PRE-RAPHAELITE PAINTERS EXPLORING THE MODERN VICTORIAN TOWN

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Abstract: By 1850 the artists belonging to the Pre-Raphaelite group started to show their interest in London and its modernity including the development of the city's outskirts as well as the new social patterns. It has been stressed that Victorian art commonly displayed paintings containing scenes of daily life treated through an anecdotal manner, set in a countryside that showed but small changes determined by modernity. Contrary to such scenes, those drawn by the Pre-Raphaelites focused on modernity and put forth scenes involving moral, social or political issues of modernity. The Pre-Raphaelites seemed to have been fascinated with the painting of modern life, with its multiple visual images, its bustling crowds, and the continual pulsation of ordinary activities. The city, as the embodiment of modern life, changed its appearance with extreme speed and seemed to reject everything that had to do with routine so that it became an ideal environment to be represented by the Pre-Raphaelites who were against pictorial conventions and strived to have a fresh perspective on the subject-matter they treated. They aimed at getting rid of preconceptions and targeted at finding out constraint-free means of representation which finally resulted in a vividness that managed to convey a strong feeling of immediacy.

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1. Victorian painting: a context

The early nineteenth-century British art was mainly dominated by the Romantic Movement, including artists like James Ward (whose large-scale landscape entitled *Gordale Scar* is considered a masterpiece of English Romantic painting) or John Martin. It also witnessed the geniuses of William Blake, John Constable, and Joseph Mallord William Turner who were regarded as having tremendously influenced both the British artists and the foreign movements in the decades to follow. Accordingly, Turner was credited to have exerted his influence on the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist movements while Blake was acknowledged as having influenced the group of Ancients (that included Samuel Palmer, Edward Calvert, George Richmond, and John Linnell). The Ancients, settled at Shoreham, in Kent, by the 1820s, produced intense pastoral scenes and later, together with Blake whom inspired them, were acknowledged as a source of inspiration for certain modernist artists of the twentieth century (Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland, Dora Carrington).

Victorian painting also included several artists that specialized in rendering a various range of subjects: from sentimental animal subjects (Edwin Henry Landseer) and 'beauties' in exotic or classical settings (Sir Frederic Leighton, Lawrence Alma-Tadema), to allegorical works (George Frederic Watts) or scenes of social life (William Powell Frith). Despite the fact that the subjects approached by most of those artists were characterized as 'low key' – owing to the fact that they mainly focused on figure and landscape painting - Victorian painting owed part of its importance to the previously mentioned painters.

One of the most important sources of subjects for Victorian painters was British history that provided them with a widely appreciated stuff that approached either the Middle Ages, the reign of Elizabeth I, the character of Mary, Queen of Scots, or the English Civil War (Ernest Crofts – *Cromwell at the Storming of Basing House).*

Social subjects were also approached by Victorian painters in a manner considered to have derived from Hogarth, often focusing on a perennial concern of the time: 'fallen' women

(for instance, Augustus Egg's *Past and Present* - 1858, George Frederic Watts' *Found Drowned* -1849-50 or Richard Redgrave's *The Outcast* - 1851). Critics pointed out that paintings of that type were designed to be read like novels and revealed their meanings only after having been deciphered by focused and involved viewers (Conrad, 1973). Towards the end of the nineteenth century the so-called "problem picture" used to leave the details of the painting's narrative ambiguous and restrained from providing final answers so that the viewers were free to speculate on what they saw before their eyes. Besides, such paintings often centred on sensitive social issues – which mainly targeted women – that could scarcely have been debated directly (W. F. Yeames – *And When Did You Last See Your Father?*)

Painters that included Frederick Walker (*The Vegrants*-1868), Luke Fildes (*The Village* Wedding-1883), and George Clausen (*The Girl at the gate*-1889) approached the social condition of the poor through the mediation of rural scenes where human misery appeared, to a certain extent, softened by the landscape. The milieu of heavy industry, on the other hand, was not widely represented and few were the painters who focused on subjects derived from the industrial field (James Pollard – *The Louth-London Royal Mail Travelling by Train from Peterborough East, Northamptonshire*).

Other painters like John Frederick Lewis (1804-1876, *The Coffee Bearer,* 1857), Edward Lear (1812-1888, *Masada,* 1858), Frederick Goodall (1822-1904, *The Finding of Moses*), David Roberts (1796-1864, *The Great Sphinx and Pyramids of Girzeh,* 1839), and Richard Dadd (1817-1886, *The Flight out of Egypt,* 1849-50) developed the so-called British Orientalist painting of the period that primarily exploited subjects connected with foreign countries, and, more specifically with the Middle East.

2. Pre-Raphaelite painters: exploring the modern town

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, established in 1848, with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt as founding members, appeared to have emerged as a mainstream artistic movement of Victorian art which subsequently came to be considered as having performed a significant change in painting.

Art historians agree that it is difficult to precisely delineate both the beginning of the Pre-Raphaelite movement and its ending. Certain scholars appreciate that Pre-Raphaelitism ceased to be a movement by the time the members of the Brotherhood stopped their regular meetings, around 1850, while others appreciate that Pre-Raphaelitism survived in the twentieth century as well. And although there is a consensus about the difficulty of fixing the boundaries of Pre-Raphaelitism, it appears that critics cannot decide who to include under that label. Accordingly, a large variety of artists – John William Waterhouse, George Frederic Watts, Aubrey Beardsley, James McNeill Whistler, and many others have been connected with the movement. And, despite its numerous representatives, Pre-Raphaelitism was not attributed an important role in the history of modern art by early criticism.

In the opinion of certain twenty-first century critics, the fact that Pre-Raphaelitism failed to hold a first rank position among modern art movements was mainly due to its inherited labelling as a 'deviation' from the main modern art current considered to have begun in France with Manet and the Impressionists. Yet, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, Pre-Raphaelitism seemed to be quite familiar owing to reproductions on calendars, posters, and

greeting cards; meanwhile, its continual publicizing worldwide may erase the common perception of Pre-Raphaelitism as opposed to modern art.

By 1850 the artists belonging to the Pre-Raphaelite group started to show their interest in London and its modernity that included the development of the city's outskirts as well as the new social patterns. It was Ford Madox Brown who in 1852 began working three pictures that approached issues connected with 'urban modernity'. One of them, *An English Autumn Afternoon* is considered to depict the 'intersection between Hampstead Heath and the encroaching urban environment' (Prettejohn, 2007) and was first exhibited in 1855. The other two paintings, *The Last of England* (1856) and *Work* (1865) represent explorations of modern social life. The first picture is an emigration scene which used to be quite familiar in the early 1850s while the second one is an allegory of labour in modern England showing various types of work in an urban environment.

1. F.M. Brown – *An English Autumn*

Later on, other members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were drawn by modern life aspects, mainly by city life that seemed to change according to an alert rhythm. Such new practices meant a shift from their former approaching of elevated historical and religious subjects.

2. F.M. Brown – *The Last of England*

It has been stressed that Victorian art commonly displayed paintings containing scenes of daily life treated through an anecdotal manner, set in a countryside that showed but small changes determined by modernity. Contrary to such scenes, those drawn by the Pre-Raphaelites focused on modernity and put forth scenes involving moral, social or political issues of modernity. And in order to succeed in representing the changed urban milieu they had to look for pictorial means capable of supporting their subject-matter.

The Pre-Raphaelites considered various London locations capable of displaying urban modernity (population density, fashionable dress or class mixing) and in order to render it they conceived a pictorial category that matched the features of history painting and the modern costumes and environments seen as 'unattractive'. The new paintings that displayed a busy modern milieu also required a fresh modality of representation. As it has been asserted, modern town already had been represented by popular imagery that displayed graphic illustrations of events in magazines or newspapers: *Punch* and *Illustrated London News* had appeared since 1840s. Although the standards of Academic art considered such illustrations of low artistic value, nonetheless Millais succeeded in transforming them into art. Between 1853 and 1854, he resorted to illustration in order to draw a series of pen, ink wash and pencil works that focused on subjects inspired by modern life, and mainly on social relationships (*Retribution* – 1854) and 'social mixing' (*The Blind Man* – 1853). Millais's project also included an oil painting – *The Blind Girl* (1856) that can be regarded as a step further in his adapting the mode of illustration.

3. J.E. Millais – *The Blind Man*

A serious issue of the modern Victorian town - the 'fallen women' – exerted its undeniable attraction on Hunt (*The Awakening Conscience* - 1854) and D.C. Rossetti (*Found* – 1854-81 – unfinished) who started several paintings that focused on that subject-matter. Hunt's *The Awakening of the Conscience* displays an interior of a London house with its new furniture pointing to modernity and defining the subject; it is a space designed as a dwelling-place of the male character's mistress, suffocated by kitsch – an abundance of pieces of furniture, shiny surfaces, a glaring carpet – that appears to induce the moral corruption of the scene. In the opinion of certain authors, the modernity of the picture resides in its capacity of conveying the vulgarity of the newly-rich.

4. W.H. Hunt – *The Awakening Conscience*

Twenty-first century art historians have pointed the similarities between the Pre-Raphaelites representations of the modern town and those of French artists who are considered the founders of modern art. In 1863, Charles Baudelaire wrote 'The Painter of Modern Life', the essay that demanded artists to focus on the aspects of life and manners of their time. The Pre-Raphaelites appeared to have already represented many of the modern subjects mentioned by the French writer: prostitutes (D.G. Rossetti's *Found*, Millais's *The Awakening Conscience*), fashionable women (John Roddam Spencer's *Thoughts of the Past* - 1858-9), dandies (Millais's *The Awakening Conscience*). Baudelaire got acquainted with the art of the Pre-Raphaelites on the occasion of the Universal Exhibition held in 1855, in Paris, where they displayed their work in the British section and, although those paintings did not approach modern-life subjects, they had a worth mentioning impact. It has been acknowledged that both the Pre-Raphaelites and Baudelaire used press as a source of inspiration for the representations of modern towns – for instance, the graphic artist in Baudelaire's essay had French origins and was an employee of *Illustrated London News*; nonetheless, it appears that French and British interest in modern-life subjects occurred separately and developed without influencing each other.

5. D.G. Rossetti – *Found*

The Pre-Raphaelites seemed to have been fascinated with the painting of modern life, with its multiple visual images, its bustling crowds, and the continual pulsation of ordinary activities. The city, as the embodiment of modern life, changed its appearance with extreme speed and seemed to reject everything that had to do with routine so that it became an ideal environment to be represented by the Pre-Raphaelites who were against pictorial conventions and strived to have a fresh perspective on the subject-matter they treated. They aimed at getting rid of preconceptions and targeted at finding out constraint-free means of representation which finally resulted in a vividness that managed to convey a strong feeling of immediacy, even when the subject-matter was related to the past (for instance, Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents* 1849-50 might have been found upsetting due to its striking manner of conveying modernity in contrast with its historical setting).

From the point of view of considering modernity as the capacity of conveying a sense of immediateness, the Pre-Raphaelite project may be seen as having incorporated it from its beginning and the fact that they employed, later on, subjects inspired by modern life obviously appears as a further exploit of their primitivist approach. In order to convey such vivid impressions, the Pre-Raphaelites conceived a minutely elaborated manner that was exactly the opposite of the Impressionistic approach to life and art. While the Impressionists resorted to rapid working in order to grasp the vanishing immediacy of the moment, the Pre-Raphaelites made use of a thorough elaboration of their pictures as if through such a minutely detailed technique the moment was made still and consequently eternally preserved. There is here something that one may call the 'stiffness' of the moment rendered owing to almost suffocating details. It has been noticed that the vivid colours as well as the extremely detailed depiction of modern middle-class interiors to be found in Pre-Raphaelite paintings resemble the bustle and permanent rush of modern cities.

The rendering of such detailed modernity was possible, as stressed previously, owing to multiple elements of reality that accumulated and remained 'still' in what scholars considered to be a climax of 'specificity, solidity and abundance' of modern elements.

Besides choosing modern subject-matter, costumes and accessories, the Pre-Raphaelites reformed the way they pictorially represented modernity in that they employed extremely vivid colours and hard edges that totally opposed French Impressionists - considered to be the initiators of modern art – who instead expressed modernity through evanescent visions of light and air.

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