

Elizabeth Siddal

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Elizabeth Siddal (1829 - 1862)

The daughter of a Sheffield-born cutler, Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal (Lizzie) was born in London in 1829. She was introduced to the circle by Deverell, who discovered her working as a dressmaker in 1849. Demure in manner but strikingly (if unconventionally) beautiful, with brilliant red hair, Siddal captivated the young Pre-Raphaelite artists and became a frequent model for their paintings, appearing as Sylvia in Hunt's 'Valentine rescuing Sylvia from Proteus' and as 'Ophelia' for Millais. In 1852 she sat regularly for Rossetti, who described her to his sister Christina as his pupil (although none of her drawings are dated earlier than 1853). He fell in love with her, but they did not live together or become formally engaged.

Her earliest drawings show great promise, her best work being a series of watercolours on romantic medieval themes. Thanks to John Ruskin's patronage, she visited the south of France in 1855 for her health; she suffered from a lifelong debilitating neurotic illness.

Reconciled after a prolonged estrangement, Siddal and Rossetti married in 1860, and enjoyed the stimulating company of the Brown, Burne-Jones and Morris families (she helped with the decorative painting at Red House). Following a stillbirth, in 1862 she took an overdose of laudanum and died; rumours of a suicide note have never been confirmed. Before her burial in Highgate Cemetery, Rossetti laid a manuscript notebook of poems in her coffin (they were recovered by exhumation ten years later).