, flanked on either side by two windows, about waist height. “The blessed maiden very white,” could also describe the light on the figure, as Guenevere was depicted in green, but the effect of strong light could have made her dress appear white.

So, while the light from the windows obscured the murals, it did not keep them from being “seen.” Instead the light provided an opportunity for an early persistence of vision, to keep seeing them in the midst of an obstacle. The phrase “persistence of vision” comes from Joseph Plateau’s scientific theory, formulated in the nineteenth century, which postulated that different images viewed in proximity will merge in the mind, causing them to have the appearance of a single, moving image. The “persistence” in this theory is the so-called after-image that remains in the brain even when the object is no longer in sight. While this concept is useful in discussions of visual culture, I will employ the phrase to describe how Victorian viewers continued to see Rossetti’s mural in spite of obstacles to visibility.

For the Ecclesiologist reviewer, this kind of seeing meant evaluating the murals by thinking about the artists, their youthfulness, and how they might turn out. For
Swinburne, the light enhanced the subject of the murals, especially in the case of Rossetti’s, as his mural depicted a vision, where flooding light in between the figures supported the interpretation, rather than subverted it. Both these constructed ways of seeing would later be used to different degrees by writers to create Rossetti’s artistic identity and reputation.

**“Incompleteness Stands Out”: Unfinished State**

Even if light from the windows had not been an obstacle to visibility, the fact that three of ten bays were left blank was an immediate problem. When Patmore’s review appeared in December 1857, he referred to the mural project’s unfinished state, mentioning that the “paintings are in progress.”77 The seven artists had painted one mural each, but Rossetti’s correspondence indicated that at least one, possibly two, more would be completed by him.78 This additional mural was commissioned by art critic and writer John Ruskin, an early champion of the Pre-Raphaelite movement and advocate for medieval revival architecture in England.79 Though designs for *How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors and Sir Percival Were Fed with the Grael; but Sir Percival’s Sister Died by the Way* were executed for this bay, the mural was never begun for reasons that are unclear (figs. 5–6).

For Patmore, the murals’ incompleteness was not an obstacle to vision, but merely an indicator of their “progress.” As time passed, however, and three bays still remained blank in 1859, the Oxford Union hired William Riviere, not part of the original group, to fill in the empty spots, reflecting their desire for the architectural space to be visually complete.80 Areas left blank next to the completed murals would have seemed unbearably conspicuous, disrupting not only the visual continuity but also the narrative of the
Arthurian cycle. Though not intended to be linear, the cycle was meant to be connected thematically. An 1859 guidebook offered the literary sources that these murals were based on, presenting them—including the later ones by Riviere—as a complete story.

The blank bays, therefore, were an obstacle not only to visibility but also to a complete narrative. Seeing these paintings in terms of the story they told was a critical method of their interpretation as the guidebook demonstrated.

Another obstacle to vision in the case of Rossetti’s mural was the fact that it was never finished. As we have seen, he completed the three main figures of Launcelot, Queen Guenevere, and the Sanc Grael, but left blank two fairly large areas, one below the left window, one above the right window. Rossetti was the only artist of the group, moreover, who did not finish his mural. In letters during the summer of 1858, Rossetti described his intentions to return to Oxford and finish his first mural and start the new one; but in November of that same year, Rossetti wrote the following: “I am not sure of Oxford till I am at Oxford—but I propose & suppose Oxford, & leave it in the hands of fate.” This statement followed a letter days earlier that indicated that his work was delayed because Union officials would not put the scaffolding up for his project. It is clear that Rossetti was struggling with his mural well before this time because he advised his family in the fall of 1857 not to come and see it because “things are peculiarly in a muddle just now.”

Rossetti did not mention the Oxford project again until August 1860, when he wrote that he was “not on good terms with the Union fools” in response to William Michael Rossetti’s offer to work on his brother’s behalf to solve the issue of the unfinished mural. While Rossetti did not say why he had a falling out with the Oxford
Union, it may have had something to do with the fact that they had hired Riviere to paint the three empty mural bays in 1859. Rossetti recounted in a letter of 1861 that they first tried to persuade him to finish the project, but when artistic differences could not be resolved (he did not say what these were), they asked him if they could use his designs, which he refused. To underline his frustration with the Union, Rossetti wrote in 1871: “The only remedy is whitewash, and I shall be happy to hear of its application.” This aspect of visibility created a way to see the mural as a frustrated artist’s battle with unsympathetic authorities.

In 1869, about twelve years after the mural project was started, the Oxford Union formed a committee regarding the murals, with one of its goals being the completion of Rossetti’s mural. The blank spots of Rossetti’s mural, like the once-empty bays, overwhelmed and disrupted what could be seen. Their repeated attempts to persuade the artist to finish it reveal their dissatisfaction. In the correspondence regarding this task, Rossetti promised to send another artist for the fee of 100 pounds. This artist, most likely his assistant Henry Treffry Dunn, never carried out this task, as an 1874 report noted the following: “But the publication of a certain pamphlet, following the persistent obstruction of an anti-artistic section of the Society, so offended Mr. Rossetti that he withdrew from the undertaking.” I have discovered the pamphlet that was the cause of Rossetti’s indignation, which, although alluded to, has never been identified conclusively in the literature.

A clue to the identity of the author of this pamphlet is found in the amount of the fee (£100) noted in the letter from committee chair James Thursfield to Rossetti in 1869. In an 1871 Oxford Union pamphlet by Edward Purcell, signed “E. P.,” against the
actions of the mural committee, this exact amount was noted, along with the identity of Rossetti’s substitute:

And if, as is rumoured, Mr. Rossetti does not himself intend to undertake the technical work, but to entrust it to a certain Mr. Dunn (who would appear to be an assistant or workman in Mr. Rossetti’s employ) to carry out after his plans, what will be the result? Simply that the society will have gained a pseudo-Rossetti-fresco, at the expense of an undoubtedly genuine Rossetti-fresco, plus 100l. in cash. But for this last step the Committee has a justification, and it must be owned a perfectly ample one. The single picture in question was actually unfinished; they are simply doing their duty in securing its completion. The responsibility of its restoration now lies with Mr. Rossetti, and not with the Fresco Committee.⁹⁴

For Purcell, the burden rested on Rossetti, and the committee’s mission all along should not have been to have the murals restored, writing, “We have not engaged to renovate, but to complete.”⁹⁵ Exactly what angered and offended Rossetti can only be speculated upon, but Purcell’s disparaging comments on the murals’ artistic merits must have been the cause:

Do they merit conservation by their intrinsic value as pictures? Possibly they do not. They reproduce the gravest errors of their school; the drawing is in some cases atrocious, and the colouring for the most part coarse, crude, and harsh. Indeed there is every reason to think that in this respect they have even improved by age: in short, that the fading so much deplored has at least toned down what as a whole must have had a somewhat bizarre and forced effect. At best they claim to be nothing more than rough studies, and as such they pass muster pretty fairly.⁹⁶

Purcell began his polemic by saying that he was not in favor of whitewash, that he was not in the “iconoclastic section of the Fresco Committee.”⁹⁷ But he put forth that the restoration of the murals should be looked at from an artistic point of view, rather than economic. While the above quotation shows that Purcell doubted their artistic merit, he argued that they should be left alone, rather than tampered with: “If they continue to fade, fade they must: better so than be tricked out in a new dress not their own.”⁹⁸ For him, any
restoration would obscure the murals, rather than preserve or bring back their original look. And he cited Ruskin’s argument against the restoration of Venetian Old Master paintings to support his position.\(^99\)

Purcell, singling out Rossetti, proposed that the mural’s “incompleteness stands out distinctly from the others.”\(^100\) In addition to his arguments that restoration would destroy the murals and that Dunn would produce a “pseudo-Rossetti,” he argued that Rossetti himself was no longer the artist he once was: “The Mr. Rossetti of 1871 is in many respects a different man from the Mr. Rossetti of 1858, who undertook these frescoes, and, so far as their unity of interest goes, a less acceptable man for our purpose.”\(^101\) Purcell’s pamphlet, Rossetti’s reaction to it, and the formation (or revival) of another Fresco Committee in 1874 all demonstrate that the issue of the mural’s completion and deteriorated stated was a contentious one, not ever entirely settled.

Rossetti’s blame of the Oxford Union for his unfinished mural in his letters prior to 1869 provided another way of seeing the mural.\(^102\) Rather than interpret the incompleteness as a failure on his part (that he just did not finish a large-scale project), Rossetti highlighted an animosity rooted in aesthetic and artistic differences. The conflict that began with the Union’s hiring of another artist to finish the project was exacerbated by Purcell’s pamphlet, effectively creating an unbridgeable gap between artist and patron. This antagonism between the Union and Rossetti can be compared with the one that spawned the formation of the Brotherhood, which pitted the Royal Academy against a group of young upstarts. Seeing the mural as a thwarted attempt created a scenario wherein Rossetti became a misunderstood genius tangling with Philistine authorities, something that would later enhance rather than damage his reputation. This positioning of
artists against the establishment, which Matthew Plampin termed the “alien faction,” allowed artists to create their self-identity and their reputation, giving them a way to promote themselves and their art.103

“Unsightly Signs of Decay”: Deteriorated States

An obstacle to visibility that Rossetti could not blame on the Union was the murals’ deteriorated state. This condition, perhaps understated by Thursfield, was related in writing to Rossetti in 1869: “You will be sorry to hear that several of the other frescoes are already beginning to show signs of decay: we shall be greatly obliged if you can make any suggestion for their more efficient preservation, for I need hardly say how anxious we are to preserve them.”104 While no primary sources are extant that provide a condition report on the murals, stating exactly how they looked or when they started to deteriorate, these “signs of decay” might have been evident at an early date. William Bell Scott’s 1858 recollection, recorded in 1892, noted: “When I saw them only a few months after they were executed, they were beginning to be unintelligible.”105 Regardless of when the murals started to fade, such deterioration created serious problems of visibility.

Though a committee was formed in 1869, no action was taken regarding the murals’ deterioration. In 1874, “several promoters of the restoration” raised a new effort to preserve the murals.106 This attempt was not unanimous among members, with a faction of the society writing a pamphlet in response titled The Frescoes Again! Reasons for Voting Against the Amendment.107 Union members, however, voted down the motion and formed the Fresco Committee to determine what could be or needed to be done for the murals. The committee brought in Morris to do a “minute and careful examination of the Frescoes,” who concluded that they could be restored, with Burne-Jones offering to
assist. Even with Morris’s optimistic outlook, however, the committee decided to take no action:

> It does not seem likely that much can be done, and the Committee must candidly though regretfully state to the House the conclusion they have reluctantly come to, that the further decay and final extinction of the Frescoes cannot be averted, though they are anxious to take any steps that may seem to be practicable for that purpose.\(^{108}\)

They hired Morris, nevertheless, to redesign the ceiling decoration (fig. 7).\(^{109}\)

The committee’s *Final Report* reiterated the feeling that the murals were a lost cause by stating, “nothing can be done to retard the decay of the Frescoes.”\(^{110}\) The reasons given were that the fault of the deterioration was the building itself, that its thin walls could not keep out the harsh effects of the English climate.\(^{111}\) In other words, if the murals were restored, they would have to be restored again in the future because the decay was intrinsic to the site. One way to deal with problems of visibility concerning deterioration was to try to understand why they were ruined in the first place. These early sources mentioned wall surface and climate rather than inexperience of the artists or wrong medium, something that would be mentioned later on.

Though no action was taken to conserve the murals in either 1869 or 1874, the formation of these committees indicates the desire to see the murals as they were intended to be seen. Their decayed state, especially as they were only a decade old, was not seen as favorable, but as contrary to their contemporaneity. But restoration was not favorable either, even though it would seem to solve the problem of not being able to see them as they were meant to be seen. Though the committee wanted the paintings to be restored, restoration efforts were ultimately determined to be futile. The Oxford Union’s efforts reflect an anxiety to do something with them, but the debate that emerged out of
these efforts cannot be neatly divided into for or against restoration, as the 1871 pamphlet demonstrates.

In spite of their deteriorated state, Oxford guidebooks in the 1870s directed visitors to see the murals: “The rooms comprise a lofty *Debating and Reading Room*, and *Library*, decorated with remarkable paintings illustrative of the exploits of King Arthur and his Knights, chiefly the gratuitous work of amateur artists.” Here, the guidebook author provided a framework with which to view the murals, much as the author of the *Ecclesiologist* review did, as the work of young, nonprofessional artists. In other words, if one were not expecting much, one would not be disappointed. The guidebooks nevertheless recommended that Oxford visitors should see these murals, which reflects an interesting feature of Victorian visual culture—the desire to see in spite of or through obscurity.

Guidebooks also emphasized the subject matter over the artists who made the murals as another way of seeing them. Viewing the murals through the text they represent—the story of King Arthur—provided an imaginative framework that liberated the observer from dwelling on the murals’ physical state. The murals’ subject was part of the medieval revival movement in nineteenth-century British art and architecture, inspired by the earlier Romantic movement. The Oxford Union building, in a neo-Venetian Gothic style, was considered by Rossetti to be not only the perfect setting for mural decoration but also an appropriate vehicle for his medieval theme.

Just knowing that the murals represented the story of King Arthur could have changed the way visitors saw them. Published shortly after the murals were executed, Rev. J. S. Sidebothan’s guidebook gave detailed textual explanations of each mural.
scene. The guide, however, relied more on the literary source text than what was actually depicted in the murals. Rosetti’s mural, for example, drew on the Malory text—Launcelot is forbidden to obtain the Grail because of his affair with Guenevere—but did not depict the scene with literal specificity. Likewise, Sidebothan inserted elements of the narrative that are not present in Rossetti’s depiction. He noted, for example, that Launcelot prayed for a vision of the Holy Grail, when in Rossetti’s mural the knight was already asleep, having a vision, not of the Grail but of Guenevere. For Sidebothan, Guenevere was less an object of Launcelot’s vision and more of a temptress, “offering him earthly pleasures in the shape of fruit.” And the mural’s subject was also less of an accomplished vision of Launcelot than a failed attempt because of “his foul sins.” His description could not help viewers decipher the three faded figures, but could assist in helping them imagine a narrative not necessarily depicted.

All these positions reflect attempts to see the murals. For some, the standard of visibility was just to let them be, for others visibility could only be accomplished by intervention. For some, the restoration equaled whitewash, for others to do nothing meant the same. The seeming paradox here is that, on the one hand, early viewers of these murals wanted visibility: to see the murals in spite of light from the windows, their unfinished nature, and their deteriorated state. On the other hand, they embraced the obscurity, choosing to leave them as is rather than finishing Rossetti’s mural and restoring them all.

For Victorian viewers, according to Flint, states of visibility and invisibility did not have firm boundaries, but often overlapped and intermingled. These two positions reflect the Victorian positivist and spiritualist ways of seeing, but they are not necessarily
antithetical to each other, as these ideas often coexisted and were loaded with ambivalence. It is remarkable, frankly, that the Oxford Union did not whitewash them, that they chose to keep seeing them, even in a deteriorated state, for what they represented: the untested young school of British art. These diverse ways of seeing also suggest that viewing the murals was a practice steeped in discontinuity.

“Like the Margin of a Highly-Illuminated Manuscript”: Reading the Mural

Perhaps the most influential source to model persistence of vision regarding the Oxford mural project was one that did not deal or need to deal with any obstacles to visibility. Seeing the murals when the windows were whitewashed, when the murals were still in progress and not yet ruined, Coventry Patmore, in his review, focused on what could be seen. Even though he did not have to mention problems of visibility, his writing can still be considered a constructed way of seeing because he modeled a way to look at the murals that many took up afterward. Patmore pointed out, for example, specific visual aspects of the mural, one of which was that Rossetti applied his watercolor technique (that of small brushstrokes) and color scheme (bold, vibrant colors) to this large-scale project.

Patmore was a poet, critic, and friend of Rossetti’s, best known then and now for his narrative poem *The Angel in the House* of 1854. Written in 26 December 1857 for *The Saturday Review*, Patmore’s review began by analyzing the building itself, probably because of the recent attention to William Butterfield and Benjamin Woodward’s Oxford New Museum (now Museum of Natural History), begun in 1855. He made a bold claim at the beginning of the review: “Oxford, in addition to certain other and more important steps of a somewhat startling but very commendable character, has recently
made—or rather is at this moment making—some remarkable experiments in architecture and architectural painting.” He then linked Woodward and Butterfield to this project, proposing that their “works [...] cannot fail before long to attract a considerable amount of public and artistic attention.” He defined this new style of architecture as modern and placed the murals, and their new style of painting, on the same level.

These paintings, which are in distemper, not fresco, promise to turn out novelties—and quite successful novelties—in art. [...] The characteristic in which they strike us as differing most remarkably from preceding architectural painting is their entire abandonment of the subdued tone of colour and the simplicity and severity of form hitherto thought essential in such kinds of decoration, and the adoption of a style of colouring so brilliant as to make the walls look like the margin of a highly-illuminated manuscript.

The “kinds of decoration” that Patmore referred to were probably the recently executed frescoes for the new Palace of Westminster, the subject of which was also Arthurian (fig. 8). Patmore alluded to these earlier murals and their “subdued tone of colour and the simplicity and severity of form” to highlight Rossetti’s departure in his own “style of colouring so brilliant,” which would have positioned Rossetti as more daring, experimental, and modern. In this claim, Patmore placed the Oxford murals above the Westminster frescoes and attributed this accomplishment to Rossetti, “the most startlingly original living.” In the following passage, Patmore not only discussed technique and color but also attributed the concept to Rossetti:

The eye, even when not directed to any of the pictures, is thus pleased with a voluptuous radiance of variegated tints, instead of being made dimly and unsatisfactorily conscious of something or other disturbing the uniformity of the wall-surfaces. Those of our readers who have seen any of Mr. Rossetti’s drawings in water-colours will comprehend that this must be the effect of a vast band of wall covered with paintings as nearly as possible in that style of colouring.
Not only did he liken the large-scale mural to a blown-up version of Rossetti’s watercolors, he suggested its effect as that of pleasing the eye. This emphasis on the senses, which he later described as “a steam of rich, distilled perfumes’ [which] affects the eye much as one of Mendelssohn’s most unwordable ‘Lieder ohn Wörter’ impresses the ear,” modeled a way for Victorian viewers to appreciate this new style. Patmore also invoked Ruskin’s placement of Rossetti as “the only modern rival of Turner as a colourist.”

Though by far the most influential writing about the mural project, Patmore’s was not the only eyewitness account of the murals’ original appearance. Included as a footnote in painter William Bell Scott’s 1892 autobiography, an excerpt from the artist’s 1858 journal recorded his first impressions of the murals. Though he later recalled that they were deteriorated when he saw them, Scott made no mention of their decay in this passage. Instead he praised their color and execution:

They are poems more than pictures—being large illuminations and treated in a mediæval manner [...] [T]he colour is all positive, like mediæval work, the execution stippling like a miniature. The conception of the whole artistically, the method of working and the character of colour and design are undoubtedly all due to Rossetti; indeed the work is properly his work [...].

In his likening of their appearance to medieval illuminations and crediting of the color and design to Rossetti, Scott’s assessment is similar to Patmore’s review.

Pauline Trevelyan also wrote down her thoughts about the murals in a letter to Scott, urging him to visit them in person. Her letter of 12 November 1857 predated both Patmore’s review and Scott’s journal entry. In her listing of the works and subject matter, she offered two key observations that would be important later on. First, she wrote of her hope that they would last, as they were only painted on a “very thin coat of whitish
plaster (hardly more than whitewash) over the rough brick & mortar wall.” Secondly, she discussed how Rossetti’s work looked: “Rossettis [sic] is a most glorious piece of color, & very beautiful besides,” adding later that, “the color is like flowers or fresh fruit with the bloom on.”\textsuperscript{132} In this letter, Trevelyan both mentioned a potential obstacle to vision and offered a way to see Rossetti’s mural in spite of any obscurity.

These techniques of seeing the murals, from regarding them as works by young, upstart artists to viewing them through the text they represented, laid the groundwork for later writers, who used this mural project as a way to buttress Rossetti’s reputation. These ways of seeing did not come about naturally but were culturally constructed reactions to what should have been highly visible works of art. The obstacles to viewing the murals were many, especially in Rossetti’s case, where his painting was not only obscured by the light from the windows and physical deterioration but was also an incomplete work of art. The reactions to these problems of visibility are not homogeneous or easily categorized but have in common a persistence of vision. This persistence, in a sense, reflects that of the subject of Rossetti’s mural: though Launcelot is denied the sight of the Holy Grail, he sees an apparition of Guenevere. Like Launcelot’s visions, the way people saw Rossetti’s mural could be viewed as both spiritual (seeing with the inner eye, or imagination) and positivistic (seeing materially, in a way, a “failed” vision because it does not show what was intended to be seen).
CHAPTER 3 “Dim Ghosts Linger”: The Persistence of Vision after Rossetti’s Death

Despite its many obstacles to visibility, Rossetti’s Oxford mural was part of a project to strengthen the artist’s reputation after his death in 1882. At that point, it is not clear how many of his followers would even have been aware of the mural’s existence or would have known what it looked like, let alone its problems of visibility. Nevertheless, his early biographers used the mural, sometimes mentioning the obstacles to vision, sometimes ignoring them, to craft an artistic identity for Rossetti. This identity revolved around two key, often overlapping, aspects of Rossetti’s reputation: his elusive, mysterious status as a painter and his less obscure but yet still reclusive status as a poet. The fusion of these two artistic personalities created a way for writers to craft an image of Rossetti that transgressed the boundaries of traditional Victorian art.

Given that the Oxford mural project became critical to Rossetti’s artistic reputation, how did writers deal with the problems of visibility, if at all? For many writers, the mural’s fugitive and fading glory did not hinder but rather enhanced his reputation as an enigmatic, obscure artist. The mural had problems of visibility not only for those wanting to see it in person, but also for those who wanted to see it in reproduction. Aside from a contemporary engraving that reproduced the interior of the Oxford Union (fig. 9), in which the murals are hard to read, Rossetti’s mural was not reproduced until almost fifty years after it was executed. But just as the mural’s ruined state did not hurt Rossetti’s reputation, the scarcity of reproductions of his works added to his mystique.

“Ghostly Frescoes”: Seeing the Artist’s Intention in Text and Image
One way of seeing Rossetti’s mural was to view it as ghostly remnant of what the artist intended. In an 1882 memorial article about the artist, Edmund Gosse took the ruined state of the murals into account, noting that they were “strange, shadowy frescoes, melting into nothingness.” But he modeled a way to see them even in this state: “It is impossible, however, to ascend the gallery of the Oxford Union and examine the ghostly frescoes that are fading there, without great interest and even emotion.” This interest and emotion, according to Gosse, were generated by Rossetti’s involvement in the project. Esther Wood (1894) also picked up the theme of the murals as ghosts:

The hapless frescoes are now hardly recognizable upon the Oxford walls, but their dim ghosts linger, like the kindly witnesses of days fruitful, at least, in loves and friendships of sacred import on the lives of the young sojourners in that “home of lost causes, and forsaken beliefs, and unpopular names, and impossible loyalties,” as Matthew Arnold called it.

Even in her description of the subject matter, she mentioned that Guenevere “haunts” Launcelot with her “haunting, passionate face.” In 1899, John William Mackail, son-in-law of Morris, also likened the murals to apparitions: “The story of these paintings, of which the mouldering and undecipherable remains still glimmer like faded ghosts on the walls of the Union Library, is one of work hastily undertaken, executed under impossible conditions, and finally abandoned after time and labour had been spent on it quite disproportionate to the original design.”

Ghost sightings in the Victorian period, as Flint argued, were often brought about by the power of suggestion that a place was haunted. What distinguished the supernatural sighting from a mere hallucination was the level of “felt objectivity” on the part of the viewer. By likening the murals to ghosts, these writers suggested the independent existence of this particular vision and prepared the viewer to expect a less subjective
visual experience. Rather than see them as a deteriorated artistic project, in other words, they could be seen as ghostly remnants of the past, something that removed the stigma of failure.

Seeing the murals as apparitions also carried within it a Romantic, otherworldly connotation that transmuted the murals from failed paintings into something supernatural. In other words, what the viewer was looking at was not Rossetti’s unfinished, decayed mural, but rather the phantasm of the mural he meant to execute. These ghosts were friendly, meant to conjure memory but not to frighten or harm. Using this terminology to describe the murals’ deteriorated state also distanced them in time from the immediate present, thus creating a way to see them as ruins from another era. This supernatural seeing demanded both belief and imagination but did not require viewing Rossetti’s mural in person.

The words describing the mural’s former glory provide a virtual stand-in, surpassing the mural’s condition. In fact, most writers acknowledged problems of visibility but then used highly descriptive words to visualize Rossetti’s mural in a positive way. This type of writing represents a deliberate spirit summoning versus just leaving the murals as “faded ghosts.” Calling up aspects of the mural that were no longer apparent, William Sharp described the mural’s color in 1882: “The general effect of glowing colours may be imagined, rich blues, purples, greens, and reds being predominant […]”139 This description is reminiscent of Patmore’s review, which he quoted but did not name the author.

Acknowledging both the mural’s deteriorated state and invoking its former glory required these writers to creatively see Rossetti’s work as simultaneously a failure and a
triumph. Regarding Patmore’s review, Sharp wrote the following: “But the writer’s confident anticipations as to their lasting success as regards colour-endurance were not well founded, for in a comparatively short period the colours began to lose their brilliancy and later to fade still more decisively.” He supported this statement with his eye-witness testimony (in 1882) that the murals were “virtually destroyed,—here and there indeed a fine piece of colour still remained, but there was little coherency of form and a general decay in tone.” Sharp’s ambivalence reflects his desire to both show Rossetti in the best possible light as the leader of the new movement and to be candid about the state of the murals. This ambivalence is present in other narratives about the murals. In Scott’s 1892 account, for example, he wrote that the project “was simply the most unmitigated fiasco that ever was made by a parcel of men of genius.” But he then added: “Still the remains are curiously interesting, and ought to be preserved.”

Mackail in his 1899 biography of Morris noted Scott’s 1858 view of the murals but also mentioned that “they still glimmer faintly in their places, blackened, faded, and peeled, the light here and there falling on some still recognizable feature […].” But then quickly he added Patmore’s words that the murals were “so brilliant as to make the walls look like the margin of an illuminated manuscript,” noting that his review was “the only record of their first fugitive and fairylike beauty.” By using Patmore’s review, Mackail evoked the murals’ past glory, which for him, could still be detected. The murals’ one-time radiance recalled through Patmore’s words gave the viewer a way to see the murals as they were meant to be seen rather than as tragic failures.

Mackail also noted that “even in its unfinished condition [Rossetti’s mural] was by far the finest and most masterly of the series.” He honed in on Rossetti’s mural by
suggesting that other contemporary works by the artist should be considered to understand the original appearance of the mural. Though it is unlikely that his readers would be familiar with a work in a private collection, he nonetheless pointed them to the 1864 watercolor How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors and Sir Percival Were Fed with the Sanc Grael; but Sir Percival’s Sister Died by the Way (see fig. 10; Tate, formerly Heaton collection) to get “a better idea […] of the method used in the Union paintings, and also of the extraordinary brilliance of the colouring, nearly all in radiant greens and reds and blues.”

This substitution technique, of referring to Rossetti’s small-scale watercolors to provide a mental picture of the mural’s vibrant color, was originally used by Patmore.

Seeing the mural through the lens of the artist’s imagined intention was one way to sidestep issues of visibility. This constructed vision did not solve the problems of obscurity but recognized them, treating the mural like a poetic ruin of Rossetti’s intent. This method also played off another aspect of visibility, that of the inner eye, because it demanded that one use his or her imagination. By suggesting ways of seeing the mural through the way others saw it, subjectivity was given credibility that could not be disputed. In acknowledging the deteriorated and faded state of the mural and simultaneously invoking its former brilliance and magnificence from eyewitness accounts, these writers aimed to establish a more objective “view” of Rossetti’s contribution.

Along with Rossetti’s intent, the elusiveness of the mural would have been seen against the obscurity of his works in general. Though he began exhibiting works in 1849, Rossetti early on cultivated the reputation that he showed his works to only a select few. In Patmore’s review, he mentioned this notoriety: “Those who have not had that pleasure
[of seeing his watercolors]—and Mr. Rossetti’s odd crotchet of refusing to exhibit has made these the majority—must be content with a less perfect idea.”¹⁴⁷ This reputation for not exhibiting works extended to the Continent. In the 1882 publication *La Peinture Anglaise*, Ernest Chesneau noted that Rossetti never sought out publicity, something that the author attributed to either austerity or supreme skill. He further wrote that after the Russell Place exhibition in 1857, “The public never had an occasion to see his paintings.”¹⁴⁸ Even though Rossetti did exhibit works after the Russell Place exhibition, he chose venues that were in semi-public settings (see Table 2). Rossetti’s notoriety, however, was not hampered by his refusal to exhibit but was instead enhanced by it.

Rossetti’s reluctance to exhibit his works in his early period has recently been examined by Colin Cruise, who has pointed out that F. G. Stephens’s claim that “the outside world saw no more of Rossetti as a painter” after *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1849) and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (1850) was “extreme and unsubstantiated.”¹⁴⁹ Cruise argued that this perception was created more by where Rossetti exhibited, rather than by his refusal to exhibit at all. At least in his early period in the 1850s, Rossetti exhibited works—and the semi-public Oxford mural should be included in this group—even though, as Cruise noted, this exposure “was always negotiated, even controlled, by the artist himself.”¹⁵⁰ Other recent scholars have pointed out that his unusual exhibition practices, combined with the Romantic myth of the reclusive artist, actually helped bolster Rossetti’s reputation as a genius.¹⁵¹

Whether or not Rossetti’s paintings were seen in public, it is certain that reproduction of his works were very rare during his life.¹⁵² This lack of reproduction supported the idea that his art was elusive, mysterious, and hardly known. Even after he
died, his works were not completely “illustrated” until 1899 in H. C. Marillier’s *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, An Illustrated Memorial of His Art and Life*. This image of scarcity enhanced “an illusion of discovery” regarding Rossetti, which Matthew Plampin argued was used by the artist as a “marketing strategy” during his lifetime.\(^{153}\) After his death, reproductions increased, but it was not until 1906 that a reproduction of the Oxford mural was published. Before that, if a reproduction was included to illustrate the mural project it was usually a sketch or related drawing. In F. G. Stephens’s *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (1894), for example, the author discussed the purpose of reproducing sketches and related works (figs. 11–13):

> The efforts of six months were almost ruined before that period was complete. At the present time the decorations are not legible. Rossetti’s picture, which was never finished, is not the most dilapidated of the whole. […] In the sketches here reproduced the reader has designs for parts of this unfortunate picture, the splendour of which, while it lasted, was at once fine and intense.\(^{154}\)

In printing images associated with the mural, a different way of seeing the mural was presented. In addition to viewing the mural through the words of Patmore or Scott, sketches and designs provided further visual aid by suggesting what Rossetti intended. The absent work of art—the mural—then became less important materially because the idea of it was manifested imaginatively through its counterparts.

Marillier’s 1899 text reproduced the most images associated with the mural and may have created a good idea about what the mural looked like. The first work (fig. 14), though, was not by Rossetti.\(^{155}\) Marillier wrote that even though the reproduced image was a copy after Rossetti’s mural by his assistant, it could be “taken as fairly accurate.”\(^{156}\) Dunn’s version, however, depicted the mural as finally finished, by adding angels on the lower left and trees in the upper right. In addition, the overall look of the reproduction
lacks the skill seen in other works by Rossetti. It would seem that by reproducing this inferior work, Marillier would have done more to damage Rossetti’s reputation than to bolster it, something that might have been alleviated by noting that it was a copy.

On the next page, the pen and ink drawing of Sir Galahad receiving the Holy Grail was reproduced also as a “design for Union” (fig. 15). This reproduction represented much more accurately Rossetti’s style and drawing ability of the late 1850s. The other drawings reproduced included a sketch for the Sanc Grael, two studies for Queen Guenevere (one with Elizabeth Siddal as the model, the other with Jane Burden; fig. 16), a drawing of what could have been another design for an unexecuted mural, and a portrait of Swinburne (fig. 17). By 1906, Marillier’s book was vastly reduced, along with its reproductions, going from 279 pages to 112. The only image that related to the Oxford mural that was retained in the 1904 edition was the copy by Dunn. By substituting sketches for the mural, Stephens and Marillier highlighted Rossetti’s creative process and artistic intentions, thus overshadowing any problems of visibility. The presence of the sketches thus obscured the reasons the original mural was not reproduced, even when the text clearly stated why this was so. In this sense, the reproductions created their own narrative by privileging creation over deterioration, intention over reception.

The extant sketches and watercolors related to Rossetti’s mural supported the ghostly viewing, or seeing the artist’s intention, because they had fewer problems of visibility (figs. 18–26). One watercolor study, now in the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, in Oxford, was used by Rosalie Mander in 1984 as a comparison for Rossetti’s mural (fig. 27). This study may be the one referred to by Marillier (1899), when he wrote: “Mr. Dunn made a sketch of the Launcelot design in water-colours,
which I would gladly have reproduced here if I had succeeded in tracing it.”162 The Ashmolean work contains the blank, unfinished areas present in the mural and does not have the same vibrant colors as Rossetti’s other contemporary watercolors, supporting the idea that his assistant executed it at a later date.163 Even though, to my knowledge, this sketch was not reproduced until later in the twentieth century, it still presents a way to “see” the mural, preserving a reproduction of it in another medium.

The “Poetic Painter” of the Oxford Mural

The texts and reproductions that invoked seeing did not hinder but actually helped Rossetti’s reputation, especially his status as a poet and painter. In biographies and articles published the year of Rossetti’s death, the artist was memorialized as a “poetic painter” and “the center and sun of a galaxy of talent in poetry and painting.”164 The appearance of his Poems in 1870 had solidified his reputation as poet, but this aspect of his creative output was seen against the relative obscurity of his visual works. Merging these identities at Oxford was an important endeavor because it transmuted an artistic project into one that encompassed both visual and literary arts.

After his death, two memorial exhibitions at the Royal Academy and at the Fine Arts Club brought several of these obscure works to light, many for the first time.165 In 1902, Ford Madox Ford dated these exhibitions as the beginning of Rossetti’s reputation: “[Rossetti’s] death, as far as the public is concerned, was only his birth as an artist.”166 His posthumous placement in the Royal Academy exhibition effectively placed him on the same level as the Old Masters.167 In addition to these exhibitions, several books and articles were published about Rossetti’s life and art, all of which contributed to what one writer later called Rossetti’s “hagiography.”168
Set against the backdrop of Rossetti’s elusive and obscure paintings, his published volume of poetry would seem to be the most “visible” aspect of his creative output because it went through several editions and even sold out at one point.\(^{169}\) This visibility however, appeared toward the end of Rossetti’s career, even though he had poetic ambitions early on. While his first poem was seen about the same time as his first paintings were, with “The Blessed Damozel” printed in 1850 in *The Germ*, an edition of his works was not published until twenty years later in 1870. By that time, his paintings were said to be lesser known. By 1883, Walter Pater noted that he had “a long-standing curiosity” about both Rossetti’s paintings and poems.\(^{170}\)

Rossetti also self-identified more as a poet, although he wanted to be known as a master of both arts: “My own belief is that I am a poet (within the limit of my powers) primarily, and that it is my poetic tendencies that chiefly give value to my pictures: only painting being—what poetry is not—a livelihood—I have put my poetry chiefly in that form.”\(^{171}\) As in the Oxford mural, he often changed the narrative of works that illustrated poetry or prose as a way to paint his poetic expression. For an illustration for the *Moxon Tennyson* (1857), Rossetti creatively interpreted the subject in such a way as to upset the author.\(^{172}\) To be aligned with a famous poet, he even changed the order of his given name from Gabriel Charles Dante to Dante Gabriel and also created several written and visual works about Dante’s life and output.\(^{173}\)

Early writings about Rossetti also aimed to show him as a master of two arts, often with the emphasis on poetry. The biggest controversy in his artistic career, in fact, had more to do with his poetry than with his paintings. Rossetti’s first volume of poetry was published in 1870 to positive reviews. According to Jan Marsh, the success of this
volume boosted his confidence, and he became more determined than ever to have a
career as poet.\textsuperscript{174} This confidence was shaken, however, by the 1871 review “The Fleshly
School of Poetry: Mr D. G. Rossetti,” written by Robert Buchanan under the \textit{nom de plume} Thomas Maitland. This review attacked not only Rossetti’s poetry but his overall
moral character: “The fleshly gentlemen have bound themselves by solemn league and
covenant to extol fleshliness as the distinct and supreme end of poetic and pictorial
art.”\textsuperscript{175} Buchanan did not stop at Rossetti’s poetry but also criticized his art, noting they
both shared “the same morbid deviation from healthy forms of life, the same sense of
weary, wasting, yet exquisite sensuality.”\textsuperscript{176}

Critics linked Rossetti’s poetic identity to Oxford by citing his involvement with
\textit{The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine}, the so-called new \textit{Germ}. William Michael
remarked that Rossetti called the magazine “‘The Oxford and Cambridge \textit{Germ},’ as
meaning that it held some affinity with the old \textit{Germ} magazine of 1850.”\textsuperscript{177} According to
Canon Dixon, one of the founders of the publication, Rossetti’s poetry “exhibits in
flawless perfection the gift that he had above all other writers, absolute beauty and pure
action.”\textsuperscript{178} Dixon’s recollections, published in an 1882 biography by T. Hall Caine, were
cited to discuss Rossetti’s Oxford phase, but the mural project itself was only mentioned
casually, with no mention of any issues of visibility.

Caine did mention, however, that Rossetti met Swinburne, something that would
be noted again and again by others as a way to show the crucial generative moment of the
poetic movement that would bear both Rossetti’s and Swinburne’s names.\textsuperscript{179} For
Rossetti’s brother William Michael, in 1895, this meeting of Swinburne had greater
significance than the mural itself: “So my brother’s sojourn in Oxford had at least one
good result—that of bringing him into personal contact, and soon into very intimate
friendship, with the greatest figure in our poetical literature since the advent of Tennyson
and of Browning." Joseph Knight, in 1887, called the mural project an “abortive
scheme” yet noted it had a powerful influence as “art and literature are likely to look back
to these Oxford days as marking an epoch.” These writers emphasized Oxford as the
birthplace of a poetic movement but also cited it as the beginning of a new art movement.

Rossetti’s biographers brought in the artistic aspect when they mentioned two
other names in conjunction with Swinburne: William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones.
With the inclusion of these two men, Rossetti’s identities as artist and poet were brought
together and situated firmly in Oxford. Both Burne-Jones and Morris, as undergraduates
of the university, had a history at Oxford that predated the mural project, but their
“conversion” from an ecclesiastical career to an artistic one was cited by most as a result
of Rossetti’s influence. For Rossetti’s biographers, Oxford was the best of both poetic
and painterly worlds, because they could position him in one place at the beginning of the
Aesthetic Movement that encompassed both arts. Rossetti was thus made a master of both
poetry and painting and became crucial to both.

The “Jovial Campaign”

Writers focusing on the relational aspect of the mural project created another way
to sidestep issues of visibility altogether, with visual obstacles becoming less
cumbersome and more like unfortunate circumstances told anecdotally. In almost all
writings published soon after his death, when the Oxford mural was mentioned, it was
discussed in the context of the relationships formed there. William Sharp (1882), for
example, presented it as the beginning of an artistic fellowship: “There was a remarkable
‘drawing together’ of sympathetic minds in this famous undertaking […].” Rossetti’s brother, William Michael, almost ignored the problems of visibility in his 1889 publication, focusing instead on the artist’s relationships with Burne-Jones, Morris, Swinburne, Ruskin, and Woodward. His only mention of the deteriorated state was resolved to one sentence: “The works were executed, I understood, in a sort of watercolour distemper, and were from the beginning predestined, by Fate and Climate, to ruin.” In an 1895 publication, he also skirted the issue, stating, “Some good work was done in the room, and some other work which, without being exactly good, was at least interesting and noticeable; but the whole affair ended in material failure.”

One relationship that writers frequently mentioned was the one formed with Jane Burden. The story of her “discovery” by Rossetti at a theatre in Oxford as an “incident of importance” has been frequently told and has reached the level of myth. One recent scholar termed this meeting “the crucial result” of the Oxford project for Morris because Jane was to become his wife. In the Oxford mural, Guenevere’s face was said to be modeled after Jane, who would later become Rossetti’s lover. More importantly for art history, Jane became his model, sitting for several works, and became known as the “type” of woman that Rossetti painted. In Elisabeth Luther Cary’s 1900 biography of Rossetti, she highlighted this “finding” as one of the “certain results of importance” that took place at Oxford: “[H]e gained a model whose curious type of beauty influenced for better or for worse a large proportion of his subsequent painting.” Earlier in 1895, William Michael went even further by stating: “If Rossetti had done nothing else in painting (and some people seem to suppose, most erroneously, that he did little else) except the ideal, and also very real, transcription of this unique type of female beauty, he
might still, on that ground alone, survive in the chronicles of the art.” Reproductions of sketches of Jane in conjunction with texts on the mural project visually supported this association (e.g., fig. 16).

Aside from Jane Burden, the relationship narrative focused on the all-male group of young artists and their friends. Not all accounts mentioned all the artists involved, selectively editing the narrative to focus on Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and Morris, though four other artists were present. This editing of the group—leaving out those who did not have the same artistic legacy as Swinburne, Morris, and Burne-Jones did—supported the use of the mural as a way to cite Oxford as the birthplace for the movement. Because the others did not “fit” into the movement, they did not belong in the narrative.

In these narratives that focused on relationships, the murals were seen as a backdrop for the more important male bonding ritual. The emphasis when discussing this group in Oxford was their youthfulness, exuberance, and bohemian leanings. William Michael, for example, wrote in 1895: “They worked with reckless self-confidence, and one might almost say upon a mere system of ‘happy-go-lucky.’” This group dynamic was underscored in the Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones (1904), written by Georgiana Burne-Jones. Using quotations from those involved, she wrote the account of the making of the murals, relying heavily on the social aspects of this endeavor. She mentioned where they lodged in Oxford (first 87 High Street, then George Street), recounted working methods, and described how the group got on together. “‘What fun we had in that Union! What jokes! What roars of laughter!’” was one of the quotations she included from Valentine Prinsep, a painter of one of the murals, to highlight the energetic youthfulness and camaraderie of the group. This atmosphere was an “improvised
Bohemia,”¹⁹³ according to her husband Edward, one that Georgiana characterized as shocking to the Oxford establishment.

A 1908 recollection from William Tuckwell, who was not directly involved in the project, highlighted the youthfulness and energy of the group:

A merry, rollicking set they were: I was working daily in the Library, which at that time opened into the gallery of the new room, and heard their laughter and songs and jokes and the volleys of their soda-water corks; for this innutrient fluid was furnished to them without stint at the Society’s expense, and the bill from the Star Hotel close by amazed the treasurer.¹⁹⁴

This youthfulness also extended to the condition of the murals’ visual obscurity. An oft-repeated reason given for the murals’ decayed state was that the artists involved did not know the proper technique. For example, Gosse wrote in 1882: “These youths had enjoyed no practical training in that particularly artificial branch of art, mural painting […]. The result has been that their interesting boyish efforts are now decayed beyond any chance of restoration.”¹⁹⁵ His characterization of the artists as young and boyish—though Gosse acknowledged that Rossetti should have known better—made the deteriorated murals reflect artistic ambition rather than failure.

Depicting the Oxford mural group as unconventional and bohemian also created a way to interpret the murals as an artistic experiment. Georgiana Burne-Jones mentioned that invitations to dinner by members of Oxford society unhappily drew them out of their artistic sanctuary at George Street, “where they could smoke, talk altogether or not at all, read aloud or play whist, just as they chose.”¹⁹⁶ Their bohemian character, as Swinburne mentioned in an 1858 letter, extended to their ways of thinking:

Jones and I had a great talk. Stanhope and Swan attacked, and we defended, our idea of Heaven, viz. a rose-garden full of stunners. Atrocities of an appalling nature were uttered on the other side. We became so fierce that two respectable members of the University—entering to see the pictures—stood mute and looked
at us. We spoke just then of kisses in Paradise, and expounded our ideas on the celestial development of that necessity of life; and after listening five minutes to our language, they literally fled from the room!  

Oxford, in this sense, became the artistic retreat and Petri dish for a new artistic movement.

When Prinsep added his own contribution to this narrative in 1904, titled “A Chapter from a Painter’s Reminiscence: The Oxford Circle: Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and William Morris,” he further emphasized the relationship aspect of the mural project. Prinsep recounted his Oxford experience, embellishing his narrative by quoting whole passages of conversation between him and the others.

I can hear Rossetti from his sofa interrupting us, and saying: “It’s all very well talking, but if I could paint like—” mentioning a painter, who was then the most popular artist of the day, “why, by Jove, I should do it.” I can see Morris stop aghast in his stumping backwards and forwards, as was his wont, and Ned look up from his drawing, and crying a pained, “Oh, Gabriel,” and then bursting forth in a roar of laughter at the idea of “our Gabriel” being anything but what he was. Then Morris recovers himself and chuckles, “What a lark!”

In this passage, Prinsep named the three key players of the Oxford circle, Gabriel (Rossetti), Ned (Edward Burne-Jones), and Morris (William), and gave the reader a glimpse into their artistic group. It is interesting that he placed the camaraderie above any artistic output. For Prinsep, this group dynamic was as much a part of the art making as the work itself: “What we did had a certain ‘cachet’ which came from our being all full of the same feeling and labouring under the same enthusiasms.”

As a constructed way of viewing Rossetti’s mural, seeing it through the relationships formed in Oxford was a way to make the problems of visibility no longer problematic. With the focus on the players (in itself selectively edited to focus on
Rossetti, Morris, and Burne-Jones) rather than trying to see the mural as it once was, as it was meant to be, or even as it is, the mural’s problems of obscurity became less relevant. The group’s status as bohemian, energetic, and youthful would also negate any visual faults of the murals, by highlighting creative ambition. The mural project thus came to represent an important artistic experiment rather than failure.

**“Guide and Inspirer”: Rossetti as Leader and Genius**

In the narratives that focused on the relationships formed at Oxford, writers often underlined Rossetti as the most bohemian and unconventional artist of them all. Throughout *Memorials*, for example, Georgiana Burne-Jones depicted the character of Rossetti with “melancholy eyes,” wearing a paint-smeared “plum-coloured frockcoat.” She also underscored Rossetti’s love for the wombat: “‘a delightful creature—the most comical little beast,’” the image of which was sketched on the whitewashed windows while the artists were working. Next to this passage, Burne-Jones included a drawing by her husband of a wombat running in the Egyptian desert as a type of alter ego for Rossetti (fig. 28).

The fact that these young artists were following the creative energy of Rossetti was often highlighted. Burne-Jones quoted the following from her husband’s notes:

> “The walls were not quite flat and had a ridge in them over which we had to train a face, if a face happened to come there; but we began with enthusiasm, and repented, if we repented, afterwards. At any rate we had no misgivings, and when Gabriel willed a thing it had to be done.”

In this passage, earlier writings that characterized the murals as a youthful enterprise, underlining their ambition and inexperience are echoed, with the emphasis on Rossetti as the leader. Prinsep also noted Rossetti’s creative, uncontainable energy, that he “never
saw [Rossetti] do but one half-hour’s work at his picture.” In this view, it was Rossetti’s uncontainable energy and genius that kept him from finishing his mural. In other words, this aspect of his character was not a drawback but intrinsic to his creative nature, which also inspired others.

Georgiana Burne-Jones placed Rossetti as the crucial participant in the “Oxford companionship” as when he left, it dissolved. Burne-Jones downplayed her husband’s involvement, focusing more on Rossetti and his contribution: “The picture was never completed, but the part he did finish Edward always thought represented the highest character of Rossetti’s work.” In the next paragraph, Georgiana provided Rossetti with an excuse for not finishing the mural, claiming that he “was also much distracted in mind owing to the illness of Miss Siddal,” yet continued “but whilst he remained in Oxford he was the leader and inspirer of all company.” She further added the following quotation from Prinsep: “Rossetti was the planet round which we revolved,’ says Mr. Prinsep; ‘[…] Wombats were the most delightful of God’s creatures. Medievalism was our beau idéal and we sank our own individuality in the strong personality of our adored Gabriel.’

Rossetti’s strong presence in Prinsep’s recollections extended to the only illustration that appears in his article, a self-portrait executed in 1870 (fig. 29). In these works, Prinsep and Burne-Jones echoed earlier writings that placed Rossetti as the leader of the Oxford circle. As with the relational aspect of the mural project, positioning Rossetti as the leader became a way to “see” the mural as a work of “genius.”

Writing about Rossetti as a genius and leader of a new artistic movement both conformed and departed from traditional Victorian artists’ biographies. As Codell proposed in her recent work on biographical narratives, the trend was to create images of
professional, successful artists who were “representative of English cultural domination and superiority” rather than portraits of “agonized geniuses.”\textsuperscript{207} By placing Rossetti as a leader of “an experiment exerting a subsequent wide influence of English art” and calling him “one of the most splendid geniuses of which the English nations can boast,” biographers, such as Sharp, conformed to the nationalistic model.\textsuperscript{208} Using the mural project as a way to buttress these claims, however, seems unusual as its “failure” departed from the image of the successful, professional artist.

A clue to this departure and why the mural project could be used to support the genius claim was found in the subject himself. Codell noted that Rossetti was a “troubling figure” for biographers because of his unconventional life (i.e., money problems, frequent sexual relationships).\textsuperscript{209} As he did not fit neatly into the model of the Victorian gentleman artist, he could be dealt with in a special way. Codell posited that Sharp’s 1882 biography provided a solution to this problem and served as the model for later writers, as he sidestepped Rossetti’s personal life and focused instead on his art and status as a genius, even going so far as comparing his talent to Leonardo da Vinci.\textsuperscript{210} In a sense, Sharp also supplied a way for subsequent writers to deal with the issues of visibility, by situating the mural project as evidence of Rossetti’s genius, in spite of how they turned out:

In this undertaking, as wherever else he came into union with sympathetic workers, he took by right of strongest gift the place of guide and inspirer, the vigorously magnetic personality of the man being in itself almost sufficient to account for this,—that irresistible magnetism which may be defined as bodily genius.\textsuperscript{211}
Thus even though the mural was an artistic failure in terms of visibility, this did not affect Rossetti’s legacy in the hands of his biographers, with the mural project becoming the expression of his genius and role as leader of a new movement.

The positioning of Rossetti as a leader in Oxford was also important because it distanced him from the earlier formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, effectively eclipsing and surpassing what came before. In “The Aesthetes, the Story of a Nineteenth Century Cult” (1895), for example, Thomas F. Plowman named Rossetti as the key component of Aestheticism: “They fell under the influence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was the leading spirit of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, and whose presence on the scene supplies a connecting-link between the new movement and its predecessor.”

Mary Robinson wrote, in an 1882 article in Harper’s Magazine: “The four names—Rossetti, Swinburne, Morris, Burne-Jones—represent the latter and more important phase of pre-Raphaelitism.” William Michael commented in 1895 that Rossetti “was now in the position of what the French term a Chef d’Ecole. He had not only borne a leading part in founding and guiding the Preraphaelite movement, but he had formed a totally different group of believing admirers in the very diverse centre of Oxford University.”

William Michael also contextualized all of his brother’s work (mostly watercolors) in this period as the beginning of this new movement: “They may be referred to that phase of Rossetti’s painting which more especially fostered his connexion with certain young men—now of world-wide fame—at Oxford University, and which led to his own pictorial experiments at Oxford.” Others adopted this positioning, including Marillier in 1899, who not only gave leadership to Rossetti of the two movements but also said the two were inextricably linked:
The second of these “Brotherhoods” — the word was actually adopted for a time — had its origin at Exeter College, Oxford, in the personalities of William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, and resolved itself at first, like its forerunner, into a “crusade and holy warfare against the age,” with a much wider scope of conflict and with an added religious tinge which was hardly visible, though doubtless present, in the other.216

Placing Rossetti as the link between these two movements secured and strengthened his place in the narrative of the history of English art, and the Oxford mural project was the linchpin.

Rossetti’s reputation in the first decade of the twentieth century is reflected in the 1906 Daily Mail article that remarked the following on the mural project: “Rossetti’s visit to Oxford was perhaps the most significant art-departure ever made from Paddington Station. What would English painting and poetry have been without that pregnant meeting between him and Mr. Swinburne in the very room where we mourn those ruined paintings?”217 Edwin Becker has recently noted that by the end of the nineteenth century, Rossetti’s myth was known by artists on the Continent, who “fell under Rossetti’s spell” through both the writings by his proponents and the works of his followers, such as Burne-Jones.218 That Rossetti’s works were hard to see, both in person and in reproduction, only enhanced his position and made him more alluring and mysterious.

Recent scholars have questioned the positioning of Rossetti as leader of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, considering it part of the reputation building after his death by biographers and, in particular, by his brother William Michael, also a member of the Brotherhood.219 Fellow Brotherhood member William Holman Hunt, in particular, disputed Rossetti’s placement as the leader.220 Perhaps it was this positioning of Rossetti that prompted Hunt to agree to write the essay Oxford Union Society: The Story of the
Painting of the Pictures on the Walls and the Decorations on the Ceiling of the Old Debating Hall (now the Library) in the Years 1857–8–9. Published shortly after his 1905 Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the publication on the murals placed the author, by proxy, in the second movement. He even mentioned at the end of his essay that he had been “expected” to participate in the mural project but was pleased to at least be able to write about it.²²¹ In his earlier work, he wrote the following about the murals:

Some of those connected with the Council of the Union, I heard, saw little to be grateful for in the generosity of the young decorators, and expressed themselves discourteously; perhaps it was this, coming to Rossetti’s ears, that disenchanted him with his design, for he left it abruptly half-finished and returned to town, refusing all allurements of Ruskin and others to carry it further. Without previous experience of wall-painting, and disregarding the character of the pigments, the work of the group was doomed to change and perish speedily, and nothing of it now remains.²²²

It has been pointed out by Laura Marcus that Hunt’s agenda in the 1905 publication was a planned effort “to claim authority over definitions and histories.”²²³ As far as I know, no one has noted that in this 1906 publication on the Oxford murals Hunt also situated himself in importance and proximity to the second movement by having the last word on the murals and noting the expectation of his participation.

Hunt’s essay photographically reproduced in a limited edition, for the first time, all the murals.²²⁴ The impetus for this publication, given in the introduction by C. J. Holmes, was the hope that photography could be used to aid preservation attempts. He wrote that by that time the murals were “dim dusty shadows practically invisible in any light to the most keen and enquiring eye.”²²⁵ To shoot the murals, Holmes described how the photographer blocked out the light from the windows and used large mirrors to reflect available artificial light. He also noted that the publisher, Clarendon Press, retouched the
photos to “remove evidence of brickwork.” For Holmes, the result was a resounding success: “Faint and dim as the reproductions may seem, they show us far more of these paintings than any eye has seen for forty years.” He underlined the murals’ importance in the history of art, aiming to justify their effort to preserve them.

In Hunt’s narrative of the mural, he built on previous ways of “seeing” the mural. He described the bohemian, youthful character of the project, for example, and even noted disdainfully that the subjects depicted “are of a distinctly barbarous stamp as to refinement and honour.” He mentioned the importance of this project, that “what accords to these productions the hope of lasting interest is the expression of imaginative thought.” And he recounted Rossetti’s estimation of his mural: “He always cherished a favourable estimate of his design, speaking of it at times as the best he had ever done.”

But Hunt also remarked that even with the reproductions only “imaginative essence will be found.”

When considering the reproduction of Rossetti’s mural itself (fig. 30), one can see why Hunt emphasized “imaginative essence,” for it would have taken a great deal of imagination to see what had been described by previous writers such as Patmore. The reproduced photograph is dark and blurry, showing the texture of the brickwork and uneven surface more than the images on it. This photograph, with its transparency and transience, captured the ghostliness of the mural that earlier writers described. In this way, the photograph provided evidence of something invisible, similar to Victorian spirit photography. Only, in the case of Rossetti’s mural, the ghost was not a phantasmal specter but the shade of his artistic intentions.
This 1906 publication by Hunt, even though written by a challenger to Rossetti’s position, reinforced his reputation as genius and leader. It noted that the important message of the mural project was not that it was no longer visible but that its “centralizing power […] brought together men destined afterwards to be inspirers of their generation.” By “preserving” and reproducing the murals in photographs, even though they are “faint and dim,” the publication could be seen as continuing Rossetti’s influence for future generations.
Conclusion

From the perspective of Coventry Patmore in 1857, the Oxford murals were “remarkable experiments” that would “attract a considerable amount of public and artistic attention.” His observation, though made while the murals did not have any problems of visibility, still holds true but for different reasons than he intended. Patmore’s words, which would eventually become a stand-in for the project, described the radiant colors and watercolor technique applied on the large-scale wall surface as “like the margin of a highly-illuminated manuscript,” ascribing this new style to Dante Gabriel Rossetti. This innovative mural decoration, markedly different in technique and color from the contemporary, and more conservative, murals at the Palace of Westminster, would ensure Rossetti’s placement in the history of British art, according to Patmore.

Rossetti’s mural, however, had immediate problems of visibility, the first of which was that he never completed it. His mural, along with the others, also began to deteriorate six months later because of the very technique that Patmore praised. In their experiment of applying tempera on an untreated brick surface, the artists ensured their ultimate deterioration. This obstacle to viewing the mural project was exacerbated by light from the windows, which made it difficult to see the paintings even before they started to fade. Nevertheless, writers created ways to see the murals, regarding them as works by young, upstart artists to viewing them through the text they represented. These earliest writings about the mural project, including Patmore’s, laid the groundwork for later writers, who used this mural project as a way to buttress Rossetti’s reputation.

Writers in the late nineteenth century salvaged what could be seen by first dealing with the issue of visual obscurity as a “ghost” of what Rossetti intended. The obscurity of
the mural was treated in the context of Rossetti’s reputation of elusiveness and mysteriousness, which related to his positioning as both poet and painter. Seeing the mural project as a marker for the beginning of a new artistic and poetic movement was made possible by both selectively editing narratives to include Algernon Charles Swinburne, Edward Burne-Jones, and William Morris, and to exclude those who did not fit. Focusing on a relationship narrative and the male-bonding ritual that led to such creative and energetic outbursts, writers then positioned Rossetti as the leader and inspirer of this new movement that surpassed the earlier Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. As Hunt’s 1906 work on the mural demonstrates, writers could not afford to overlook the Oxford mural project when crafting their narrative of British art and its influence.

Many of these ways of seeing continue to be practiced in the most recent sources that discuss Rossetti’s mural, showing him as a pioneer and leader of a new movement. This scholarship relies on earlier sources, such as Patmore’s review, to “see” the mural and its significance. This substitution, though necessary, was not entirely stable as the murals themselves are still extant. How viewers and writers dealt with both the texts representing Rossetti’s intention and the actual ruins of it reflect the complexity and unreliability of sight itself. The underlying feature of these various attempts, both then and now, at creating ways of seeing Rossetti’s mural was persistence of vision, or continuing to see in spite of obstacles to visibility.

The many constructed ways of seeing Rossetti’s mural reflect both a determination to see the Oxford project in spite of its problems of visibility and to participate in creating Rossetti’s reputation and artistic identity. The mural’s problematic visual outcomes do not detract from Rossetti’s role as an inspiration and leader. If
anything, the obstacles to visibility enhanced his influence, especially in the imagination of a late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century viewer who would have been well versed with the idea of the Romantic artist. In this way, the mural project, even in its visual failure, is a success because of all the ways created for it to be seen and the persistence of its presence in the discourse of British art.
This 1858 recollection by William Bell Scott was not published until 1892 (William Bell Scott, *Autobiographical Notes of the Life of William Bell Scott. And Notices of His Artistic and Poetic Circle of Friends 1830 to 1882*, ed. W. Minto [London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine, 1892], 41). I had the opportunity to see Rossetti’s mural in person in 2009 and 2010. While it is hard to know what remains of Rossetti’s original effort because of subsequent restoration attempts, it is clear that mural is as deteriorated and obscured as many writers have noted. My first visit was on an overcast day, and with artificial light, it was still difficult to see the brilliant color and small brushstroke technique described in the literature. On my second visit, the sunlight from the windows made the murals as difficult to view directly as described by the 1858 review.


2. Coventry Patmore, “Walls and Wall Painting at Oxford,” *The Saturday Review*, 26 December 1857, 584. Patmore probably did not comment on obstacles to visibility as he saw them while still in progress with the windows whitewashed.

3. For example, “Progress in Oxford,” 243.

4. The other six members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood include the following: John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, Thomas Woolner, James Collinson, Frederic George Stephens, and William Michael Rossetti. The group was formed in September 1848 and lasted until 1853. Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 46, wrote about Rossetti’s medieval watercolors of the 1850s and their departure from earlier work: “[H]e concentrated increasingly on the pursuit of an ideal, sensuous beauty, in images of long-haired and languorous women; and on the relationship between art and music, sight and sound [...].”


“With the exception of Arthur Hughes & myself, those engaged upon it have made there almost their début as painters” (Rossetti to Charles Eliot Norton, July 1858, in Rossetti, Correspondence, 2:225). Rossetti did not mention in this letter that Pollen had recently painted decorations for the Merton Chapel at Oxford (William Sharp, Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study [London: Macmillan and Co., 1882], 156); William Michael Rossetti wrote that Pollen “had already done some decorative work in Oxford, which excited a good deal of notice” (William Michael Rossetti, ed., Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism: Papers 1854 to 1862 [New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co.; London: George Allen, 1899], 190). Hereafter, abbreviated references to William Michael Rossetti will be WMR.

In a letter to Alexander Gilchrist ([18 June 1861], Rossetti responded to a request for his thoughts on Benjamin Woodward for the architect’s obituary. According to William Fredeman, this letter has many deletions, insertions, and changes, one of which is that Rossetti crossed out “I” and inserted “one of his friends” regarding who suggested that the murals be painted on the Union walls. Rossetti also mentioned that William Morris was present and said he would also paint a mural (Rossetti, Correspondence, 2:376–77). Rossetti recorded the architect’s response: “Woodward was greatly delighted with the idea; as his principle was that of the medieval builders to avail himself in any building of as much decoration as the circumstances permitted at the time, and not prefer uniform bareness to partial beauty” (Rossetti, Correspondence, 2:376–77). Earlier Rossetti had been asked by Woodward to do some kind of design work for his other Oxford building, the New Museum (now Oxford University Museum of Natural History), according to a letter from the artist to his mother Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti in 1 July 1855 (Rossetti, Correspondence, 2:52). Rossetti did not execute any designs for this museum.

Rossetti explained this monetary arrangement in a later letter, dated June 1861, to Alexander Gilchrist (Rossetti, Correspondence, 2:376–77).

This tympanum design is not extant. See William Michael Rossetti, ed., Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family Letters, with a Memoir (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1895), 198; Sharp, Rossetti: A Record, 157.

Rossetti mentioned that he and the other artists were “painting pictures nine feet high with life-sized figures, on the walls of the Union Society’s new room [...]” (Rossetti to Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, [August–September 1857], in Rossetti, Correspondence, 2:195; see also Rossetti to Lowes Cato Dickinson, [11 Oct] 1857, in Rossetti, Correspondence, 2:197). In 1850 Rossetti had attempted a large canvas titled “Hist!” Said Kate the Queen but later abandoned and destroyed it. It is thought that the paintings Rossovestita (Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery) and The Two Mothers (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool) are remnants of this painting (Jerome McGann, ed., “Rossetti Archive,” http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s45.raw.html on Rossovestita). Access to the Oxford Union building in 1857 was limited to its male members or by invitation.

One exception is Jan Marsh’s 1999 work that treated the Oxford mural project in terms of Rossetti’s life (Jan Marsh, Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999], 180–85ff). Regarding who chose the subject matter, Rosalie Mander proposed that the idea was probably instigated by William Morris and

16 “And anon there appeared the Sangreal unto the white knights, but thou was so feeble of good belief and faith that thou mightest not abide it for all the teaching of the good man, but anon thou turnest to the sinners, and that caused thy misadventure that thou should’st know good from evil and vain glory of the world, the which is not worth a pear […]. God was wroth with you, for God loveth no such deeds in this quest. And this advision signifieth that thou were of evil faith and of poor belief, the which will make thee to fall into the deep pit of hell if thou keep thee not” (Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur* [New York: Modern Library, 1999], 714).


21 Ibid., 81, 84.
26 Willsdon, *Mural Painting*, 259, offered Goetze’s murals at Grove House in London as an example of what Rossetti’s mural predicted.
28 Prettejohn, *Art for Art’s Sake*, 29. In an earlier work on the Pre-Raphaelites, Prettejohn also noted that the group formed at Oxford constituted a new Round Table (Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000], 101).
31 Michaela Giebelhausen and Tim Barringer, “Introduction,” in Writing the Pre-Raphaelites: Text, Context, Subtext, ed. Michaela Giebelhausen and Tim Barringer (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 2. They wrote: “It is this wealth of extant literature—fragmented, idiosyncratic, conflicting, and often biased—that determines how we see the Pre-Raphaelites” (Giebelhausen and Barringer, Writing the Pre-Raphaelites, 11).
32 Giebelhausen and Barringer, Writing the Pre-Raphaelites, 7. They also noted Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock’s seminal work to challenge this type of scholarship in the 1980s.
35 Parris, Pre-Raphaelites, 26.
37 Ibid., 172.
38 Ibid., 183.
40 Ibid., 484.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Cherry and Pollock, “Patriarchal Power,” 485. Cherry and Pollock wrote: “In no way do these texts offer accounts of what happened in the 1840s and 1850s”; and “It does not acknowledge the fact that the texts of the 1880s and 1900s occurred within the formation of discourse on the avant-garde in English art” (Cherry and Pollock, “Patriarchal Power,” 487).
45 Renton, Oxford Union Murals, 15.
46 Band also re-shot the murals during their 1986 cleaning, according to Renton, The Oxford Union Murals, 16.
47 Christian, The Oxford Union Murals, 1.
48 Christian, The Oxford Union Murals, 27; he wrote that the reason for the unfinished state was that Rossetti was called away from Oxford to attend to Siddal during her illness, but that he always intended to return (51).
49 Christian, The Oxford Union Murals, 19.
Oswald Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 226; Doughty also mentioned the mural’s unfinished state and said that Rossetti had to attend to Siddal during her illness (242).


Ibid., 36.


Ibid., 600.

Ibid., 604.

Herbert A. Morrah, *The Oxford Union, 1823–1923* (London: Cassell, 1923), 187. This book was published to commemorate the centennial of the Oxford Union.


Whether Beerbohm was making fun of Jowett or Rossetti in this caricature has been debated (see George P. Landow, “Max Beerbohm,” *Victorian Web* [http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/mb/dgrcircle4.html]).


Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 33. Lindsay Smith also applied Crary’s work to the Victorians, focusing on John Ruskin, William Morris, and how photography influenced the Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt. She looked at how the subject of the text could create an “unsettled account of vision” (Lindsay Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry: The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 3).


“Mr. Prinsep says that the windows in the spaces they were painting were whitened in order to tone the light [...].” (Georgiana Macdonald Burne-Jones, *The Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* [New York and London: Macmillan and Co., 1904], 162).

“Progress in Oxford,” 243–44.

Review is not signed, but I am using the male pronoun in this instance.

Renton, *Notes and Quotations*, includes Swinburne’s poem.

For full text of this poem, see University of Rochester, “The Lancelot Project,” http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/swinlan.htm. The publication date of the poem is listed as 1860.


Patmore, “Walls and Wall Painting,” 584.

The pen and ink drawing *Sir Launcelot in the Queen’s Chamber* (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 404’04; see fig. 26) could have been a design for another mural bay.

Rossetti’s letter to Ford Madox Brown (ca. 21 January 1858) indicated that Ruskin was going to clear Rossetti’s debit of seventy pounds as payment for the second mural (Rossetti, *Correspondence*, 2:208); Ruskin also wrote to Rossetti: “Or if you like to do another side of the Union I will consider that as 70 guineas off my debt: provided there’s no absolute nonsense in it, and the trees are like trees, and the stones like stones” (Ruskin to Rossetti, ? 1857, in WMR, *Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism*, 192); Ruskin’s latter comment about trees and stones may be in reference to a work (*St. Catherine*, 1857 [Tate N04603]) that he had sent back to Rossetti to fix but was still displeased with the outcome, returning it again to the artist. Ruskin wrote: “You are a conceited monkey, thinking your pictures right when I tell you positively they are wrong. What do you know about the matter, I should like to know?” (Ruskin to Rossetti, ? 1857, in WMR, *Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism*, 184). That Ruskin was initially pleased with Rossetti’s mural was indicated in a letter to William Michael: “What glorious work Dante is doing at Oxford!” (Ruskin to William Michael Rossetti, 27 October 1857, in WMR, *Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism*, 187).

John William Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), 123, noted that Riviere was hired in 1859 for 150 pounds to fill three vacant bays.

“The series commences with Pollen’s picture,—King Arthur Obtaining the Sword Excalibur from the Damsel of the Lake; & ends with Hughes’s—Arthur Carried away to Avalon & the Sword Thrown Back into the Lake” (Rossetti to Charles Eliot Norton, July 1858, in Rossetti, *Correspondence*, 2:225).


Flint, *Victorians*, 234–35, points out that narrative was evident in not only a painting’s subject but the way it was interpreted through art criticism.

Rossetti to Pauline Trevelyan, 6 November 1858 and 8 November 1858, in Rossetti, *Correspondence*, 2:234.

Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, [30 October] 1857, in Rossetti, *Correspondence*, 2:199; Rossetti to Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti, [20 November 1857], in Rossetti, *Correspondence*, 2:200. Even earlier in 1857, Rossetti complained to one friend that the
painting was going slowly (Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, August 1857, in Rossetti, Correspondence, 2:194).

86 Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 18 August 1860, in Rossetti, Correspondence, 2:309. William Michael wrote in 1895: “The strong term ‘the Union fools’ is applied to the Committee or other authorities of the Union Debating Club in Oxford. Some steps were taken for completing anyhow the pictures there left unfinished by my brother and his colleagues” (WMR, Family Letters, 158).

87 Rossetti referred to Oxford’s hiring of another artist in his 1861 letter to Alexander Gilchrist (Rossetti, Correspondence, 2:376–77) but did not mention Riviere by name, nor did he mention the date. An 1874 pamphlet published by the Oxford Union recorded that the artist was “much annoyed” that Riviere was hired to finish the mural project (The Wall Paintings at the Union [Oxford: Oxford Union, 1874]).


89 Quoted in O’Dwyer, The Architecture of Deane and Woodward, 310, n80, from a 10 June 1871 letter.

90 James Thursfield to Rossetti, 26 October 1869, in William Michael Rossetti, ed., Rossetti Papers, 1862 to 1870 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), 477–78; Thursfield to Rossetti, 14 November 1869, in WMR, Rossetti Papers, 482–83: “The selection of the artist to be employed will, of course, rest with you: it will be for us, I presume, to arrange with him the remuneration he is to receive, and to contract with him for the execution of the work.” According to William Michael, the letters from Thursfield “were entertained with some good-will but came to nothing.” He also alluded to a possible earlier restoration attempt: “Before this, a local painter had been called in, and tried his hand. That also proved to be in vain; and for many years past the painted surface of the Union walls has been a confused hybrid between a smudge and a blank” (WMR, Family Letters, 198). What William Michael did not mention is that in the fall of 1869, his brother was preoccupied with trying to recover the manuscript of poems that was buried in the grave of his wife, Elizabeth, who died in 1862 (Rossetti to William Michael, 15 October 1869, in Rossetti, Correspondence, 4:304).

91 William Michael noted that Dunn was chosen by Rossetti to finish his mural, but he incorrectly wrote that Dunn could have also been sent to execute “the second of the two subjects which Rossetti had of old undertaken—Sir Galahad receiving the Sangrael” because by 1869 the blank bays had already been filled by Riviere (William Michael Rossetti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer [London: Cassell and Co., 1889], 67–68). The 1874 pamphlet was The Wall Paintings at the Union, n.p., which also mentioned that Rossetti would finish his sketch and that the person sent (no name given) to complete the mural was also supposed to restore it. It is possible that the sketch mentioned is the one currently at the Ashmolean (see fig. 27).

92 Mackail, Life of William Morris, 124, wrote that the pamphlet, though of “well-known authorship” was anonymous, in 1899: “The only point on which the opinion of the Society was unanimous was that no more money should be spent. Rossetti took very justifiable offence at a pamphlet—anonymous, but of well-known authorship—the effect of which had been to defeat a motion empowering expense to be incurred in cleaning and repairing the paintings; he refused point blank to have anything further to do with the
affair: and the fresco committee was ultimately dissolved without anything being done.”

The pamphlet is signed “E. P.” and was later catalogued in the Bodleian Library as authored by Edward B. Purcell.

93 Thursfield to Rossetti, 14 November 1869, in WMR, Rossetti Papers, 482–83.

94 Edward B. Purcell, The Fresco Question: Remarks Addressed to the Members of the Oxford Union Society (Oxford: Oxford Union Society, 1871), 9. N.B.: The term “fresco” was often used to describe the Oxford murals in the early literature, although strictly speaking they were not executed in the fresco technique. Most accounts indicated that the artists used tempera paint applied with watercolor brushes on whitewashed brick without a ground or any effort made to smooth out the surface of the brick (see, for example, Renton, Oxford Union Murals, 5). Scott, Autobiographical Notes, 41, indicated that the artists used watercolor, not tempera.

95 Purcell, The Fresco Question, 9. This author also wrote that Rossetti did not finish his mural and thus owed the Union money.

96 Purcell, The Fresco Question, 5.

97 Ibid., 4.

98 Ibid., 7.

99 Ibid., 7.

100 Ibid., 9.

101 Ibid., 9.

102 Rossetti to Pauline Trevelyan, 6 November 1858 and 8 November 1858, in Rossetti, Correspondence, 2:234; Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 18 August 1860, in Rossetti, Correspondence, 2:309.

103 Matthew Plampin, “Exhibiting the Avant-Garde: The Development of the Pre-Raphaelite ‘Brand,’” in Writing the Pre-Raphaelites, ed. Giebelhausen and Barringer, 195.

104 James Thursfield to Rossetti, 26 October 1869, in WMR, Rossetti Papers, 477–78.

105 Scott, Autobiographical Notes, 41–42. The terminus post quem of the deterioration could be placed at the formation of the 1869 committee. It is also plausible, however, that the deterioration was evident earlier, as an 1871 Union pamphlet indicated that the debate about the murals had been going on for five years, making 1866 a possible date.


107 The Frescoes Again! Reasons for Voting Against the Amendment, vote dated 10 February [no year], no year given for pamphlet, but most likely 1874 as The Wall Paintings at the Union is dated 9 February 1874. The amendment (referring to the The Wall Paintings at the Union?) seemed to be in favor of restoring the murals as the four reasons given in the Frescoes Again! pamphlet proposed doing nothing to them. 270 voted for the amendment, 160 against.

108 Thursfield, First Report, 2.

109 The First Report of the 1874 committee indicated that Morris came to Oxford on March 17 to do his evaluation and that he said they could be restored (First Report, 1). Even with Morris’s evaluation, the decision was made in November to take no action to preserve them (First Report, 2). Mackail, Life of William Morris, 125, noted that Morris redesigned the roof in 1875.


Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 21.

Rossetti to Alexander Gilchrist, [18] June 1861, in Rossetti, *Correspondence*, 2:376–77, even described the architect as a “medieval builder.”


The first descriptive title Rossetti gave the mural indicated that Launcelot is denied this vision: “Sir Launcelot prevented by his sin from entering the chapel of the Sanc Grail” (Rossetti to Charles Eliot Norton, July 1858, in Rossetti, *Correspondence*, 2:225). In another letter, he emphasized that Launcelot’s vision is of Guenevere, not the Grail: “The first is Lancelot failing in the quest of the Sancgrael. He is falling asleep before the shrine of the S. full of Angels, & between him & it arises a vision of Queen Guenevere, the ‘cause of all,’ with her arms extended in an apple tree” (Rossetti to William Bell Scott, [ca. 21 June 1858], in Rossetti, *Correspondence*, 2:212).

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Ibid., 14.

The Wall Paintings at the Union, n.p.; according to the committee, the state of the murals could be “summed up in the following words: Restoration or Whitewash.”

Flint, *Victorians*, 2.


Edmund Gosse noted that Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* was begun in 1854, revised until 1857, published again in 1866 (Edmund W. Gosse, *Coventry Patmore* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1905], 64).

The Oxford University Museum of Natural History was worked on from 1855 to 1860. See Frederick O’Dwyer, “The Oxford Museum,” in *The Architecture of Deane and Woodward* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 152–285.

Patmore, “Walls and Wall Painting,” 583.

Ibid.

Ibid., 584.

Once it was decided that the interior of the palace would be decorated with frescoes, competitions were held in the 1840s to determine who would be awarded the commission. The cartoons for the competition were displayed in public exhibitions, one of which was visited by Rossetti (Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 28).

Debra Mancoff has also made this comparison, noting that Rossetti’s bright, jewel-like colors are in stark contrast to the muted, cool colors of William Dyce’s *Religion: The Vision of Sir Galahad and His Company* (Queen’s Robing Room, Palace of Westminster,
London) and that Rossetti’s mural emphasized the sensual in both subject and style (Mancoff, *Arthurian Revival*, 159).

129 Patmore, “Walls and Wall Painting,” 584.
130 Ibid.

The engraving currently hangs in the Oxford Union Old Library. The following text is contained within the same frame as the engraving: “Our illustration displays an internal perspective view of the famous Union Society’s Debating-room at Oxford, showing forth the features of its constructive characteristics. This building is from the designs of Sir Thomas Deane and Son and B. Woodward, and has been successfully carried out by Mr. C. C. Bramwell, as assistant architect; the general contractor being Mr. Wyatt, of Oxford; and the gaseliers and ornamental iron-work furnished by Mr. Skidmore, of Coventry. This room is specially adapted for the members of the society to debate in upon various subjects connected with history, theology, &c. The debates take place every Monday evening during term time; and when we state that such eminent men as Mr. Gladstone, Mr. Cardwell and numerous others of note, first learned to debate in this room previous to its reconstruction and enlargement, no doubt a large amount of interest attaches to it. The new structure is generally brick built, with stone and ornamental brick jams and voussoirs of the windows and doorways. The gallery shown in our Engraving, 4 ft. in width, is for the use of members of the society not taking part in the discussions. It also forms an extensive addition to the library of the establishment, having a bookcase against its back wall 7 ft. in height and 12 in. deep. We must explain that the spaces over the bookshelves and between the rafters of the roof are being gradually filled with frescoes or paintings in distemper. Among the paintings already completed are works by Mr. Rossetti, Mr Pallens (who is a private gentleman and clever amateur painter), Mr. Princeps, Mr. Morris, Mr. Jones, Mr. Stanhope, and Mr. Hughes, who have all chosen their subjects from the ‘Morte d’Arthur.’ The portions of the roof above the frescoes are also painted in colour, and have a somewhat confused effect. The room has one of its ends semi-octangular in shape. Its total internal length is 62 ft.; its width, 33 ft.; and its height to the ridge of the roof, 48 ft.” The author wishes to thank Niels Sampath, at the Oxford Union Library, for transcribing this text.

135 Ibid., 143–44.
136 Ibid., 143–44.
138 Flint, *Victorians*, 269.
140 Ibid., 158.
141 Ibid.
142 Scott, *Autobiographical Notes*, 41–42.
144 Ibid., 125–26.
145 Ibid., 122.
146 Ibid., 123.
147 Patmore, “Walls and Wall Painting,” 584.
148 “M. D.-G. Rossetti, en effet, n’a jamais recherché la publicité. Est-ce austérité ou bien habileté suprême? […] Depuis, le public n’a jamais eu occasion de rien voir de sa peinture” (Ernest Chesneau, La Peinture Anglaise [Paris: A. Quantin, Imprimeur-Editeur, 1882], 230). This author also wrote about Rossetti’s “powerful influence” (la puissant influence) and that Rossetti died during the printing of the book.
150 Cruise, “Rossetti’s Early Exhibitions,” 12.
152 One of Rossetti’s earliest works reproduced in books was Maids of Elfen-Mere (1855) for William Allingham’s book of poems, “Day and Night Songs.” It was reproduced in woodcut by T. Dalziel. H. C. Marillier wrote: “In addition to the foregoing there must be chronicled under 1855 the first of the important and beautiful designs for woodcuts, which in the absence of his pictures were almost the only means afforded to the public for many years of judging of Rossetti’s work” (H. C. Marillier, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, An Illustrated Memorial of His Art and Life [London: George Bell and Sons, 1899], 70). As Malcolm Warner has pointed out in the case of the early harsh criticism of Rossetti’s fellow Pre-Raphaelite artist, John Everett Millais, certain reproduction techniques of the nineteenth century did not always suit the style of the Pre-Raphaelites. In particular, steel or wood engravings produced a “crudeness of line” that did not capture the nuances of the original paintings (see Malcolm Warner, “Millais in Reproduction,” in Writing the Pre-Raphaelites, ed. Giebelhausen and Barringer, 217); Warner also argued that mezzotint engravings did a better job of mimicking paintings, that they were works of art in their own right (222).
155 Marillier, Illustrated Memorial, 90.
156 Ibid., 92.
157 Ibid., 91.
158 Codell, The Victorian Artist, 27, argued that this reduction in pages and scholarly apparatus represented a “dumbing down and sanitizing for general readers” trend in Victorian biography publishing.
159 Marillier, Illustrated Memorial, 60.
161 Mander, “Rossetti and Oxford,” plate 81, p. 179, as “retouched by another hand.”
162 Marillier, Illustrated Memorial, 92.
In a discussion with Curator of Western Art Colin Harrison, at the Ashmolean, he indicated that a scholar (not named) had once mentioned that the watercolor study may have been executed years later by Rossetti’s assistant Henry Treffry Dunn (conversation with the author, May 2009). William Holman Hunt, *Oxford Union Society: The Story of the Painting of the Pictures on the Walls and the Decorations on the Ceiling of the Old Debating Hall (now the Library) in the Years 1857–8–9* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 1906), 14, also noted that “Years later he [Rossetti] sent an assistant to copy it, with the intent to use it for an easel picture, but this project also came to nothing.”


Cherry and Pollock, “Patriarchal Power,” 484.

Ford Madox Ford’s 1902 biography of Rossetti, p. 82, quoted in Codell, *The Victorian Artist*, 258.

Cherry and Pollock, “Patriarchal Power,” 484.

Giebelhausen and Barringer, *Writing the Pre-Raphaelites*, 13.

For a complete list of all of Rossetti’s publications and printing history, see “Rossetti Archive,” [http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/1-1881.raw.html](http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/1-1881.raw.html).


Quoted in Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 431.

Quoted in Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 432. Cruise, “Rossetti’s Early Exhibitions,” 12, maintained that this attack was “made possible by the relative invisibility of
Rossetti’s paintings.” Rossetti responded to the review months later in his article “The Stealthy School of Criticism” in The Athenaeum. For more on this controversy, see the scholarly commentary on “The Stealthy School of Criticism,” in “Rossetti Archive,” http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/34p-1870.raw.htm.

177 WMR, Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism, 135.
178 Quoted in Caine, Recollections, 37.
179 Caine, Recollections, 10; Swinburne’s Poems and Ballads was published in 1866, four years before Rossetti’s volume of poems would appear.
180 WMR, Family Letters, 199.
182 For example, in 1882, Caine, Recollections, 10; and in 1887, Knight, Life of Rossetti, 86.
183 Rossetti to Alexander Gilchrist, [18] June 1861, in Rossetti, Correspondence, 2:378, called the Oxford project a “jovial campaign.”
184 Sharp, Rossetti: A Record, 156.
185 WMR, Designer and Writer, 32–33.
186 WMR, Family Letters, 198.
187 Ibid., 199.
188 Barringer, Reading the Pre-Raphaelites, 48.
189 Marillier reproduced a sketch of Jane Burden Morris as a “study for Queen Guenever” in 1899 (Illustrated Memorial, 92a).
190 “This model was a Miss Burden, whom he saw at the theatre one night, admired extravagantly, and knew as promptly as possible in order to beg for sittings” (Elisabeth Luther Cary, The Rossettis: Dante Gabriel and Christina [New York and London: G. P. Putnam and Sons, 1900], 104).
192 WMR, Family Letters, 198; F. G. Stephens wrote: “A more brilliant company it would, out of Paradise, be difficult to select” (Stephens, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, footnote 1, p. 45).
193 Burne-Jones, Memorials, 166.
196 Burne-Jones, Memorials, 166.
200 Burne-Jones, Memorials, 161, 162.
201 Ibid., 162.
202 Ibid., 160.
203 This kind of criticism of Rossetti regarding the Oxford project was rarely if ever articulated. That Prinsep was the only one of the artists involved who wrote a narrative
could be the reason why he laid the blame at Rossetti’s feet, calling the project “Rossetti’s bargain […] that ended in disaster.” Burne-Jones’s and Morris’s accounts of the mural were filtered through their biographers, all written after their deaths. The only other participants that remained alive at the time of this article, besides the author (who died later that year), were Arthur Hughes and John Spencer Stanhope, who, as in other accounts of the mural, were only briefly mentioned (Prinsep, “Painter’s Reminiscence,” 169, 170, 172).


Ibid., 164.

Burne-Jones, *Memorials*, 164; that Valentine Prinsep was enamored of Rossetti was also borne out by a letter written by G. F. Watts: “I have conscientiously abstained from inoculating him with any of my own views or ways of thinking, and have plunged him into the Pre-Raphaelite Styx…and now his gods are Rossetti, Hunt and Millais” (Watts to Lady Duff Gordon, ? 1857, quoted in Rossetti, *Correspondence*, footnote 2, 2:203). Prinsep, “Painter’s Reminiscence,” 169, wrote: “I was told when I returned to London, that I had caught Rossetti’s intonation of voice, and I know myself I used all his slang and talked of ‘stunners’ with truly Rossettesque enthusiasm.”

Codell, *The Victorian Artist*, 2.


Codell, *The Victorian Artist*, 259.

Ibid.


Ibid., 192.


See, for example, Cherry and Pollock, “Patriarchal Power,” 486.

Giebelhausen and Barringer, *Writing the Pre-Raphaelites*, 13.


Laura Marcus, “Brothers in Their Anecdotage: Holman Hunt’s *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*,” in *Pre-Raphaelites Re-Viewed*, ed. Marcia Pointon (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 16.; Cherry and Pollock, “Patriarchal Power,” 486, also argued that Hunt was probably responding to William Michael’s positioning of his brother as leader of the movement; in effect Hunt wanted to protect his own reputation and value of his works.

325 copies, 300 for sale.

Renton, *Oxford Union Murals*, 15, also observed that the lettering on the Holy Grail’s halo was probably retouched.


Ibid., 11.

Ibid., 15.

Ibid., 15.

Ibid., 15.

Quoted in Morrah, *The Oxford Union*, 176.

Patmore, “Walls and Wall Painting,” 583.
APPENDIX A. FIGURES

Figure 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, English, 1828–82, *Sir Launcelot’s Vision of the Sanc Grael*, 1857; tempera on brick wall, 9 x 16 ft. The Oxford Union Library (formerly Debating Hall), Oxford, England. (Photo: Cyril Band, by kind permission of The Oxford Union)

Figure 2. Interior of the Oxford Union Library, showing light from windows. (Photo: author)
Figure 3. Exterior of the Oxford Union Library. (Photo: author)

Figure 4. Max Beerbohm, *The Sole Remark Likely to Have Been Made by Benjamin Jowett about the Mural Paintings at the Oxford Union*. “And what were they going to do with the Grail when they found it, Mr. Rossetti?” 1922; published in *Rossetti and His Circle*. (Photo: Victorian Web)
Figure 5. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Study for *How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors and Sir Percival Were Fed with the Grael; but Sir Percival’s Sister Died by the Way*, 1857; pen and brown ink, 10 x 13 3/4 in. British Museum, London, 1885,0613.81. (Photo: British Museum)

Figure 6. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Study for *How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors and Sir Percival Were Fed with the Grael; but Sir Percival’s Sister Died by the Way*, 1857; Pen and brown ink, with brown wash, pen and black ink, over red chalk and graphite, 10 x 13 3/4 in. British Museum, London, 1910,1210.3. (Photo: British Museum)
Figure 7. Interior of the Oxford Union Library, showing 1875 ceiling designed by William Morris. (Photo: Cyril Band, by kind permission of The Oxford Union)

Figure 8. William Dyce, English, 1806–64, *Religion: The Vision of Sir Galahad and His Company*, 1851; fresco, 10 ft. 6 1/4 in. x 14 ft. Queen’s Robing Room, Palace of Westminster London. (Photo: unknown)
Figure 9. Contemporary engraving of interior of the Oxford Union Debating Hall, 1857. (Photo: Cyril Band, by kind permission of The Oxford Union)

Figure 10. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors and Sir Percival Were Fed with the Sanc Grael; but Sir Percival’s Sister Died by the Way*, 1864; watercolor, 11 ½ x 16 ½ in. Tate Britain, London, N05234. (Photo: Tate)
Figure 11. “Study for Guinevere,” reproduced in F. G. Stephens, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 1894. (Photo: Google books)

Figure 12. “Study for Guinevere and Sir Lancelot,” reproduced in F. G. Stephens, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 1894. (Photo: Google books)
Figure 13. “Ancilla San Grael,” reproduced in F. G. Stephens, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 1894. (Photo: Google books)

Figure 14. “Design for Oxford Union. Launcelot at the Shrine of the Sanc Grael (from a copy by H. Treffry Dunn),” reproduced in H. C. Marillier, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, An Illustrated Memorial of His Art and Life*, 1899. (Photo: Rossetti Archive)
Figure 15. “Design for Union: Sir Galahad Receiving the Sanc Grael,” reproduced in H. C. Marillier, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, An Illustrated Memorial of His Art and Life*, 1899. (Photo: Rossetti Archive)

Figure 16. “Study for Queen Guenevere,” reproduced in H. C. Marillier, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, An Illustrated Memorial of His Art and Life*, 1899. (Photo: Rossetti Archive)
Figure 17. “Algernon Charles Swinburne 1861,” reproduced in H. C. Marillier, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, An Illustrated Memorial of His Art and Life*, 1899. (Photo: Rossetti Archive)

Figure 18. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Study for *Sir Launcelot’s Vision of the Sanc Grael* (Launcelot and Guenevere), 1857; pen and brown ink and pencil, 9 1/8 x 7 in. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, 272’04. (Photo: Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery)
Figure 19. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Study for *Sir Launcelot’s Vision of the Sanc Grael* (Guenevere standing whole-length), 1857; pen and brown and black ink, with traces of watercolor, 9 5/8 x 13 in. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, 273’04. (Photo: Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery)

Figure 20. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Study for *Sir Launcelot’s Vision of the Sanc Grael* (angel), 1857; pen and brown ink, 7 1/8 x 4 1/16 in. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, 274’04. (Photo: Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery)
Figure 21. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Study for *Sir Launcelot’s Vision of the Sanc Grael* (Guenevere at the well), 1857; pen and brown ink and pencil, 8 3/4 x 4 9/16 in. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, 270’04. (Photo: Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery)

Figure 22. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Study for *Sir Launcelot’s Vision of the Sanc Grael* (Guenevere in tree); verso: portrait of Valentine Prinsep, 1857; pen and ink, 9 x 7 in. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, 1904P271. (Photo: Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery)
Figure 23. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Sir Galahad and an Angel* (alt. title *Alma Mater and Mr. Woodward*), 1857; pen and brown ink, 9 x 8 3/4 in. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, 399′04. (Photo: Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery)

Figure 24. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Study for *Sir Launcelot’s Vision of the Sanc Grael* (angels), 1857; pen and ink and pencil, 8 7/8 x 5 3/8 in. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 2150. (Photo: Fitzwilliam Museum)
Figure 25. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Study for Sir Launcelot’s Vision of the Sanc Grael (Launcelot), 1857; pen and ink, 10 x 8 7/8 in. Princeton University Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, 3788. (Photo: Princeton University)

Figure 26. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Sir Launcelot in the Queen’s Chamber, 1857; pen and black and brown ink, 10 1/4 x 13 3/4 in. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, 404’04. (Photo: Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery)
Figure 27. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, possibly assisted or retouched by H. Treffry Dunn, Study for *Sir Launcelot’s Vision of the Sanc Grael*, 1857; watercolor, 26 3/4 x 40 3/4 in. Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford. (Photo: Ashmolean)

Figure 28. Drawing of wombat by Edward Burne-Jones, reproduced in *The Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 1904. (Photo: Google books)
Figure 29. “D. G. Rossetti, from the pen and ink portrait by himself,” reproduced in Valentine Prinsep, “A Chapter from a Painter’s Reminiscence. The Oxford Circle: Rossetti, Burne-Jones and William Morris,” 1904. (Photo: Google books)

Figure 30. Reproduction of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Oxford mural in William Holman Hunt, Oxford Union Society: The Story of the Painting of the Pictures on the Walls and the Decorations on the Ceiling of the Old Debating Hall (now the Library) in the Years 1857–8–9, 1906. (Photo: author)
## Table 1. Oxford Union Mural Project as of 1857

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title/Image</th>
<th>Artist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King Arthur obtaining the sword Excalibur from the damsel of the lake*</td>
<td>John Hungerford Pollen†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>left blank, painted in 1858 by William Riviere</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Palomides’ jealousy of Tristram</td>
<td>William Morris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merlin being imprisoned beneath a stone by the damsel of the lake</td>
<td>Edward Burne-Jones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Gawain meeting three ladies at a well</td>
<td>John Roddam Spencer Stanhope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur carried away to Avalon and the sword thrown back into the lake</td>
<td>Arthur Hughes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title/Image</strong></td>
<td><strong>Artist</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>left blank, painted in 1858 by William Riviere</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>left blank, painted in 1858 by William Riviere</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Lancelot prevented by his sin from entering the chapel of the San Grael</td>
<td>Dante Gabriel Rossetti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Pelleas leaving the Lady Ettarde</td>
<td>Valentine Cameron Prinsep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table</td>
<td>Alexander Munro (design by Rossetti)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Titles taken from Rossetti’s description of the murals in a letter (Rossetti, *Correspondence*, 2:225)*
†Rossetti commented that the sequential narrative was to begin with Pollen’s mural and end with Hughes’s (Doughty and Wahl, *Letters*, 1:337)

All photos by Cyril Band, except where noted, by kind permission of The Oxford Union.
Table 2. Rossetti’s works, published or exhibited in the 1840s and 1850s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of exhibition or publication</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Exhibition or publication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td><em>The Girlhood of Mary Virgin</em>, 1849; oil on canvas. 32 3/4 x 25 in.</td>
<td>Free Exhibition, Hyde Park Corner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td><em>Rossovestita</em>, 1850; watercolor over pen and ink, 9 1/2 x 5 1/4 in.</td>
<td>National Institution, Portland Gallery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Ecce Ancilla Domini!</em> (alt. <em>The Annunciation</em>), 1850; oil on canvas mounted on panel, 28 5/8 x 16 1/2 in.</td>
<td>National Institution, Portland Gallery, no. 225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1852</td>
<td><em>Rossovestita</em>, 1850; watercolor over pen and ink, 9 1/2 x 5 1/4 in.</td>
<td>Old Watercolour Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante</em>, 1852; watercolor, 14 1/2 x 18 1/2 in.</td>
<td>Old Watercolour Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td><em>Maids of Elfen-Mere</em>, 1854; pen and ink, 5 x 3 1/4 in</td>
<td><em>The Music Master, A Love Story, and Two Series of Day and Night Songs</em>, for Allingham’s “Maids of Elfen-Mere.” Engraved by Dalziel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td><em>St. Cecilia</em>, 1856–57; pen and brown ink, 3 7/8 x 3 1/4 in</td>
<td>Moxon Tennyson, for “The Palace of Art,” lines 97–100. Engraved by Dalziel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>King Arthur and the Weeping Queens</em>, 1856–57; pen and brown ink, 3 1/4 x 3 3/8 in.</td>
<td>Moxon Tennyson, for “The Palace of Art,” lines 97–100. Engraved by Dalziel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Lady of Shalott</em>, 1856–57; pen and brown ink and pencil, 4 x 3 1/2 in.</td>
<td>Moxon Tennyson, for “The Lady of Shalott.” Engraved by Dalziel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Mariana in the South</em>, 1856–57; pen and ink, 3 7/8 x 3 1/4 in.</td>
<td>Moxon Tennyson, for “Mariana in the South,” lines 25–36. Engraved by Dalziel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice</em> (alt. <em>Dante drawing an angel</em>), 1853; watercolor, 16 1/2 x 24 in.</td>
<td>4 Russell Place, Fitzroy Square, <em>Pre-Raphaelite Exhibition</em>, no. 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Dante’s Dream at the Time</em></td>
<td>4 Russell Place, Fitzroy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of exhibition or publication</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Exhibition or publication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of the Death of Beatrice, 1856; watercolor, 18 1/2 x 25 3/4 in.</td>
<td>Square, Pre-Raphaelite Exhibition, no. 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Blue Closet, 1856–57; watercolor, 13 1/2 x 9 3/4 in.</td>
<td>4 Russell Place, Fitzroy Square, Pre-Raphaelite Exhibition, no. 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>Dante’s Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice, 1856; watercolor, 18 1/2 x 25 3/4 in.</td>
<td>Liverpool Academy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Wedding of St. George and the Princess Sabra, 1857; watercolor, 13 1/2 x 13 1/2 in.</td>
<td>Liverpool Academy, no. 297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Christmas Carol, 1857–58; watercolor, 13 1/4 x 11 1/2 in.</td>
<td>Liverpool Academy, no. 301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>Borgia, 1851; watercolor, 9 1/8 x 9 3/4 in.</td>
<td>Hogarth Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Found (early design), 1853; pen and ink and brown wash and some Indian ink, and touched with white, 8 1/4 x 7 1/4 in.</td>
<td>Hogarth Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mary in the House of St. John, 1858; watercolor, 18 x 14 in.</td>
<td>Hogarth Club</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES

Primary Sources
(1857 date of mural–April 1882 death of the artist)


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ABSTRACT

“MORE THAN PICTURES”: DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI AND THE OXFORD MURAL PROJECT

by

TRACEE JO-ANN GLAB

December 2010

Advisor: Dr. Jennifer Olmsted

Major: Art History

Degree: Master of Arts

Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s mural *Sir Launcelot’s Vision of the Sanc Grael* (1857) for the Oxford Union had obstacles of visibility as soon as six months after he abandoned work on it. In spite of the mural’s ruined, obscured, and unfinished state, it continued to be seen by Victorian viewers—both during and after the artist’s life—through texts, reproductions of related artwork, and photographs of the mural project. The many constructed ways of seeing Rossetti’s mural reflect both a determination to see the Oxford project in spite of its problems of visibility and to participate in creating Rossetti’s reputation and artistic identity in the late nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth century.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Growing up in southwest Detroit, my first exposure to the work of the Pre-Raphaelites and their followers was a trip to the Toledo Museum of Art in grade school, where I saw Arthur Hughes’s painting *Ophelia* (1865), which captivated me. I did not know then that this artist, who “introduced” me to this type of work, would also play a small part in my master’s thesis, as Hughes was one of the seven artists who took part in the Oxford mural project. Since that early encounter in Toledo, I have pursued art history at the University of Michigan, Dearborn, culminating in a Bachelor of Arts degree with high distinction in 2001. An internship in 2000 at the Detroit Institute of Arts marked my professional entrance to this field, which later led to positions in education and then publications. At the DIA, I edited the scholarly publication *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*, as well as worked on several exhibition and collection catalogues. Deciding to return to school to get my Master of Arts degree in art history in 2008, I took advantage of the proximity of the Wayne State University campus, continuing my full-time work. As a result of the economic downturn in 2009, my position at the DIA was eliminated. With my new status, I took the opportunity to pursue another aspect of museum work, volunteering as a curatorial intern in the Department of European Art, while working part-time as an exhibitions assistant. My interest in curatorial work eventually led me to the job I currently hold as associate curator at the Flint Institute of Arts, where I am working on a book focusing on their European collection.