

# PRE-RAPHAELITES A MODERN RENAISSANCE

Admirers of 19th-century British art are warmly encouraged to experience *Pre-Raphaelites: A Modern Renaissance*, a large loan exhibition on view in Italy this spring (through June 30) at the Museo San Domenico in Forlì, 45 miles southeast of Bologna.

This project traces the profound impact of historical Italian art on Britain's Pre-Raphaelite movement — and its inheritors — between the 1830s and 1910s. No previous exhibition has explored this phenomenon by placing British works alongside a substantial representation of Italian prototypes loaned by museums across Italy.

The exhibition has been mounted at the Museo San Domenico, a former Dominican convent constructed in the 13th century and renovated in the late 20th century. On view are approximately 350 works in a range of media, including paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints, photographs, ceramics, glass, metalwork, textiles, illustrated books, manuscripts, wallpapers, and jewelry. Wherever possible, these artforms are juxtaposed to underscore their aesthetic connections, and the Old Master works are integrated into almost every gallery.

For the past two and a half years, I have been privileged to collaborate closely with two fellow lead curators. Liz Prettejohn is Professor and Head of Department, History of Art, at the University of York (UK). She has written widely on the Pre-Raphaelites, the Aesthetic Movement, and the classical tradition in modern art. Based in Rome, our colleague Francesco Parisi is an independent curator who specializes in 19th-century art.

We have been honored to gather an extraordinary team of guest curators. Cristina Acidini is a Florentine art historian who has played a leading role in Italy's Ministry of Cultural Heritage since 1982. Tim Barringer is Paul Mellon Professor of art history at Yale University. Stephen Calloway is a London-based aesthete, curator, and collector who joined the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1974; since leaving in 2013 he has continued to write and lecture on English art. Charlotte Gere (London) is an independent social historian with publications on Victorian decorative arts and jewelry. And Véronique Gerard Powell is an art historian who organized a touring exhibition of Victorian masterworks owned by the Mexico-based collector Juan Antonio Pérez Simón, who is lending generously to our exhibition.

*Pre-Raphaelites: A Modern Renaissance* is accompanied by a catalogue published in Italian by Editore Dario Cimorelli (Milan). Running more than 500 pages, this volume contains essays and entries written by our curatorial team members, as well as the Ph.D. candidates Caterina Franciosi (Yale University) and Eduardo De Maio (University of York). Also contributing an essay is Dr. Susan Owens (independent scholar, England).



JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS (1829–1896), *The Woodman's Daughter*, 1850–51, oil on canvas, 35 x 25 1/2 in., Guildhall Art Gallery, London



DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI (1828–1882), *Borgia*, 1851–59, watercolor on paper, 9 1/8 x 9 3/4 in., Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle, England

### DEFINITIONS

In the autumn of 1848, seven young men brought a spirit of reform to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's first meeting in central London. They came from a range of middle-class backgrounds with widely varying artistic abilities. John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were studying at the Royal Academy Schools; Rossetti attended only occasionally and struggled with execution, while Millais was a prodigy who had been admitted at the unprecedentedly young age of 11. Joining these three ringleaders were the sculptor Thomas Woolner and two painters of lesser talent, James Collinson and Frederic George Stephens; Stephens, along with Gabriel's younger brother William Michael, would turn to art criticism and become the Pre-Raphaelites' leading chroniclers.

Every generation produces some dissatisfied young people, and the history of Western art has been punctuated by a succession of revolts, some more enduring in impact than others. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's uprising was not merely about aesthetics, however; as Tim Barringer has noted, "The Pre-Raphaelites turned to the past as a means of rectifying flaws in the present." England — particularly London, where the Pre-Raphaelites lived — was the center of the largest global empire that has ever existed, fully connected to the world yet struggling with profound changes at home: the growing middle classes thrived while workers experienced grinding poverty, often in crowded cities and industrial centers that sprawled at the expense of nature.

Ranging in age from 19 to 23, they were not just restless kids; Liz Pettejohn has observed, "The revolt of the young Pre-Raphaelites against the Victorian artistic establishment is singular in the history of modern art in that it was an attack from above." For them, "the 'establishment,' represented by successful Royal Academicians such as [Edwin] Landseer and [Charles Robert] Leslie, meant commercial success through the representation of pleasant, anecdotal subjects suited to the domestic environment of the prosperous middle classes. The Pre-Raphaelites offered an implicit critique of their elders by adopting more serious and elevated subjects than Landseer's dogs and Leslie's humorous scenes from literature."

From the start, then, the Brothers tackled subject matter dealing head-on with moral, religious, social, and political themes of urgent concern to them yet unfamiliar or disconcerting to most viewers, using compositions and techniques that were simultaneously historically aware and

experimental. As for the Academicians' technique, William Michael Rossetti noted that the Brothers "hated those forms of execution which are merely smooth and prettyish, and those which, pretending to mastery, are nothing better than slovenly and slapdash, or what the P.R.B.'s called 'sloshy'."

It was Gabriel Rossetti who suggested they form a "Brotherhood," having inherited a love of intrigue from his Italian revolutionary father. Essentially the young men were rebelling against two father figures — Raphael and Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), the Royal Academy's founding president who had cited Raphael as a paragon in his *Discourses*, which are still read to this day. Instead of the idealization and other conventions pursued in the Academy's classrooms and galleries, the Brothers admired, according to Hunt, the "naïve traits of frank expression and unaffected grace" seen in 15th-century art — "so essentially vigorous and progressive" — which flourished before the norms of pictorial perspective became customary. As Pettejohn notes, early Italian (and Flemish) pictures of the 15th century were then seen by most British artists and commentators only as exploratory steps leading to the more sophisticated art of what we now call the High Renaissance.

Gabriel proceeded to suggest "Early Christian," but Hunt proposed "Pre-Raphaelite." Later he recalled that he and Millais admired



WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT (1827–1910), *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*, 1867–68, oil on canvas, 23 3/4 x 15 1/4 in., Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco



(ABOVE) EDWARD BURNE-JONES (1833–1898), *Lancelot at the Chapel of the Holy Grail*, 1896, oil on canvas, 54 1/2 x 66 1/2 in., Southampton City Art Gallery, England  
 ■ (RIGHT) FRANK CADOGAN COWPER (1877–1958), *Vanity*, 1907, oil on panel, 22 1/2 x 15 in., Royal Academy of Arts, London



Raphael's cartoons for the tapestries of the Sistine Chapel and St Catherine of Alexandria, yet felt his altarpiece of the Transfiguration (completed by assistants) marked "a signal step in the decadence of Italian art" with "its grandiose disregard of the simplicity of truth, the pompous posturing of the Apostles, and the unspiritual attitudinizing of the Saviour." When the pair expressed this disdain to some Academy classmates, those students replied, "Then you are Pre-Raphaelite." Millais and Hunt "laughingly agreed that the designation must be accepted," and so ultimately it was conjoined with "Brotherhood."

Thus the Brothers rejected the curriculum Reynolds had put in place, with its copying of plaster casts, nude models, and post-1500 color schemes. Still, William Michael cautioned, "It would be a mistake to suppose, because they called themselves Preraphaelites, that they seriously disliked the works produced by Raphael." Rather, "they disliked the works produced by Raphael's uninspired satellites, and were resolved to find out, by personal study and practice, what their own several faculties and adaptabilities might be, without being bound by rules and big-wiggeries founded upon the performance of Raphael or of any one."

As Prettejohn has argued, Pre-Raphaelitism was not a reactionary return to styles of the past, but rather a visionary project that transformed them into something emphatically modern. The Pre-Raphaelites drew upon a broad array of historical influences and elements; as was usual in 19th-century art, they did not distinguish the Gothic Middle Ages from the High Renaissance as strictly as we do. At different moments, then, they revered Venetian Gothic art and architecture, Giotto, Masaccio, and the Primitives, but also Renaissance masters like Botticelli, Leonardo, and Michelangelo, ultimately turning to 16th-century Venetian art with similar enthusiasm. Over time, British artists expanded and diversified their interest in Italian art.

### MOVING FORWARD

The launch of Pre-Raphaelitism can be dated firmly to 1848, yet specifying the moment of its conclusion is problematic. Characterizing its secondary phase is especially challenging because it commingled with the Aesthetic Movement and widely influenced a generation of British artists including members of the Symbolist and Decadent movements. A late flowering of Italianate Pre-Raphaelite art took place in the early 20th century.

Because the period under review spans nine decades, *Pre-Raphaelites: A Modern Renaissance* is organized in large sections that all share the

concept of re-invention as their guiding theme. Some key artists, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, Ford Madox Brown, and Frederic Leighton are explored in depth, while other talents are represented by one or two works that demonstrate specific points of connection.

We hope that visitors are electrified upon entering the exhibition's first gallery, which is in fact an enormous church. It contains all four of the Holy Grail tapestries designed by Edward Burne-Jones for Morris & Co., as well as all four of Frederick Cayley Robinson's huge paintings commissioned for London's Middlesex Hospital. Though of very different characters, these stunning artworks instantly alert visitors to the ambition of the British artists we are highlighting, demonstrating how they absorbed Old Master influences to create completely individual works. Mixed into this gigantic space are other British works, and also relevant Italian forerunners from the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries.

The first set of galleries after the church sets the stage by exploring the Gothic visual culture in which Pre-Raphaelitism emerged. Especially influential was A.W.N. Pugin, the Catholic architect whose theories encouraged artists to think about the past more freely and to recast the Middle Ages as a period when spirituality prevailed. Many British artists shifted their attention to religious content and to the characters of Chaucer, Dante, and the Arthurian legends. This section is particularly strong in design and decorative artworks, tracing the aesthetic impact of the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition, and there is a large grouping that traces the evolution of John Ruskin's engagement with Italy, including the influential critic's architectural drawings.

The next section provides an overview of art created by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood between 1848 and 1853. The figures highlighted here are Rossetti, Millais, and Hunt, and we demonstrate that



**FREDERIC LEIGHTON** (1830–1896), *Pavonia*, 1858–59, oil on canvas, 20 3/4 x 16 1/4 in., private collection, courtesy Christie's

members of the Brotherhood were enthusiastic illustrators who found inspiration in religious subjects, sacred and profane epics, and the poetry of Dante, Tennyson, and Christina Rossetti. Through the rest of the exhibition we trace the ongoing fascination with Dante and his characters (such as Paolo and Francesca).

A section devoted to later Pre-Raphaelitism surveys the art produced by members of the Brotherhood after they disbanded, each retaining a fascination with Italian art that developed in varied ways. Pre-Raphaelitism moved somewhat in the same direction as Ruskin, toning down its early admiration for Florentine art and turning toward Venetian masters such as Titian and Veronese.

Particularly close attention is paid to the evolution of Edward Burne-Jones's relationship with Italian art; his influences encompassed not only Giotto, Michelangelo, and Andrea del Sarto, but also Tintoretto, Jacopo Bassano, Carpaccio, and Giorgione. We are especially excited to have installed the museum's enormous refectory — which is adorned with historic frescoes that will remain visible — with more than 20 extremely significant examples of Burne-Jones's artistry. An adjacent space contains the famous piano presented to Frances Graham, for which Burne-Jones created colorful designs executed by his assistant T.M. Rooke. On view nearby is the smaller but equally exquisite jewel casket he designed for the same young woman.

The next section considers members, exhibitors, and students of the Royal Academy who absorbed aspects of both Italian art and Pre-Raphaelitism, melding them into approaches palatable to the institution's mainstream visitors and patrons. England's classical revival was led by Frederic Leighton, who became the Academy's president and played a unique role in transmitting Italian culture to Britain through his imaginary scenes from Italian art history, numerous depictions of

Italian models, and recording of architecture and landscapes during regular visits to Italy. Of comparable stature was G.F. Watts, represented through both paintings and sculpture, including a rare loan of his *Sir Galahad* from Eton College. Italian models were tried out and adapted to British taste by a range of Academy exhibitors including E.A. Abbey, Frank Dicksee, Edward J. Poynter, and J.W. Waterhouse.

From the 1860s onward, it was inevitable that the Aesthetic Movement would become intertwined with Pre-Raphaelitism. Its key venue was London's Grosvenor Gallery, founded as a progressive alternative to the Academy. From 1877 through 1890, it highlighted artists whose work diverged from conventional taste, including Walter Crane, J.R. Spencer Stanhope, Evelyn De Morgan, Marie Spartali Stillman, and J.M. Strudwick. This section demonstrates how British artists looked to various Italian prototypes for inspiration, including Botticelli, Leonardo, and Michelangelo.

A crucial expression of this phenomenon are decorative works by such artists as C.R. Ashbee, William De Morgan, and Phoebe Anna Traquair — as well as firms like Della Robbia and Minton — which are arranged alongside the Italian prototypes that inspired them. A significant representation of New Sculpture is on view, too, including such figures as Leighton and Alfred Gilbert.

### UNEXPECTED ANGLES

The field of Victorian art is often perceived as exclusively male, but this was not actually the case, and so the exhibition contains superb examples by the following female artists: Julia Margaret Cameron, May Louise Greville Cooksey, Evelyn De Morgan, Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale, Christiana Jane Herringham, Beatrice Parsons, Constance Phillott, Elizabeth Siddal, Marie Spartali Stillman, Marianne Stokes, Eliza Jameson Strutt (who designed ceramics for Minton & Co.), Phoebe Anna Traquair, and Maria Cassavetti Zambaco. Also represented are the poets Christina Rossetti and Maria Rossetti, whose handsomely illustrated volumes appear in a gallery devoted to the Rossetti family.

Finally, what did the Italians themselves make of all this? At Rome's Academy of Fine Arts, the revival of 15th-century forms was rooted in the ideological effort to forge a national culture that minimized Italy's strong regional distinctions. Especially prestigious was the example of Botticelli, seen in various works by Giulio Aristide Sartorio. The poet Gabriele D'Annunzio became a key champion of Italian literary Pre-Raphaelitism, extolling 15th-century poets ranging from Angelo Poliziano to Lorenzo de' Medici. To illustrate one edition of his poetry, he turned to revivalists including Sartorio and Giuseppe Cellini, the main interpreter of a graphic design aesthetic that was simultaneously Anglophile and Neo-Renaissance. D'Annunzio later turned to the Art Nouveau artist Adolfo de Carolis, who championed Botticelli, and after 1915, Michelangelo. Several masters from this phase close our exhibition and encourage visitors to learn more about this still-overlooked phase of Italian art.

We look forward to seeing you in Forlì this spring. This has been a labor of love, and we are eager to share our findings with as many kindred spirits as possible. The Victorian Society is organizing a study tour (April 23–29) to visit the exhibition, where I will welcome them and provide an intensive gallery tour. The tour group will be based in Bologna and will also visit the extraordinary cities of Ravenna and Modena nearby. ●

**Information:** <https://mostremuseisandomenico.it/uk-version/>. For details on the April trip, visit the Facebook page of the Alumni Association of the Victorian Society Summer Schools.

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