



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

7 | 2012

Ceramics / Submorphemics

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/4436>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.4436

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Laurence Roussillon-Constanty, "From the *House of Life* to the *Decorative Arts*: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Ceramics", *Miranda* [Online], 7 | 2012, Online since 09 December 2012, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/4436> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.4436>

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From the *House of Life* to the *Decorative Arts*: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Ceramics

Laurence Roussillon-Constanty

Towards The Decorative

- 1 In his early ballad, *A Last Confession* (1848-1849) Dante Gabriel Rossetti invests various domestic artefacts with allegorical or hidden meanings. The little glassware angel of Love that is given by the overprotective and somewhat promiscuous father to his adoptive daughter thus gets shattered in pieces and wounds the little girl's hand, signalling the father's incestuous and forbidden desire for the girl's nascent femininity. Later on, the local church's votive statues of the Virgin Mary—one in marble, the other probably in ceramics—are compared and contrasted to highlight the girl's change into a woman and turning away from childhood and from the cumbersome father figure. As the girl definitely abandons the fine Madonna "wrought in marble by some great Italian hand" (l.356-357) and turns to a new one "gaily decked, Tinselled and gewgawed (l.385), a slight German toy", her transferred devotion not only marks out her turning away from Italy to Germany but also from classical Italian art to cheap, manufactured commodities passing themselves off as art.
- 2 Such a multilayered use of symbolism embedded in the most ordinary objects within a given art form—be it poetry, painting or design—demonstrates how, from a very early stage, Rossetti was able to move between the frontiers of the fine arts and the decorative arts so as to create a colourful universe mixing the most sophisticated and abstract "dream-world" with the most concrete and contemporary décor of the Victorian era. Such an ability to embrace influences and "recycle" the old to give it original and new expression can also be seen as the main reason why his name is still associated with two main artistic movements that one might otherwise consider distinct: Pre- Raphaelitism and aestheticism. One way to understand why Rossetti's

name was able to carry over from one movement to another is perhaps to look away from the main achievements in painting and poetry he is still well-known for and focus instead on the lesser forms of art that he promoted through his own practice or through his active role of encouraging fellow-artists to move in innovative directions.

- 3 Among those lesser forms, ceramic art is an interesting case in point: although very little evidence survives of the exact implication of Rossetti himself in the development of ceramic art in Britain in the second part of the nineteenth century by comparison to some of his contemporaries such as the painter and art-collector Henry Wallis², several examples of his direct or indirect involvement with concrete projects suggest that his interest for ceramics was instrumental in the exploration of ceramics as both ancient art form and new design material among his circle of friends and rivals. More particularly, a consideration of Rossetti's own artistic evolution—from a distinctly Pre-Raphaelite style (illustrated by his paintings of the 1850s) to a more decorative style (after 1860) suggests that his later aesthetics not only relied on a merging of painting and poetry but also offered to extend the artist's world to the Victorian living-room by fashioning/designing the poetic “bower”³ he imagined in his painting and poetry.
- 4 Thus, aside from his well-known designing of picture-frames for his own paintings⁴ and book-binding⁵. Rossetti's canvases gradually got filled with more and more objects reflecting his interest for craftsmanship old and new that in turn inspired innovative patterns in various departments ranging from decorative design to art collecting and eventually led to poetry writing.
- 5 The first and most striking example of such a complex interaction between different art forms and evolution towards aestheticism is to be found in Rossetti's *Blue Closet* watercolour of 1856-1857, which stages two women facing each other and playing music on the same clavichord. In the queenly figure on the right one easily recognizes the familiar profile of Rossetti's early muse, Elisabeth Siddal. The character on the left looks like its almost exact replica and the inverted motion of her arms (as she is shown striking bells) recalls Rossetti's famous doublings in such pictures as *How they Met Themselves* (1851-1864). In the background two other women are shown holding a music score and singing.
- 6 As noted in the Rossetti Archive's textual commentary on the picture one would be hard-pressed to find a real motive behind the picture's initial production. In his correspondence Rossetti simply writes that “its subject is some people playing music” (Fredeman 60-38) and Stephens' well-known commentary that the picture “intended to symbolize the association of colour with music” (Stephens 41) further confirms the idea that Rossetti only produced the picture as a decorative piece. However, close attention to the picture composition and pictorial detail suggests the artist's growing attempt to reconcile two types of images: the medieval illumination—with flat figures and glowing colour symbolism—and the purely ornamental pictures commissioned by such important patrons as George Rae or James Leathart:

The blue tiles, visible at the back wall and the floor, argue that the entire “closet” is indeed enclosed in their blue; and the pair of blue emblems on the bells and lute define another symmetry. In a sense, the crossed legs supporting the clavichord are a visual emblem of all these symmetries; in another sense, the predominance of quaternary relationships connects to the square tiles which enclose the entire space.
- 7 Filling the whole space, the blue tiles painted in the foreground and background of the picture function both as a unifying pattern and a gap-filler in a series of silent tales: the

watercolour only refers to music through visual clues (the score, the strings, the bells) and all channels of expression look hermetic (mouths shut, closed eyelids). The overall mood of the watercolour is meditative and invites the viewer to reflect on music in purely visual terms.

- 8 As in the *Christmas Carol*⁶, a watercolour executed in the same year, *The Blue Closet* thus invites the viewer to respond and supply the missing narrative or song. Just like the ancient or exotic musical instruments represented in the pictures, the patterned tiles are used in the watercolours to fill out visual space and enclose the figures within a dreamy world while at the same time opening a world of interpretations onto their actual existence. In terms of artistic expression, however, those bright experiments embody Rossetti's attempt at inviting/enticing poetic responses⁷ and hinting at ways to integrate the old (the flat and quaint figures of medieval manuscripts) into a new context: the Victorian taste for cosy furniture, fine collectibles, and accessible pictures. It also illustrates Rossetti's personal response to John Ruskin's contemporary engagement with the fine arts in his conferences and lectures.

All Great Art Aspires to Design: Ruskin's Views on the Decorative Arts

- 9 Indeed, in looking back to medieval manuscripts and the flat, colourful surfaces of Giotto's time while looking ahead and trying to raise the decorative arts to the standard of the fine arts, Rossetti is clearly following the influential aesthetic principles developed by Ruskin from the mid-1850s. Since the Oxford graduate's first defence of the Pre-Raphaelites in his well-known letter to the *Times* of 1851 (Ruskin 1851), Rossetti had become involved in some of Ruskin's more unusual initiatives, such as the teaching of art to workmen⁸. The Working Men's college—founded by Christian Socialists led by F.D. Maurice, Charles Kingsley, and others - aimed at providing “a serious liberal education to working men going beyond the basics of contemporary evening classes, or the utilitarian aims of the Mechanics' Institutes.” (Atwood 51). The other aim of Ruskin's teaching was also “to free students from the rigid practice of the Government Schools” (Atwood 53) by training them to draw natural objects. The direct implication of his teaching was to encourage young students to find true satisfaction in the mere skill of their craft. As Atwood underlines, “by making a carpenter happier in being a carpenter, Ruskin sought to revive the spirit of Gothic workmanship that he had expounded in *The Stones of Venice*; the reverence for and admiration of the natural world—God's creation—that makes men noble” (Atwood 54).
- 10 Ruskin's ethics of work and his challenging of the set boundaries between the fine and the decorative arts clearly had an impact on Rossetti's own, distinctly “integrative” approach to the arts. Just like William Morris whose enthusiasm for Ruskin's lectures led to the foundation of the Arts and Crafts movement (Faulkner 2000, 6-8), so Rossetti must have been strongly impressed by Ruskin's public lectures where he advocated the union of the arts and the raising of the decorative arts to the level of the fine arts. When examined together, Ruskin's public lectures of the 1850s and Rossetti's artistic projects of the same years thus show a similar focus on the ways to combine form, figure and expression in art.

- 11 Returning to *The Blue Closet* watercolour and the ceramic motifs included in the picture one can suggest that its very composition illustrates Ruskin's position as regards ornamental design. The argument is two-fold: one, that there should be no hierarchy or distinction between the fine arts and the decorative arts; two, that both forms of art should rest on the same artistic skill in representing figures accurately.
- 12 In his third lecture given at Bradford in March 1859, entitled *Modern Manufacture and Design* Ruskin asserted:
- Get rid, then, at once, of any idea of Decorative art a degraded or a separate kind of art. Its nature or essence is simply its being fitted for a definite place. And in that place, forming part of a great and harmonious whole, in companionship with other art; and so far from this being a degradation to it—so far from Decorative art being inferior to other art because it is fixed to a spot—on the whole it may be considered as rather a piece of degradation that it should be portable. (CWJR, XVI, 320)
- 13 The critic then compares a little Dutch landscape on a mantelpiece as opposed to the frescoes of the *Campo Santo* in Pisa (which played such a significant role in the second PRB's involvement with the Oxford Union murals in 1857- 1859) and concludes: "all art may be decorative and that the greatest art as yet produced has been decorative" (*op.cit.*, 321). He then goes to demonstrate that the conception of form (such as the delineation of the figure in sculpture, for instance) derives from the study of the figure and shows the "inseparable connection between figure-drawing and good ornamental work" (CWJR, XVI, 326). His examples range from Greek art to medieval tapestry, leading him to conclude that the lack of figure-drawing in the training of today's workmen leads to a lack of imagination so that "today, we have no good ornamental design" (*op.cit.*, 329). As Rossetti himself was in charge of teaching figure-drawing at the Working Men's College, one may suggest that *The Blue Bower* may be reconsidered as an illustration of Ruskin's argument that figure-drawing is the way towards creating innovative design.
- 14 By comparison to traditional academic drawing, where the student is taught "only to draw a leaf well" [...] and then to turn it the other way, opposite to itself, to create a "design" (*op.cit.*, 331). Ruskin advocates that his audience draw human figures together not by "knocking two heads together" and hoping that they will make a design but by thinking about figure-drawing in terms of composition. The result is a harmonious whole for "you will see at once that to arrange a group of two or more figures you must, though it may desirable to balance, or oppose them, at the same time vary their attitudes, and make one, not the reverse of the other, but the companion of the other." (*ibid.*)
- 15 A clear illustration of Ruskin's idea, *The Blue Closet* therefore uses figures as companion motifs to lend a strong ornamental quality to the picture. Designed as decorative paintings, such pictures show Rossetti trying to accommodate his art to a particular place and time. Just as the Oxford Murals fresco-painting venture that he, William Morris and others participated in at around the same time, these experimental works all hark back to older forms of art that mix patterns and media to promote greater affinity between the arts.
- 16 Ruskin's stress on greater harmony between art forms, figure-drawing and abstraction, day-to-day use and aesthetic necessities, his insistence on truth in execution and his persistent emphasis on the connection between the fine arts and the decorative arts necessarily paved the way to a new design adventure: the creation of the Morris,

Marshall, Faulkner & Co., “Fine Art Workmen in Painting, Carving, Furniture and the Metals”, which was jointly created by William Morris, Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne-Jones, Charles Faulkner, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, P. P. Marshall, and Philip Webb in 1861.

- 17 How did this new step towards aestheticism and modernity revive the decorative arts in general and more particularly the use of ceramics and glassware as artistic material? What part did Rossetti play in the company’s various schemes and how did his temporary involvement with the firm allow him to explore new alleys in his painting and his poetry? These are the main issues to be discussed here.

The Firm and Rossetti’s “Baffling Pots”⁹

- 18 In the record of his brother’s artistic career aptly-called *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer*, William Michael Rossetti recalls his brother’s role in the foundation of what became known as “the shop”. There he claims that Dante Gabriel initiated the movement by quickly responding to what the latter regarded as a good business opportunity. As is well-known, Rossetti had a strong business flair and was always astute in his art dealing. According to William, this is how the story went:

The first suggestion for forming some such firm came from Mr. Peter Paul Marshall, an engineer, son-in-law of Mr. John Miller of Liverpool, who has been already mentioned more than once. Rossetti was the first to close with the idea. Through him Madox Brown was enlisted, followed by Burne Jones; also the “Falkner” whose name appeared in the firm, and Mr. Philip Webb the architect. All these seven were in fact the partners constituting the firm. Mr. Morris put some money into the concern to set it going, and each of the others co-operated in a minor degree; Mr. Charles Falkner, an Oxford mathematician, joined, as being an intimate friend of Mr. Morris. (Rossetti 1889, 59)

- 19 In her authoritative Rossetti biography, Jan Marsh also quotes one of Rossetti’s letters to Allingham of January 1861 announcing the scheme¹⁰. She makes two important points about the starting of the Firm: first, that William Morris always claimed the initiative as his own, then that the idea of a business grew “[f]rom the adornment of Red House” (Marsh 223). While the first point remains anecdotal¹¹, the second point gives an idea of the original project which entailed “reinstating decoration, down to its smallest details, as one of the fine arts” (“William Morris” article, Wikipedia). Morris’s Red House, which he and Philipp Web designed in 1861 for the Morris couple does give an idea of the ways in which architecture and the decorative arts were seen as merging in a single location and project. Factual evidence of Rossetti’s enthusiasm in the development of the project reinforces the sense that he saw in the firm an opportunity to revive the medieval spirit of Giotto’s time. In particular, the nickname “The Shop” which was soon given to the office, showroom and workshop in Red Lion Square, its first headquarters, could not but recall Giotto’s famous “workshop” (Marsh 223).
- 20 Moreover, at the time of the Firm’s foundation Rossetti was himself already renowned for living in quaintly-decorated homes and studios. When, after his wife’s death in 1862, he moved to Tudor House, 16 Cheyne Walk, he soon gave the house “a deliberately uncoordinated look very much in advance of its time, juxtaposing junk with high-quality, an eclectic mixture of Chinese and Japanese objects with Delft tiles, Old English china, brass, pewter, Spanish cabinets”.(Treuerherz, Prettejohn and Becker 2003 229) Treffry Dunn, who later became Rossetti’s assistant, famously described

Rossetti's parlour by stressing the accumulation of furniture and the place occupied by china :

On either side of the grate were inlaid a series a series of old blue Dutch tiles, mostly of Biblical subjects done in the most serious comic manner that existed in the period. The firegrate was a beautifully wrought specimen of 18th Century design and fender to match. In one corner of the room stood an old china cupboard ; inside was displayed a quantity of Spode ware. (Dunn 1984, 14)

- 21 Dunn's well-known watercolour depicting Rossetti and Theodore Watts-Dunton in the sitting room at Cheyne Walk gives a good idea of Rossetti's "bric-a-brac"¹² furnishing style and the ways in which surfaces and materials were combined so as to create a peculiar (and perhaps somewhat stifling) atmosphere. As has been remarked many times over, the abundance of mirrors further amplified the magnetic presence of objects and connected portraits and vases, wall-paper¹³and tiles, commodities and animated beings.
- 22 As Rossetti's taste and craze for Chinese blue-and-white china grew¹⁴, so he found more and more ways to include some of his favourite decorative collectibles in his own art. Sometimes, the opportunity would come from a commission such as in the portrait of Mrs F.R. Leyland in *Monna Rosa*, a portrait of the young woman arranging flowers in a blue Chinese large vase he painted in 1867 (private collection). Sometimes the paintings almost seemed like a sequence sharing the same theme or motif. For instance, both *Morning Music* (1864) and *Woman combing her hair* (1864) include realistic depictions of blue-and-white vases from Rossetti's collection that lend the painting both a contemporary and rich feel. Despite the true-to-nature representation of individual objects the overall sense is that Rossetti is using motifs, patterns and textures to highlight the pleasures derived from the senses of touch, sight and hearing (through the allusions to music or references to poetry).
- 23 However, of all the paintings produced in the mid-1860s that include ceramics, *The Blue Bower* is certainly the most emblematic, in many ways. First because, compared to *The Blue Closet* discussed earlier, the painting actually turns the musical scene into a Venetian-style portrait where colour and depth advantageously replace medieval flatness. Here the chequered background has given way to fanciful tiles that epitomize Rossetti's turn towards aesthetic design. The pattern on the tiles is the *prunus* blossom motif so often found on Chinese ginger jars that Rossetti used to call "hawthorn pots" (Treuerherz, Prettejohn and Becker 2003, 234)—a kind of porcelain that he often purchased from the dealer Murray Marks from 1861 onwards. The actual pattern on the painted tiles was taken from one of those jars "but applied to octagonal tiles, an invented form" (*ibid.*) so that "the picture is a kind of compendium of the interests in decorative art of Rossetti and his circle at this date" (Treuerherz, Prettejohn and Becker 2003, 190).
- 24 Moreover, by transposing the pattern to the tiles and using them as background to his painting, Rossetti is seen experimenting with the manifold possibilities of paint to suggest either the consistency of tiles or the transparency of stained glass. At a time when the artist was also busy contributing to the Firm's many commissions for stained-glass church windows¹⁵, tiles and even painted furniture, this painting can therefore be considered as a way to acknowledge the move into a new direction while retaining the poetic quality of his art. Such paintings as *The Blue Bower* or even *The Beloved* clearly use ceramics and the decorative arts in general to display the various uses of the palette. Just as the characters' complexions range from light and fair to tawny and dark¹⁶, so

the decorative elements are used to celebrate the evocative power of painting and include exotic elements: the background of the *Blue Bower* thus recalls the pattern of interwoven flowers and leaves of the Ottoman blue-and-white painted tiles exhibited in *The British Museum*¹⁷. It also looks forward to the Firm's Ceramic Wall Tiles, such as the ones designed by William Morris (and probably manufactured by Morris and Co) in 1873 for St Paul's Within the Walls in Rome¹⁸.

- 25 As a consequence, a painting like *The Beloved* (1865-1866) that has inspired so many Rossetti scholars to furnish elaborate interpretations might just be considered as an artistic experiment. If so, it is more about form than meaning: the hair ornament or the vase at the centre of the painting, the circular shape of the female body might be an illustrated defence of the plurality of media. Considered from the vantage point of the decorative arts, Rossetti's painting *The Beloved* is not only an imaginative portrait of Solomon's bride. It is also a rich display of colourful textures and ornaments that proves a remarkable jewel-case for the setting of the central piece: Solomon's bride. In the foreground of the composition, the vase—a golden piece in the finished version rather than the ceramic vase depicted in the original draft—that is being held by the African boy further underlines the parallel between the young bride “brought unto the king in a raiment of needlework” and the fresh-cut roses presented in the precious centrepiece vase.
- 26 Within the saturated space of the picture plane, as well as in Rossetti's poetry, the ornament—ceramic or otherwise—is therefore both a decorative element and a meaningful signifier. Sometimes, however, the signifier fails to signify and the art work is just a decorative piece of furniture, as in *The Day Dream* (1880), one of his most beautiful pictures, and one often shown to belong to a more “aesthetic” or “symbolist” movement¹⁹.
- 27 Even in his poetry one finds such instances of empty and yet tantalizing settings: thus the *Bride's Prelude*, also called the *Bride's Chamber*, fails to tell a clear story. However the detailed description of the bedroom and the decorative elements described in the course of the poem do recall Rossetti's glittering, shimmering later visual works. For example, the description of the two heroines at the beginning of the poem shows the poet using his keen eye for detail when picturing the background to the scene²⁰
- Within the window's heaped recess
The light was counterchanged
In blent reflexes manifold
From perfume-caskets of wrought gold
And gems the bride's hair could not hold
All thrust together: (l.16-20)
- 28 The effect of light bouncing off the window to the casket and into the young bride's hair is effectively sounded in the alternation between the various vowels that collide in the final image of “thrust”. The overall impression is that of a well-wrought vignette, painted tile or medieval stained-glass (such as *Music, King René's Honey Moon* designed in 1862). Even as he focuses on his poetry again, Rossetti thus invites the reader to see in his poems a picture, or a vase, or a stained glass window. Beyond the double works of art or the engraved picture-frames inscribed with lines and verses Rossetti's inclusion of decorative elements in his painting as well as his poetry clearly points to design and self-conscious form.

The Vase of Life—Ceramics is Pottery is Poetry

- 29 To illustrate this point and show how Rossetti's artistic development and achievement ultimately lies in his ability to combine content and form, the literal and the allegorical, the art object and the artefact, one could as a final example consider the sonnet *The Vase of Life*²¹ (1869), which appears at the end of the *House of Life* and focuses on a ceramic vase. As Richard L. Stein has underlined, "[the poem] comments on the entire sequence" and "shows the contrast between figurative and literal views of art" (Stein 188). If the *House of Life* is a sequence of sonnets celebrating lost moments and in Rossetti's well-known phrase staging the sonnet as a "moment's monument", so the *Vase of Life* is a *moment's ornament*. A distant echo of Keats's well-known "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (Bass, 259), the sonnet is also a complex commentary on the relations between the various forms of art and a kind of parable on the fabric, meaning and use of vases, from the everyday ceramic ware to the funerary urn.

Around the vase of life at your slow pace
 He has not crept, but turned it with his hands
 And all its sides already understands.
 There, girt, one breathes alert for some great race:
 Whose road runs far by sands and fruitful space;
 Who laughs, yet through the jolly throng has pass'd;
 Who weeps, nor stays for weeping; who, at last
 A youth, stands somewhere crowned, with silent face.
 And he has filled this vase with wine for blood
 With blood for tears, with spice for burning vow
 With watered flowers for buried love most fit;
 And would have cast it shattered to the flood
 Yet in Fate's name has kept it whole, which now
 Stands empty till his ashes fall in it.

- 30 The sonnet is clearly divided into two parts and "offers a continually shifting perspective on the vase" (Bass189). Whereas in the octet the focus is on the contemplation of the scenes depicted on the vase, "the sestet shifts from narrative to ritual content, treating the vase not as a surface but as an object to be held, filled and emptied"(*ibid.*). Here, as in *the Bride's Prelude*, the first words focus the reader's attention on a mosaic of individual visual elements that compose an animated picture. The first three lines describe the vase in a dynamic fashion, in its making, rather than in its finished aspect. The use of the words 'around', "pace", "crept", "turned" and even "understands" shows the vase being held by an active onlooker whose gesture mirrors or rehearses that of the potter. As the artisan first shaped the vessel on a wheel, so the character handling the piece is seen viewing the vase in all its dimensions and reproducing the gesture of God creating Man from earthly matter. The vase itself therefore qualifies both as a real artefact and a piece of art. It is also an allegorical motif that invites the critic to see the poem as an instance of what John Hollander and Grant Scott call "notional ekphrasis"—that is the verbal description of an imaginary piece of art (Hollander 1994, Scott 1995).
- 31 The scenes and characters depicted on the vase are vague enough to refer to any black or red figures depicted on the Greek vases that were made popular in the 1850s by Lenormant and de Witte in the publication of their influential and authoritative *Elite des monuments céramographiques*, whose first volume was published in 1844. The allusive "one", taken up again as "a youth" at the end of the stanza presumably refers to a male

hero or deity with whom the vase onlooker can identify. The visual scenes are seen in a sequence where one recognizes the well-known iconography of Greek and Italian vases of pursuit scenes (mortal or divine) and triumphant pageants.

32 Incidentally and interestingly, the change in the representation of the character from an active to a passive figure (first running, then, laughing and weeping, and finally standing crowned) encapsulates the whole range of attitudes to be found on Greek ceramic ware and highlights the evolution of Greek art that Ruskin himself was to underline in the years just after Rossetti's *Poems* appeared in 1870 after his election as Professor of Fine Art at the University of Oxford.

33 Indeed, looking at Ruskin's four collection catalogue series (now part of the Ashmolean) aiming at helping students reflect on motifs as well as on the connection between the decorative and the realistic design (section IX in the *Educational Series*), one clearly sees that Rossetti and Ruskin's thoughts ran parallel. Just when Ruskin explained in his lectures that

the change in the ancient Greek conception of deity took place between the sixth and fourth centuries BC, and was marked by a development from conceiving of the gods as embodiments of physical forces to individual, characterised intelligences ; from active to passive figures ; and from grotesque to deliberately-selected beautiful depictions (<http://ruskin.ashmolean.org/object/WA.RS.REF.184.b>)

34 Rossetti was seen illustrating the various stages of that development in his poem. The hero he describes is successively seen as an athlete, a victorious or a seated Hephaestus—all characters Rossetti could have seen in the collections of the British Museum²². The compression of all the episodes into one is also characteristic of the narrative technique used by Greek vase painters²³. The "silent face" in the last line of the octave—a classic trope in ekphrasistic poetry—effectively gives a sense of closure and distance as the interpreter is shown using the vase in many different ways.

35 Far from being a catalogue of the various types of vases²⁴ the rest of the poem is an abstract meditation on the relation between form and meaning, content and container. From a modern critical perspective, the lines are an invitation to reconsider the relationship between the object and its name and try to "understand" the relation between the signifier and the signified. As William Michael Rossetti first pointed out in his introduction to the poem (Rossetti 1911), in this poem as in Rossetti's other *Sonnets for Pictures* the shift from the literal to a more symbolical meaning hinges on the preposition "for" that is repeatedly used in the first lines of the sestet. However, contrary to William Rossetti's comment that the term "for" refers to various and sometimes antagonistic uses of the word²⁵, I would argue that the term is used to make the transition from the narrative and the decorative to the allegorical, in a translation process that may be intricate and obscure but contributes to the sonnet's virtuosity : *for* in this case could be interpreted as "stands for" or even *in exchange of* in a translation or transaction process from image to word.

36 Through the allusion to the various rituals that present the vase both as a useful and a beautiful object, and by ignoring the differences in religion (with allusions to the Eucharist as well as references to pagan rituals using recipients for decanting wine, preparing libation or else burning incense) Rossetti is reminding the reader of the vase's initial manufacture : the vase, regardless of its use and function was made by human hands and bears the marks of its flesh-and-blood creator (himself made of clay by a divine hand) whose destiny is inscribed in time and space.

- 37 Even as it stands waiting to be filled, the vase is open to every interpretation and finds its meaning in the gaze of its perceiver : as the onlooker in the museum is called upon to give life to the painted figures on the vase, so the interpreter of the vase symbolism is free to find purpose in its existence, materiality or else altogether renounce interpretation. As such, the vase is a symbol, or even a *symbolon*, that unites two levels of perception : the real and the imaginary, the visual and the virtuous, the material and the abstract. Its archaic function is to collect matter (be it water, wine or ashes) serving to record or remember experience, “to keep it whole” (l.14). As such it is a metaphor for poetry.
- 38 Examining Rossetti’s interest in ceramic art and the ways in which he used ornament and design in his paintings and his poems allows us to confirm several hypotheses, first regarding the artist’s idiosyncratic approach to the arts, his engagement with critical contemporary debates (and more particularly Ruskin’s views) and to draw a few conclusions regarding pottery-making in general.
- 39 As Jerome McGann acutely observed, in Rossetti’s poetry, we see “[a] typical inclination to handle his linguistic works as if they were kinds of objects” (McGann 2000, 74). In this way the *Vase of Life* is at once a tribute to such sf figures as Keats or Millais), an ekphrastic poem and an almost metaphysical sonnet on the making of poetry itself if we accept that a container of meanings like a vase can be compared to language itself.²⁶
- 40 It is about a vase and is itself as visually mysterious and enigmatic as a Greek vase. It is a definite object “as if it occupied space and could be as readily moved about as moved through” (*op.cit.* 75) and yet it is a self-reflexive form defying interpretation, an iconotext.. Placed towards the end of the sonnet-sequence, the poem is at the same time just another ornament in the *House of Life*’s living-room, a funerary urn in Rossetti’s *In Memoriam*, and the very embodiment of Rossetti’s “materialist” art (Ruskin as quoted in McGann 2000, 77). As a commentary on the differences between various art forms and the plurality of media the poem even anticipates on Ruskin’s own analogy when he suggests, in *Mornings in Florence*, that one should look at Giotto’s fresco-painting as if he were still an Etruscan vase-painter.²⁷ Does that mean that Rossetti himself - a great admirer and follower of Giotto—should be regarded as an Etruscan-Greek vase-painter of the nineteenth century ? Perhaps not, and yet what he shares with all the ancient vase-makers of antiquity is the ability to knead his “clay” into shape and to inscribe it.
- 41 Sometimes the clay is a well-known iconographical motif, such as *The Annunciation* (Stein 1975, 187) or the angel of Love in *A Last Confession*, sometimes it is a more esoteric one, like the idealistic bower. In every case though, Rossetti follows Keats’s famous advice to “load every rift with ore” (Keats 442), chiselling his words, painting and repainting the same scenes in various media to try and get to the heart and complexity of the matter. Stein subtly summed up the issue when he observed :
- Just as his poetry frequently dramatizes its own ornateness to illustrate the process from which all art grows, his painting contains numerous reminders that art is never spontaneous, and that an imagination is always at work comparing, abstracting, transforming its materials. (Stein 1975, 187)
- 42 Ultimately one may suggest that Rossetti’s interest for ceramics, design and the decorative arts in general had to do with his intuition that they possessed the same transformative power as words themselves for, like words, they were endowed with alternative modes of being, one literal, the other metaphorical, one inscribed and

controlled, the other latent and unpredictable. Such an awareness of the malleability of objects probably explains why his few experiments with various media were able to inspire a whole generation of artists and initiate a movement like the aesthetic movement which is so much about the mutability of form and self-reflection. In all his designs, paintings and poems, he eventually demonstrated that each form allows a distinctive way of recording a particular emotion or memory and that the power of art lies in its very ability to transcend the past and body forth new dreams.

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NOTES

2. For a discussion of Henry Wallis, see Gadoin 2009.
3. For detailed analysis on the notion of the "bower" in Rossetti, see Laurent 2008.
4. One should remember Whistler's ironic remark when discovering Rossetti's beautiful picture-frames: "take out the picture and frame the sonnet!".
5. Rossetti designed bindings for books of poetry, notably for his sister Christina and his friend Swinburne.
6. Two Rossetti pictures bear the same title, *A Christmas Carol*. One is the 1857 watercolour that closely relates to *The Blue Closet*; the other is an oil-painting that was executed in 1867.
7. One such response is the poem written by William Morris also entitled *The Blue Closet* (1858).
8. Of course Ruskin was not the only one to be concerned about art and education. From the 1830s the government had attempted to raise the national standards of design through various initiatives. In 1837 the Government School of Design was founded at Somerset House in the Strand. In 1852 the School and its Museum collection (assembled for teaching purposes) was moved to Marlborough House under the administration of Henry Cole. This move initiated a significant change with the foundation of the Department of Science and Art in 1853 and the establishment of the South Kensington Museum in 1857 (it was renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1899). "At South Kensington, where the founding principle of the museum was the education of future designers, manufacturers and the working public, Cole oversaw, with Richard Redgrave (1804-88), the development of principles and a system of segregated and theoretical approach to design" (Livingstone and Parry 2005, 41-42). Key references to design of the period include Cole's own *Journal of Design* (1849-1952) and Owen Jones's *Grammar of Ornament* (1856).
9. The heading refers to an expression Rossetti used in urging Ford Madox Brown to come and see his collection, writing: "My pots now baffle description altogether....COME AND SEE THEM" (reported in Treuherz, Prettejohn, Becker 2003, 233).
10. "We are organising a company for the production of furniture and decoration of all kinds, for the sale of which we are going to open an actual shop!" (Marsh 223)
11. Posterity in fact did retain that the initiative came from both men, even though William Morris's name clearly gets many more quotes due to the restructuring of the firm as Morris & Co. on 31 March 1875. Jan Marsh's opinion is that "the Firm was not Rossetti's idea" (Marsh 23). For another view on the origins of the firm and the Arts and Crafts movement to follow, cf. Livingstone and Perry 2005.
12. The expression is Rossetti's own, as reported in William Michael Rossetti 1889, 69.
13. In her biography, Marsh indicates that Rossetti had planned to design his own wall-paper - a plan he never actually carried out and she concludes that "the plan surely contributed to the Firm's decision to produce wall-papers" (Marsh, 233). Likewise, Barrie Bullen reports that the painter Luke Ionides remarked that Rossetti was one of the first to "advocate one's living among beautiful things of one's own choice" (Bullen 2011, 151).
14. One should also bear in mind that Rossetti's interest for pottery was growing as the term "art pottery" was just emerging to describe both "the wares of new potteries to produce art wares

(often small and experimental ventures) and the attempts of established manufacturers to produce artistic ranges in addition to their commercial output.”(Livingstone and Parry 2005, 182)

15. Although recent records state that Rossetti designed only a small amount of stained glass for domestic or church uses (Treuerherz, Prettejohn and Becker 2003, 223), Jan Marsh claims that "it was here that Rossetti made his largest contribution, with thirty-six large or multiple-figure cartoons between 1861 and 1864." (Marsh, 235) He contributed a few designs for tiles, such as the *December. Man Killing Pig* design executed in 1861) or the Findon Tiles (Marsh 2000)

16. In his recent book, Barrie Bullen ponders on the ways to interpret each type and ventures to write: “Ranging as they do from Negro to Aryan they might suggest a homage to the superiority of fair skin and blond hair. Or, alternatively they might be variations on a theme in which women of different races offer their own special kind of desirability”. (Bullen 2011, 170).

17. A picture of the tiles can be seen at: http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/me/u/underglaze-painted_tiles.aspx

18. To see a photograph of the design:
<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/design/ceramics/28.html>

19. For an overview of Rossetti’s influence on late-nineteenth century artists, cf. Treuerherz, Prettejohn and Becker 2003, 111-129.

20. Compare with William Rossetti’s commentary on the poem in the 1911 edition:

“An hour's remaining yet.” For profusion and passion of pictorial detail I do not think that Rossetti ever wrote anything more noticeable than “The Bride's Prelude”, early as the commencement of it was. (Rossetti 1911, 26)

21. The poem was originally titled *Run and Won*.

22. For instance the amphora then known as the ‘Callias Vase’ in the British Museum whose print circulated among art students: see the print in the Ashmoleum Museum online catalogue of Ruskin’s teaching collection, *The Elements of Drawing*.

23. For a great example of a situla, see: <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/56.171.64>

24. In ancient Greece, vases all bore specific names depending on their usage, such as the kylix, the situla or the more generic krater.

25. The use of the word “for” in these lines is not quite clear to me. In the first line “for” appears to mean “instead of”, and so perhaps in the earlier instance in the second line: wine instead of blood, and blood instead of tears. The next “for” appears to mean “on account of,” or “by way of”: spice by way of burnt-offering. In the last line “for” has its natural primary sense, following the adjective “fit. Madame Couve translates thus: “De sa coupe déborde plus de vin que de sang; puis plus de sang que de larmes”. If the reader thinks that, even after these explanations, the total drift of the passage is not plain, I do not dissent from him. (Rossetti, 1889, 255-256)

26. The idea suggested here is a perhaps audacious claim that Yves Bonnefoy remarkably defends in a beautiful text on the decorative arts (Bonnefoy 2010). He draws a parallel between language and the shape and significance of vases in culture. Although quite allusive, the text is full of judicious intuitions and fruitful remarks on the relation between language and pottery.

27. “Now you must observe that painting a Gothic chapel rightly is just the same thing as painting a Greek vase rightly. The chapel is merely the vase turned upside-down, and outside-in. The principles of decoration are exactly the same. Your decoration is to be proportioned to the size of your vase; to be together delightful when you look at the cup, or chapel, as a whole; to be various and entertaining when you turn the cup round; (you turn yourself round in the chapel;) and to bend its heads and necks of figures about, as it best can, over the hollows, and ins and outs, so that anyhow, whether too long or too short-possible or impossible

—they may be living, and full of grace. You will also please take it on my word today—in another morning walk you shall have proof of it—that Giotto was a pure Etruscan-Greek of the thirteenth century: converted indeed to worship St. Francis instead of Heracles; but as far as vase-painting goes, precisely the Etruscan he was before. This is nothing else than a large, beautiful, coloured Etruscan vase you have got, inverted over your heads like a diving-bell”. (CWJR 14, 43).

1. For a detailed description of the PRB’s painting technique, cf. W. H. Hunt 276.

ABSTRACTS

The recent “Cult of Beauty” touring exhibition (Victorian and Albert Museum, 13 September 2011, 15 January 2012) has convincingly shown the role such key pre-Raphaelite artists as Dante Gabriel Rossetti played in the transition from the mid-Victorian age to British aestheticism by dedicating much space to such emblematic paintings as *Bocca Baciata* (1859) or *The Day Dream* (1880). However, Rossetti’s exact artistic involvement with the Arts and Crafts design movement, which emerged in Britain around 1860 (but only took its official name after the foundation of the Crafts Exhibition Society in 1887) and his exploration of lesser forms of art in his own artistic career have not yet been widely examined: how could the leader of the Preraphaelite Brotherhood—an artistic endeavour renowned for its insistence on transparent, true-to-nature symbolism—have inspired the decorative, overcharged designs and furniture of the Arts and Crafts movement? Did Rossetti’s art also move towards aestheticism, and if so, does this change the way we should interpret his paintings and his poetry?

This paper hopes to address these issues by looking at Rossetti’s experiments with mixed media, with a special focus on Rossetti’s interest in and collecting of ceramics. It also aims to look at Rossetti’s artistic production in a broad and inclusive manner and to balance his ideas against those expressed by John Ruskin in his conferences on art and architecture in the mid-1850s.

La récente exposition *Beauté, morale et volupté dans l’Angleterre d’Oscar Wilde* (Musée d’Orsay, 13 septembre 2011-15 janvier 2012) a remarquablement illustré la façon dont un artiste préraphaélite aussi emblématique que Dante Gabriel Rossetti a contribué à faire glisser l’ère victorienne vers l’esthétisme dès le milieu du siècle, accordant par exemple une place de choix à deux de ses tableaux les plus représentatifs, *Bocca Baciata* (1859) et *The Day Dream* (1880).

Cependant, quel rôle exact l’artiste a-t-il joué dans l’avènement du mouvement *Arts and Crafts* et par quel biais s’est-il lui-même intéressé à des formes d’art moins reconnues, telle que la céramique ? Comment a-t-il réussi à l’intégrer dans son art ? Alors qu’à ses débuts, la peinture préraphaélite consistait à peindre de la façon la plus transparente possible en privilégiant un rapport direct à la nature¹, il semble intéressant de montrer en quoi l’intérêt de Rossetti pour les arts décoratifs a également pu inspirer les tendances et les créations du mouvement *Arts and Crafts*. Un tel examen conduira tout naturellement à se demander si l’on peut conclure que l’art de Rossetti a peu à peu évolué vers l’esthétisme et ce que cette lecture change quant à l’analyse de ses œuvres poétiques et picturales.

Dans cet article, il s’agira d’élucider ces questions en évoquant les expériences de Rossetti avec une pluralité de média, en se concentrant plus particulièrement sur les objets en céramique qu’il collectionnait et peignait dans ses tableaux. Par là, il s’agira dans un deuxième temps d’envisager

l'œuvre de Rossetti comme une œuvre totale, à portée philosophique autant qu'esthétique et de la mettre en regard avec les idées mises en avant par John Ruskin dans les années 1850.

INDEX

Keywords: ceramics, Victorian, decorative arts, Pre-Raphaelitism, collecting

Mots-clés: céramique, Victorien, arts décoratifs, Pré-Raphaélites, collectionneurs

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