

Columbia art museum presents 'Victorian Visions'

from a laudanum overdose in 1862, her husband Dane Gabriel Rossetti was so distraught that he added something extra to her open coffin. He hid among her long red tresses a small bound volume of manuscript poems inspired by their relationship. This book containing the only copy of most of these love lyrics was buried with her.

It may very well be true, however, that time helps heal old wounds. Seven years after his wife's burial, Rossetti had second thoughts about his extravagant gesture, and he gave his permission to exhume Elizabeth Siddal's body by dead of night and retrieve the notebook whose contents he eventually published.

Although he may not always have given his verse compositions their proper care, Rossetti was far more scrupulous about his visual work. A founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a small but influential association of artists determined to revive the purity of art before Raphael by returning to the legendary themes, vibrant colors and accumulation of detail characteristic of medieval art, Rossetti and other members of the group produced work that was popular with both connoisseurs and the general public.

Not only the paintings but also the drawings and watercolors became prized by collectors. Thanks to two particularly ardent admirers of the work of the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and other late-nineteenth century British artists, many examples of their work came to be housed in the National Museums and Galleries of Wales. For a limited time, some of the jewels of this collection are on view as part of a wonderful exhibition now hosted by the Columbia Museum of Art, the last stop on a five-city national tour. Entitled "Victorian Visions," the show features over 60 works on paper, including finished drawings and watercolors and preliminary studies for paintings and assorted decorative projects.



DR. TOM
MACK
Arts & Culture
columnist

Because I've long been attracted to the paintings produced by the PRB and those artists, like Edward Burne-Jones, who came under their spell, I was particularly drawn to the part of the exhibition devoted to the drawings executed in preparation for these finished works. Consider, for example, an 1876 pencil and chalk study called "The Lovers," a preliminary treatment of one of the background couples in Rossetti's 1878 painting "The Blessed Damsel." Now owned by the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard College, the painting illustrates Rossetti's own poem of the same title, a verse composition that gives expression to the love that a damsel in heaven feels for her lover still on earth.

Encircling the "damsel" herself are a number of loving couples who speak "evermore among themselves their hear-remembered names"; the 1876 study represents one of these sets of lovers. Some critics identify Elizabeth Siddal as the damsel who from the supernal realm gazes down upon her grieving mate, the incarnation of Rossetti's own abiding grief. If this interpretation holds true, the carefully delineated sketch embodies the poet-painter's own wish fulfillment, reunion with his dead wife.

Equally resonant are a number of preliminary sketches of details from major paintings by Sir Edward Burne-Jones. Among these is a drapery study for the young woman in his 1883 masterwork "King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid." Now in the Tate Gallery in London, the painting depicts the mythic monarch in dark armor, a jeweled crown in his lap; his gaze is fixed on the barefoot maiden seated a few steps above him. According to the legend, so bewitched by her beauty is Cophetua that he marries the penniless Penelophon. The



ON DISPLAY. The 1876 pencil and chalk study called "The Lovers" is one of the works on display at the Columbia Museum of Art.

her gown.

"Victorian Visions" will be on view at the Columbia Museum of Art until April 10. Located at the corner of Main and Hampton Streets, the museum is open from Wednesday to Sunday. For more information, one can call 803-799-2810 or visit the web site www.columbiamuseum.org.