



Raffalovich, Marc André (1864-1934)

by Dennis Denisoff

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Marc André Raffalovich
circa 1880.

English poet and writer on sexuality, Marc André Raffalovich is best known today for his patronage of the arts and for his long friendship with John Gray, who may have been the model for Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray and who became a Roman Catholic priest in Edinburgh.

In 1863, Marie and Hermann Raffalovich moved from Odessa to Paris, where their younger son, Marc André, was born. There, Marie began to contribute articles on art exhibitions to the *Journal de Saint-Petersbourg*. She also kept a popular salon, the guests of which included Henri Bergson, Sarah Bernhardt, Colette, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Gustave Moreau.

Marc André, was raised in this cultured environment. Moving to England in 1882, he settled in London and, like his mother, nurtured friendships with artists and writers, including Aubrey Beardsley, Lily Langtry, Ouida, Walter Pater, Charles Shannon, Charles Ricketts, and James McNeill Whistler.

Oscar Wilde critiqued André's salon as nothing more than a saloon (which he nevertheless frequented), while Raffalovich himself voiced discomfort with what he saw as Wilde's sexual immorality.

Raffalovich's views on sexuality appear in the five books of poetry and two novels that he published between 1884 and 1896. As Robert Browning observed, Raffalovich's poems often erase the sex of the object of desire, thereby encouraging same-sex readings. The works also reflect the influence of Uranian poetry and its view of same-sex desire as innocent and pure.

Among his nonfiction works, the most famous is *Uranisme et Unisexualité* (1896), which established his reputation as an expert on homosexuality. According to Raffalovich, "unisexual" is a mode of sexual expression as valid as heterosexuality. It is noble and pure, however, only when practiced by a "sublime invert," who fulfills his desires not through intercourse but through celibate friendship, spirituality, and art.

In 1895, Raffalovich became a patron of Aubrey Beardsley who--because of his ties to Wilde--had been dismissed from his job as art editor of *The Yellow Book* upon Wilde's conviction for gross indecency. Raffalovich and Beardsley became close, Beardsley reading drafts of the writer's work and Raffalovich commissioning a likeness of himself by the artist.

Unfortunately, the portrait was never done, but Beardsley did draw a frontispiece for Raffalovich's poetry collection *The Thread and the Path*. The publisher, however, refused to include it because the figure was hermaphroditic.

A few years later, when Beardsley was on his deathbed, Raffalovich sent a monthly check so that his mother could stay at home to look after him.

In 1892, critic Arthur Symons introduced Raffalovich to the love of his life, John Gray, a poet influenced by the French symbolists and a member of Wilde's inner circle. Remarkably beautiful, Gray was widely

rumored to be the inspiration for the protagonist of Wilde's notorious novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Until his break with Wilde in 1893, Gray encouraged the rumors, sometimes signing his name as "Dorian."

Raffalovich gave Gray extensive financial support, even paying his expenses when the young man went to Rome to study for the priesthood in 1898. "Sebastian" was the baptismal name Raffalovich chose for himself when, under Gray's influence, he converted to Catholicism in 1896. In 1902, he moved to Edinburgh, where Gray had taken a position as a curate.

Settling in Scotland to be near Gray, Raffalovich contributed generously to the construction of St. Peter's Church, in Morningside, a middle-class suburb of Edinburgh, where Gray became rector and where Raffalovich attended mass daily.

Raffalovich continued to attract and support artists such as Eric Gill, Dorothy Johnston, Eric Robertson, and Cecile Walton. Guests to his home included Max Beerbohm, the art scholar Herbert Read, Hubert Wellington (the Principal of the Edinburgh College of Art), and the sculptor Aelred Whitacre.

Raffalovich was finally hosting the salon that he had envisioned. His support of artists continued throughout the remainder of his life.

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