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## LUXURY HOMES

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An Artisan  
Jewel in  
Chappaqua







*Antiques columnist Andrea Kon profiles the auction of Rossetti's *Proserpine* at Sotheby's with Simon Toll, Sotheby's 19th century art expert who writes for academic journals, *Apollo Magazine* and *The British Art Journal*, and is a regular contributor to *Antique Collector Magazine*.*

## A PRE-RAPHAELITE LOVE STORY

By: Andrea Kon

Serious collectors and connoisseurs of 19th century pre-Raphaelite art will have the opportunity of a lifetime to acquire one of the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti's most defining images of *Proserpine* when it comes to auction at Sotheby's in London, England. This unique work, executed in colored chalks, will be offered at the Sale

of British and Irish Art on 19 November at Sotheby's British auction house.

The picture's re-emergence is concurrent with a major Pre-Raphaelite exhibition taking place at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow – an international show first staged last year by Tate Britain.

### Background

The gracious lady will first be previewed at Sotheby's famous London auction house from 14 through 18 November, before going under the hammer at the venue in New Bond Street the following day. In advance of this, the estimated guide price has been set at £1.2 and £1.8 million (\$1.8 to \$2.7 million).



Behind the romantic image, which is being sold on behalf of a private British collector who bought it in 1970 for 4,500 guineas (around £4,750, or \$6,750), lies one of the greatest love stories of Victorian England – between Jane Morris, wife of textile designer William Morris, and the great artist himself.

According to Simon Toll, the Victorian and Edwardian art specialist at Sotheby's auction house: "In the 1970s, the focus was on 'modern' things. Nobody then was interested in Victorian furniture or paintings. It's only now, when people are looking back on 19<sup>th</sup> century style with different eyes, that Pre-Raphaelite art – such as Rossetti's images of Proserpine – have become so highly desirable."

So who exactly was Proserpine? Rossetti explained in a letter to W.A. Turner, who bought a version of his painting in 1877: "She was Empress of Hades. After she was conveyed by Pluto to his realm, and became his bride, her mother Ceres importuned Jupiter for her return to earth, and he was prevailed on to consent to this, provided only she had not partaken of any of the fruits of Hades. It was found, however, that she had eaten one grain of a pomegranate, and this enchained her to her new empire and destiny." For such a tragic romantic character, Rossetti required the perfect model.

### Romance

"Rossetti first noticed Jane Morris, the stableman's daughter, while attending the theatre in Oxford, England in 1837," reveals Simon. "He became infatuated with her, but as he was already engaged to Elizabeth Siddall, he made it his business to introduce her to his friend, William Morris, 'to keep her within his circle and his sights.'" Yet despite this apparent consideration for his wife, he soon passed over Elizabeth and used Jane as the model for a new series of paintings of the enigmatic Proserpine.

"For Jane, marriage to Morris represented a great step up the social ladder," says Simon, "from the stableman's daughter to Lady of Kelmscott Manor on the outskirts of Oxford, and with a townhouse home in London's Hammersmith." Following the untimely death of Elizabeth in 1862, which suddenly and unexpectedly made Rossetti a

'free' man again, he would choose to spend "increasing amounts of time at Kelmscott with the Morris'. At that time, Jane is said to have suffered from depression and it was rumored that her doctor told William an affair would 'do her good' and perhaps help to 'spark her up'. On that basis, William Morris tolerated the relationship between his wife and his close friend, on the understanding it remained a private matter, and the public didn't get to hear of it,"



Their relationship intensified to such a degree that Jane announced she could not continue, asking Rossetti to instruct in his will that the letters they had exchanged would be destroyed. Fortunately for art history students the world over, not all of them were. "Remarkably some survived," reveals Simon, "and remained under lock

and key in London's British Museum. And when they were finally released on public view during the 1960s, they revealed Rossetti's passion for Jane and her image."

### Variations

As for the artistic result of their collaboration, there are now several versions of *Proserpine* around the world. According to Simon: "The Fog Art Gallery at Harvard University in Massachusetts has a wonderful collection of Rossettis. Three versions of her exist in oil: a slightly earlier version of her, dated 1874 and owned by the Tate Gallery in London; a version owned by a private collector; and the final version of 1882 on show at Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery in the British Midlands."

The Metropolitan Museum in New York also has another spectacular chalk drawing of Jane, although on this occasion she is depicting the enigmatic figure of 'Silence', rather than *Proserpine*. "It's not as famous as his *Proserpine*, and was a little later than the other images," says Simon. He is adamant in his conviction that "the Proserpine going into our sale is probably Rossetti's 'stand-out' image." What makes this version so unique is it's the only recorded full-scale one made by Rossetti in this medium."

The sale will also include two beautiful Pre-Raphaelite paintings by John Rodham Spencer Stanhope, *Andromeda* and *The Birth of Venus*, each of which are estimated to fetch somewhere in the region of £100,000 to £150,000 (\$150,000 to \$225,000). Like Rossetti's *Proserpine*, both demonstrate the Pre-Raphaelite's clear interest in classical mythology as a stimulus for their highly romanticized artworks.

### Bidding

For those interested in acquiring a real slice of art history – with a tragically romantic story thrown in for free – *Proserpine* will preview in Sotheby's New York 1 through 7 November, and then in London 14 through 19 November. The auction takes place in London in the afternoon of 19 November. You or your agent can bid in real time via a live video-link; it is, however, necessary to register for the video auction at least 24 hours in advance. Find out more on Sotheby's auction site: [www.sothebys.com](http://www.sothebys.com).