

art

Rose-Tinted Visions

A review of *Victorian Visions*, on view at the Columbia Museum of Art through April 10.

By MARY BENTZ GILKERSON

The Victorian era saw enormous and rapid cultural changes as the economy moved from rural and agricultural to urban and industrial. These cultural shifts are reflected in the art of the period just as the impact of the technological revolution of the 20th century can be traced in the art of the 20th and 21st centuries.

The current exhibition in the main galleries at the Columbia Museum of Art, *Victorian Visions*, is an interesting look at how one group of artists responded to those changes. The exhibition, which pulls drawings and watercolors from the collections of the National Museums & Galleries of Wales, will be on view through April 10.

Many of the works come from members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. This group of artists, formed around figures like Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones, along with many others like William Morris, rejected the advancing tide of industrialization and urbanization. They responded by looking backward to the Medieval and early Renaissance periods for models that were untouched by the dreaded machine age.

In Rossetti's *David as King*, an ink-wash study for an altarpiece for Llandaff Cathedral, he depicts the crowned David in



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Lovers*

chain mail strumming a musical instrument, a creative piece of historical and biblical interpretation. The final altarpiece is a neo-gothic confection of gilt and pseudo-medieval script.

But the artists didn't reject one byproduct of the industrial revolution — a new patron base, the growing middle class. This rising economic group was eager to buy and support art, especially as it assisted their climb up the social ladder. Because ties to "trade" were socially unacceptable in the class structure of the time, art that looked backward instead of at modern life appealed to the rising class.

The landscapes in the show have no references to contemporary life, no sign of the growth of the British industrial giant.

A look at the watercolors by Goodwin and Rooke show landscapes more in tune with picturesque postcard views than with real life. The divorce of landscape art from the realities of everyday life begins with this late-19th-century trend.

In the beginning of the Victorian period, when photography was still in its infancy, watercolor and pencil drawings and sketches were created by artists of scenic spots as mementos for the increasing numbers of tourists that developed as the middle classes grew. These "views" were the predecessors of postcards, and, like their later counterparts, they idealized whatever spot they were supposed to capture.

Tintern Abbey by William Collingwood is typical of this type of work. It is a care-

fully composed charcoal of the scene made famous by the Roman poet, William Wordsworth. Its dramatic sense of scale is created by the inclusion of two small figures at the bottom of the drawing emerging from the abbey ruins.

Nostalgia and sentimentality are characteristic of much late Victorian work. *Study of a Graveyard* by Sir Frank Dicksee is a small watercolor depicting a lonely corner of a village graveyard. Behind the gravestones is a "quaint" thatched cottage that fills the background of the painting. Still within the graveyard is a rosebush bearing a single red rose, an allegory for the ephemeral nature of life and a symbolic counterpoint for the heavy ivy covering the opposite tree in the composition.

The Victorian nostalgia for an earlier idealized worldview parallels similar desires in contemporary American culture. The popularity of Thomas Kinkadee, the self-proclaimed top-selling artist in America, testifies to that desire. A look at one of Kinkadee's *Cottage Series* on his web site reveals more similarities with this Victorian-type nostalgia than differences.

Sunset suffuses the whole scene with a rosy glow that is matched by the golden light that comes from within the cozy thatched cottage that is central to the piece. Roses and other flowers fill the garden in a profusion that doesn't happen even in most botanical gardens.

The large figure study in watercolor by John Singer Sargent stands out in the exhibit, both for its loose brushwork and for the completely different context in which Sargent and a few others in the show worked. The psychological exploration that is characteristic of his work, as well as his more painterly approach to his materials, makes him more of a forward-looking modernist than many of the artists in *Victorian Visions*. ■

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