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“Two to make a Brotherhood”: F. G. Stephens, art criticism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

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The career of Frederic George Stephens, writer on art, and one of the seven members of the Brotherhood, tends to be known only through the work of its leading artist members Rossetti, Millais and Hunt. Like William Michael Rossetti, he enjoyed a lengthy career as an art critic and disseminator of Pre-Raphaelite ideas. They worked closely together although their paths diverged by the mid 1870s when Stephens began to carve out a stronger identity as an art historian than as critic.

When Stephens joined the Brotherhood in 1848, however, he seemed headed for an artistic career. The son of an official at the Tower of London, Stephens came from a comfortable if modest background, entering the Royal Academy Schools in 1844 at the age of sixteen. There he met Hunt and Millais and later D.G. Rossetti and Madox Brown. Stephens aspired to be a painter of figure subjects and exhibited briefly at the Royal Academy. A few of his surviving works, dating from 1850-5, are in Tate Britain and bear out his period of study at RA (such as his drawing of his mother). However, Stephens struggled with his vocation and while other works, such as The Proposal: the Marquis and Griselda (1850), show a capacity for colour handling, the figures are stiff and awkwardly drawn. He despaired at the slowness of his progress and appears to have destroyed many of his works.

Stephens thus seemed bound for the role of helpmate, assisting Hunt in 1850 with the restoration of Rigaud’s ceiling decoration at Trinity House. His handsome, vigorous looks meant that he was also in demand as a model – for Brown’s Christ washing Peter’s feet (in which he posed for the Christ figure), Millais’s Ferdinand and Ariel (in which he posed for the figure of Ariel) and Lorenzo and Isabella (in which he posed for the servant). Hunt and Millais also made portraits of him in 1848 and 1853, now respectively in Tate Britain and the National Portrait Gallery.

For Stephens, looking back years later in 1906, the formation of the Brotherhood in 1848 was a fleeting moment; it came to represent a ‘point of crystallisation at which
seven very young men whose convictions concerning ethics and art coalesced. W.M. Rossetti’s diaries of this period indicate that Stephens shared the energy and conviction of his fellow brethren, writing to the Superintendent of the Liverpool Exhibition to secure the exhibition of his Arthurian picture *King Arthur and Sir Bedivere* and reading over with them his Arthur poem. His writing career began during this period with the publication of *The Germ* for which he wrote two pieces during its brief existence. Stephens seems to have had strong literary interests, especially in poetry - (one of his pieces for the *Germ* eulogised Browning) and W.M. Rossetti ranked him, with Hunt and Woolner, as ‘all reading men.’ Whilst his contribution to the *Germ* was slight, it did trigger the launch of his professional writing career. In February 1850, as the second number of *The Germ* faltered, selling only forty copies, Edward William Cox, editor of the *Critic* wrote to William Michael Rossetti suggesting that should it fail, Rossetti or one of the other *Germ* art writers should write for him on art matters instead. At first, Rossetti himself wrote for the *Critic* but by January 1851, Stephens had taken over. He continued with the *Critic* for several years, until c. 1853.

Similarly, Stephens and W.M. Rossetti both wrote for the *Crayon*, a short-lived American journal of the graphic arts, Stephens a series on ‘The Two Pre-Raphaelitisms’ (1856) and Rossetti a regular column of art events and gossip ‘Art News from England.’ Stephens would go on to write for all the leading periodicals of the day, including the literary and scientific weekly the *Athenaeum*, the French *L’Art*, and P.G. Hamerton’s *Portfolio*, like the *Crayon*, practical in its aims. From his early days at the *Critic* and the *Crayon*, Stephens remained for many years a loyal ally to Rossetti, Hunt, Millais and Brown. However, he was independent minded enough to promote the interests of other vanguard artists as well such as Leighton and Whistler. The author of a landmark British Museum catalogue of satirical drawings and prints, he took a keen interest in Whistler’s etchings.
The art world that Stephens observed in the 1860s and 70s was one in which the Royal Academy exhibition was the focal point of the year artistically and commercially. Professional artists battled with its monolithic scale and competitive atmosphere and at other venues like the British Institution. Henry Morley conveys vividly the atmosphere of the Academy:

‘Each picture [...] receives daily the off-hand judgement of the many [...] with the mind confused by quick jolting along a line of ideas between which there are no lines of association, with attention much distracted by a babble at each ear, and with the body firmly jammed in a crowd of fellow-spectators.’\(^{13}\) Each year Stephens was required to review a spectrum of work at the Academy by some 1200 artists in usually no more than three notices. Hindered by crowds until 1871 when - under pressure from Stephens and a band of other critics, a separate Press Day was initiated - several hours at the exhibition enabled them to give most works only perfunctory consideration.

Art criticism was a piecemeal and modestly paid occupation with accordingly little influence over the editorial policy of a paper. In the early days of his employment at the *Athenaeum*, Stephens seems to have attempted to improve upon his paltry income by writing to Walter Thornbury, a fellow contributor, to enquire about what his predecessor\(^{14}\) had been paid\(^{15}\) but without much success. He was obliged to seek an income from a range of publications from the *Athenaeum, Fine Arts Quarterly* and *Portfolio* and later became a prolific author of monographs and historical publications such as *William Mulready* (1867) and *Edwin Landseer* (1869). Stephens’s specialist art knowledge was unusual,\(^{16}\) as was his closeness to PreRaphaelitism: Daily and weekly critics tended to be more like, as Whistler memorably put it ‘so many hansom bowling along that the moment may not be lost […] the one or two broughams solemnly rolling for reviews, while the lighter bicycle zigzags irresponsibly in among them for the happy Halfpennies.’\(^{17}\)

Aided by the author and English professor David Mather Masson, Stephens began work at the *Athenaeum* in February 1860.\(^{18}\) It became a forty-year association during which, as Stephens himself put it, he became ‘practically, the representative of that paper in regard to art.’\(^{19}\) He went on to become a reliable contributor on subjects not only in art but architecture, illustration, religious works and children’s books. The
Athenaeum was entering a remarkably fertile period in its history. Its editor Norman MacColl, a Scot who shared the same liberal outlook as his proprietor Sir Charles Dilke, gathered an exceptional group of contributors in the 1870s from similar circles to Stephens - Theodore Watts became its chief reviewer of poetry, the Rossetti brothers were both contributors, as was Edmund Gosse. The Athenaeum’s art coverage was thorough, chronicling the minutiae of artistic life, and it had few equivalents during this period. Of the art magazines, Fine Art Quarterly (for which Stephens also wrote) was short-lived, the Magazine of Art was not founded until 1878, and the Art Journal was a great deal more expensive and had only a monthly frequency. Although literary coverage tended to take precedence in the Athenaeum, art was given a prominent place under the regular headings: ‘Reviews’; ‘Original Papers;’ ‘Exhibitions;’ ‘Obituaries’ and ‘Gossip.’ Stephens’s 'Fine Art Gossip' column (and its counterpart in the fortnightly Academy) thus offered crucial opportunities to publicise a work or prestigious commission. The ‘puffing’ of works of art was an unexceptional part of art reporting. As Ford Brown told Stephens in 1862: ‘As I now take in the Athenaeum, I have sent all the notices you have done so jollily, also today your grand puff of my picture […] which I have just succeeded in selling, for all these many thanks.’

In this period, then, one might say that the Athenaeum’s art coverage represented a half-way point between that of daily newspapers and monthly or quarterly magazines and, as Alvar Ellegård has suggested, ‘its authority was on a par with that of the Times amongst the literary, artistic and scientific middle-classes.’ Stephens wrote proudly in 1871: ‘We notice […] in the first number of the Chronique des Arts […] nothing less than a recognition of the existence of art criticism exterior to France, e.g. indications of the publication of art-reviews in the Times and Athenaeum!’ One might also say that he acquired authority from the sheer volume and comprehensiveness of his output (some 475 art reviews together with numerous essays and gossip items).

Whilst modest about his own role, Stephens’s experience of the Brotherhood helped to give his art writings a distinct practical tone. Indeed, in 1873, Dante Gabriel Rossetti specifically referred to Stephens’s literary work as ‘practical and artist-like.’ Stephens also maintained links with the studio for many years at the
University College School at Gower Street. There, a former pupil remembered being instructed by Stephens - by then an austere and eccentrically dressed figure aged over seventy - in drawing from plaster casts. Thus if Stephens’s writing was conscientious rather than inspiring in approach, his background did set him apart from that of the literary connoisseur or journalistic hack.

In addition, Stephens played an important role in ensuring that Rossetti (who showed a firm disinclination to exhibit his work publicly) remained visible in the press notably through his ‘Fine Art Gossip’ column. In 1873, keen to publicise Dante’s Dream, Rossetti wrote to his brother of his hope that Stephens would write about his works. Stephens’ support for Rossetti’s art seems to have even extended to giving him virtual copy-approval: In April 1878, he wrote to Rossetti, telling him: ‘I will use your notes as a text of my own if you like, or simply copy them before they go in to be printed.’ Other correspondence shows Rossetti revising the proofs of Stephens’s articles.

Of course the relationship between artist and critic tends to be a symbiotic one and Stephens' correspondence reveals that Brown and the Brotherhood were oft-tried sources of copy. ‘I wish heartily,’ Brown wrote to him in 1877, ‘that I could furnish you with some news respecting any show that might interest the public - yet with all my ingenuity I can think of nothing.’ This is indicative, perhaps, of the greater equanimity of Brown’s relationship with Stephens; whilst he still relied on Stephens to promote his works through his columns, he was a less prescriptive figure than Rossetti and valued Stephens’s quiet discretion. Stephens also exchanged information with William Michael Rossetti. As the two professional critics to emerge from the Brotherhood, their relationship was close: ‘As I know you barter on gossip as a vulture on garbage,’ Rossetti told him, ‘I make no apology for tendering to you the enclosed paragraph regarding certain pictures.’ The two even substituted for each other on occasion.

The relationship between the two men was different to that of the other Brotherhood members, Rossetti addressing his friend ‘Dear Steph’ in his correspondence. Just as their critical careers followed a common trajectory and they wrote frequently for the same periodicals (though not necessarily at the same time), they continued to support
each other through the day-to-day demands of art commentary and review. They advised and encouraged each other and became co-dependent upon each other for sources of facts and gossip: ‘How do you get information for the Athenaeum relative to such matters as the purchases and prices of works of art sold at auctions & c & c,’ wrote Rossetti in March 1863, ‘I ask because the Fine Arts Quarterly has asked me to do this sort of summary for them, and none of the papers I have been connected with ever seem to receive information of the kind referred to.’\(^{35}\) Indeed, they shared items freely even when this could mean duplicating each other. In August 1862, Rossetti commenced a reply to Stephens with a summary of local art gossip followed by a list of items he had garnered from newspapers:

‘I could tell you something about Florence Exhibition, Brussels Museum, Head of Seneca, Cologne Cathedral, Barry monument Merton College, Pompeii, Queen’s Pictures for 62 Exhibition; but this is only what I note down from newspapers for my own use, and perhaps you either possess or don’t want such materials.’\(^{36}\) Stephens often sought out Rossetti’s response during the preparation of his articles, including such matters as the house style of Fraser’s Magazine: ‘The paper appears to me to be an interesting and valuable piece of criticism. I fear it is too much of a criticism upon individual works of art to suit Fraser.’\(^{37}\)

The directness and force of feeling of Stephens’s criticism often got him into trouble with his editor Norman MacColl at the Athenaeum:

‘I have had a talk with Sir Charles [Dilke] about criticising people whom we have abused before. He thinks that in such cases it is a pity for us to go out of our way to condemn them. We cannot of course praise their pictures when they are bad but he thinks we ought to find no more fault than is necessary. I must say I agree with these views and it was in conformity with them that I expunged some passages in your last article.’\(^{38}\) Stephens also clashed frequently with MacColl over editorial space (perhaps under pressure from his artist subjects), a tendency that was exacerbated by Stephens’s tendency towards wordiness and obsession with forensic detail: ‘I cannot repeat,’ MacColl wrote in frustration in 1884, ‘what I have said frequently, that it seems to me your conscientiousness leads you astray in notices of galleries. To describe one picture minutely you would need several pages.’\(^{39}\)
Stephen’s descriptive powers and cataloguing instincts found a perfect subject in his long-running series of articles ‘The Private Collections of England’, published in the *Athenaeum* over a number of years from 1873 to 1887. These made a significant contribution to the history of collecting since they not only documented in detail aristocratic collections but the private collections of the merchants and iron-masters of the north of England: in 1873, for example, his articles on the Duke of Northumberland’s collection at Alnwick were followed by articles on the collections of the engineer Sir William Armstrong at Jesmond Dene, near Newcastle and the lead manufacturer (and important Pre-Raphaelite patron) James Leathart at Bracken Dene. Later articles examined collections around Liverpool and Birkenhead, ranging from that of the Earl of Derby at Knowsley to the Liverpool ship-owner Frederick Leyland, another prominent Pre-Raphaelite patron. The series allowed Stephens’s social attitudes to reveal themselves. He gave equal weight to the collections of aristocratic and middle-class merchant patrons. He commended the taste of the latter for contemporary art and - although he criticised individual artists and works of art - respected their judgment. The paintings of the ship-owner George Holt, he wrote, ‘attest the independence of the owner’s judgment as well as his comprehensive tastes.’ In his account of his visit to Newcastle, Stephens noted ‘some specimens of bold engineering’ as ‘approaching high art’ before going on to hail the modern spirit of Leathart’s collection: ‘They are almost entirely the works of living artists, paintings of decided and high character, by men whose reputations, great as they now are, may outlast the standards of the hour, and who may represent to posterity the most living, poetical and accomplished artistic power of this age and country.’

Stephens’s focus on modern day collectors of contemporary art contributed to a strategy to explicate the ideas, inspiration and methods of PreRaphaelitism wherever he could. As well as the *Athenaeum*, he used a variety of other different platforms - from literary and artistic periodicals (such as ‘The Two Pre-Raphaelitisms’ (1856) for the *Crayon*, ‘A Confession of the Pre-Raphaelite Faith’ (1862) for the *London Review*) to the more non-specialist context of H. D. Traill’s weighty *Social England: A Record of the Progress of the People* (1897) to which he contributed two notable essays. Stephens also attempted to place PreRaphaelitism at the forefront of the avant garde and frequently reminded his audience of this: In December 1860 he wrote
a short memoir and description of Hunt’s works to mark the exhibition of Hunt’s The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple at the German Gallery. In the volume (which was accompanied by extensive and laudatory critical reviews) he invoked Ruskin’s second letter to the Times (13 May 1851) in defence of Millais and Hunt and claimed that to commission a work ‘required some courage, as well as independence of judgment.’ Thus all in all, the literary talents and industry of Stephens (together with others led by Ruskin and William Michael Rossetti) meant that Pre-Raphaelite ideas were remarkably well represented across a spectrum of the British and American press from an early stage.

However, while Stephens remained loyal to Pre-Raphaelite ideals, his attitudes to individual members of the Brotherhood evolved. By Rossetti’s death in 1882, he had begun to take a more measured view of their strengths and weaknesses. Writing a few years later, he drew comparison between its chief progenitors: ‘Comparing Pre-Raphaelite with Pre-Raphaelite, the critic sees perforce that Mr Hunt’s art is distinctly a reasoning process. He is the one steadfast Brother of whom it was not quite unfairly said that he has neither learned nor unlearned anything on his way through life, and who is apt now and then to fail in taste, and waste his opportunities on subjects not fit for painting, as well as to squander his energies in by-paths which have nothing to do with great design. Rossetti was a poet who painted with a fervid heart. Millais is the painter proper, endowed in his youth with imagination and during all his life keenly sympathetic.’

Of Rossetti he cited ‘The Girlhood of Mary Virgin’, as one of several works that was ‘defective in technical respects, and here and there may be detected signs of impatience and weariness.’ This, he felt, was ‘never seen in his poetry.’ Even Millais did not escape censure; by 1898, he had begun to question the ‘hasty manner’ of his technique.

But it was his relationship with Hunt that ended most catastrophically. Whilst Stephens had long promoted his career energetically, by the 1880s, it was clear that he saw a divide between Hunt and the others. He saw Hunt as having failed to evolve artistically and his criticisms of his work became increasingly overt. Considerable personal bitterness developed between them. Later matters deteriorated further when, in his autobiographical memoir, Hunt charged Stephens with having exchanged what
he claimed was a hostile attitude to the R.A. from one of partisanship. He also attempted to denigrate the roles of Stephens and William Michael Rossetti in the Brotherhood, accusing them of distorting the facts upon which subsequent critics had based their theories and of ignorance of Pre-Raphaelite ideals.\textsuperscript{48} Stephens wrote a lengthy reply to the \textit{Times} in which he contradicted Hunt’s claims including his account of the origins and aims of the Brotherhood. ‘Mr Hunt has “confused the issue”, Stephens wrote, ‘which is not what they or any of their friends talked about before or after that epoch, but who it was formed a certain society with indefinite aims. Holman-Huntism was never accepted by any of the seven except himself, least of all by Millais (who often asserted to me his own independence), Rossetti (who laughed at “Hunt’s hide-bound theories”), and Woolner.’\textsuperscript{49}

In the end, modern critics such as Roger Fry, who succeeded Stephens at the Athenaeum in 1901, overtook his densely descriptive style of criticism and increasingly conservative taste. Like Hunt, Stephens had no time for Impressionist art and this, as Diane Macleod has noted, meant that he ignored collections that included any kind of contemporary French art. But Stephens’s writing and his attitudes to Rossetti, Millais and Hunt demonstrate a devotion to the idea of progress and positivistic development in art. Whilst his opinions of the work of Rossetti, Millais and Hunt cooled by the mid 1880s, to the end Stephens believed that PreRaphaelitism was remarkable because, as he put it, ‘it was really the one power which in this country tended to the formation of a school in the historical sense of the term, as it is applicable to Roman, Florentine, Low Country, German, and modern French painting. Here, in fact, was a group of men of genius, who, however diverse they might be, acted according to a common impulse.’\textsuperscript{50}

\textit{Note:}
This article owes much to Dianne Sachko Macleod’s useful study of Stephens which includes a bibliography of Stephens’ publications (‘F.G. Stephens, Pre-Raphaelite critic and art historian.’ \textit{Burlington Magazine}, vol. 128 (June 1986), pp. 398-4-6). The author also acknowledges the kind permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford and the Special Collections Division, University of British Columbia Library to quote from manuscript correspondence in their collections.

\textsuperscript{1} Obituary by W.M. Rossetti, \textit{Athenaeum}, 16 Mar 1907, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{3} F.G. Stephens (hereafter F.G.S.), ‘The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood,’ letter to the \textit{Times}, 16 Feb 1906, p. 4.
Stephens’s essay ‘The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art’ (under the pseudonym ‘John Seward’) appeared in the second number and ‘Modern Giants’ (under the pseudonym ‘Laura Savage’) in the final number in May 1850.

The Germ: Thoughts towards nature in poetry, literature and art. Being a facsimile reprint of the literary organ of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Introduction by W.M. Rossetti, London 1901, p. 8


Rossetti’s diary records: ‘Stephens has taken up the art-criticism for the Critic, which I had declined because of my connexion with the Spectator.’ Op. cit., Fredemann 1975, p. 87.

Of which W.J. Stillman was co-proprietor.

In its early years the Portfolio reproduced drawings by many contemporary artists including George Frederic Watts, Burne-Jones and Millais. It also admitted original etchings.


Perhaps Solomon Hart or Frank Stone.

Walter Thornbury to F.G.S., 5 Mar 1864, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms Don.d.116. According to Thornbury, a promise of £200 a year had been made by the Athenaeum’s editor William Hepworth Dixon but not ‘much more than half that sum’ materialised.

His nearest rival in the mid 1860s was Joseph Beavington Atkinson, conservative art critic at the Saturday Review, and an artist and art teacher at the Bristol School of Art.


F.G.S., letter to the Times, 16 Feb 1906, p. 4. Ironically the Athenaeum had been the setting years earlier (1850) of Frank Stone’s fiercely critical review of the works of Rossetti, Millais and Hunt.


Editor of the Athenaeum, 1871-1900.


This format never became a feature of the other weekly reviews such as the Saturday Review and the Spectator.

Ford Madox Brown to F.G.S., [15 Apr 1862], Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms Don.e.61.

The Athenaeum enjoyed one of the highest circulation levels of the weekly reviews. (See Alvar Ellegård, The readership of the periodical press in mid-Victorian Britain, Göteborg, 1957, p.22).


D.G. Rossetti to F.G.S., 13 Dec 1873, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms Don.e.61.

‘From a correspondent’, ‘One of the Pre-Raphaelites: When F.G. Stephens taught drawing at University College School,’ Times, 26 Feb 1859, p. 12.

He had last exhibited at the Hogarth Club in February 1860.

Dante’s Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice (1856; watercolour; Tate Britain).


F.G.S. to D.G. Rossetti, 6 April 1878, University of British Columbia Library, Special Collections Division, Angel-Dennis Collection, Ms Box 3.

F.G.S. to D.G. Rossetti, 3 Apr 1877 and 3 Apr, 1881, University of British Columbia Library, Special Collections Division, Angel-Dennis Collection, Ms Box 3.

Ford Madox Brown to F.G.S., 9 July 1877 Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms Don.e.61.

W.M.R. to F.G.S., 13 May [1869], Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms Don.e.76. See also Barry monument. WMR to S 16 Aug 1862, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms Don.e.76.

W.M.R. to F.G.S., 16 Aug [1862], Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms Don.e.76.

W.M.R. to F.G.S., 16 Aug [1864], Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms Don.e.76 16 Mar [1864]. Article not yet traced although it may possibly have been ‘Costume in Sculpture’ published in Fraser’s in March 1867.


‘‘The Private Collections of England’ was seen at the time as supplementing Gustav Waagen’s Treasures of Art in Great Britain (1854), itself supplemented by Waagen’s Galleries and cabinets of art in Great Britain (1857), For a more in-depth account, see D. S. Macleod’s ‘Mid-Victorian patronage of the arts: F. G. Stephens’s ‘The private collections of England’‘, Burlington Magazine, vol. 128 (Aug 1986), pp. 597-607.


‘Mr W. Holman Hunt’s Pictures in Bond Street,’ Athenaeum, No. 3048, 27 Mar 1886, p. 428.

F.G.S., ‘Royal Academy Winter Exhibition (First Notice),’ Athenaeum, No. 2880, 6 Jan 1883, pp. 22-3.