Pre-Raphaelites
Victorian Avant-Garde

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This book and exhibition present the art of the Pre-Raphaelites as an avant-garde movement whose achievements across many media – painting, drawing, sculpture, photography and the applied arts, as well as literature and political theory – constitute a major contribution to the history of modern art. The term ‘avant-garde’ describes an organised grouping with a self-conscious, radical, collective project of overturning current orthodoxies in art and replacing them with new, critical practices often directly engaged with the contemporary world. It has usually been associated with movements such as Impressionism, Cubism, Dadaism and Surrealism. Pre-Raphaelitism belongs among the very earliest of the historical avant-gardes. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded in 1848 in a world that was recognisably modern: it was marked by dramatic technological and social change, the globalisation of communications, rapid industrialisation, turbulent financial markets and the unchecked expansion of cities at the growing expense of the natural world. London was the centre of the world economic system and of an empire of unprecedented size and complexity. Every aspect of life was changing quickly. Traditional social relationships, beliefs and patterns of behaviour were challenged as never before, while evolving into those familiar to the world today. Early Victorian painting had barely registered these seismic shifts. By contrast, the paintings, drawings and material objects in this exhibition are vivid cultural manifestations of the seething energy of the world’s first industrial society.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) was founded in London in September 1848. Its leading members were the young painters John Everett Millais (1829–96), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82) and William Holman Hunt (1827–1910), and their slightly older friend and mentor Ford Madox Brown (1821–93), who never formally joined the group but shared many of its aims. From its origins Pre-Raphaelitism was characterised by innovative stylistic choices and reformist aesthetic, social, political and religious thinking. The radicalism of the Pre-Raphaelites lay in a refusal to accept the conventions revered by their teachers and society at large; in their insistence on getting to the root or origin of artistic, and sometimes also social and political, problems; and in their commitment to fundamental change. Despite its familiarity through colour reproduction today, when looked at afresh, Pre-Raphaelite art remains as difficult, unruly and distinctive as it was at the time of its creation. Its sharp lines and ‘shrill colours’, as Ernst Gombrich called them, sound a note of dissonance, as do its revolutionary approach to history painting, exploration of the profusion and brilliance of the natural world, challenging engagement with the contemporary social and religious life of Victorian England, and distinctive portrayal of beauty and sexuality.

As the title of The Germ (no.23), the group’s short-lived periodical, implies, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood intended to sow the seeds of a widespread reform of society through advanced art and design. And so it did: the British Aesthetic movement, which first flowered in the 1860s, and the international Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century both have their roots in Pre-Raphaelitism. In the later 1850s a new group converged around Rossetti, including the young poet and designer William Morris (1834–96) and the painters Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98), Elizabeth Siddall (1829–62) and Simeon Solomon (1840–1906). They explored the relationships between art and poetry, and art and music. Most strikingly, they moved beyond the traditional fine-art media of painting, drawing and sculpture to embrace the design and production of furniture, textiles, ceramics, wallpapers and stained glass, and the design and illustration of books.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century the second generation of Pre-Raphaelites, led by Burne-Jones, had created new forms of history painting in a mythic visual language appropriate to the changing psychological and social conditions of the fin de siècle. The hitherto underestimated late works of Millais, Hunt and Brown, all of whom lived for half a century after the founding of the PRB, also explored new and often difficult subject matter, and each artist evolved his own highly original, even idiosyncratic, visual language. In the 1880s and 1890s, Morris and Walter Crane (1845–1915) transformed the latent political radicalism of the Pre-Raphaelite movement into an explicit socialist affiliation, developing an iconography for the British left.

Historical and modern

Faced by a startling rapidity of technological change and social upheaval, Victorian culture consistently turned to the past for solutions to the intractable political, moral and aesthetic problems inherent in the condition of modernity. In Past and Present, published in 1843, Thomas Carlyle, a social commentator much admired by the Pre-Raphaelites, contrasted the strong
leadership and social cohesion of the medieval world with the chaotic present.¹ Theorists of the gothic revival, including the architect A.W.N. Pugin, believed that the beauty and spirituality of medieval life revealed the hideous debasement of existence in the industrial city. Meanwhile, at the very moment that he lent his support to the Pre-Raphaelites in 1851, John Ruskin (1819-1900) was writing The Stones of Venice. His chapter ‘The Nature of Gothic’ found in medieval sculpture ‘signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone’, in contrast to the ‘slavery in our England’, the wage slavery of industrial labour and its soulless and ugly products. Some imaginative early-Victorian artists, such as William Dyce (1806-64), later a friend and follower of the Pre-Raphaelites, had already begun to look to early periods in the history of art for alternatives to what they saw as conventional and crass in the art of the nineteenth century (no.4).

The brazenly unconventional Pre-Raphaelites paralleled these radically revivlist strains in writing and design by producing pictures that scandalised the Victorian art world for several years after their debut in 1849. Isabella (no.26), Millais’s first Pre-Raphaelite painting, was a frank declaration of the young artists’ shared belief that paramount examples of pure and sincere art-making could be found in Italian and Northern European art of the fifteenth century, from before the era of the Italian painter Raphael (1483-1520) and his followers, the ‘Raphaelites’. Turning their backs on the models proposed for emulation by the Royal Academy Schools, they contended that early Renaissance painting contained the seeds of a new art for the modern world of Victorian Britain. In Isabella Millais responded specifically to the side panels of the San Benedetto Altarpiece of 1407-9, now attributed to Lorenzo Monaco (no.27). In July 1848 they were acquired and placed on view in the National Gallery, which at that time shared its Trafalgar Square premises with the Royal Academy. Resonances of the Italian panels can be detected in Millais’s deliberate compression of pictorial space, crisply etched faces piled one on another and representative of everyday people rather than professional models, brilliant patches of decorative colour, and individuated forms collaged into unity. Lorenzo’s and Millais’s works are seen together for the first time in the current exhibition.²

While the Brotherhood’s very name declared an affiliation with the distant past, the group also argued that art should make a direct and critical engagement with contemporary society. In apparent contrast with their historicist leanings, they forged an entirely original realist idiom – precise, vivid and uncompromising. This early Pre-Raphaelite style emerged in part as a response to the revelatory new technology of photography, announced to the world in fixed and presentable form in 1839, less than a decade before the founding of the PRB. The daguerreotype, produced on a metal plate, and the paper negative process, products of recent scientific research, would seem to be the very antithesis of the passionate, poetic revivlist of the medievalist Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Yet, the Pre-Raphaelites responded particularly to the uncanny precision of the daguerreotype, such as that of the National Gallery from 1839 by Michel de St Croix (no.22), whose luminous silverie image mirrored the world with a fidelity seemingly unprecedented in human endeavour. Inspired in part by photography, the Pre-Raphaelites portrayed the environments of Victorian Britain with ardent, sometimes painful, clarity. For example, in The Awakening Conscience (no.98), a searing indictment of the modern sex industry in which a ‘kept woman’ sees the error of her ways, Hunt revealed every detail of the interior with forensic precision. This was not mere pointless virtuosity, as Ruskin explained in a letter to The Times: ‘That furniture, so carefully painted, even to the last vein of the rosewood – is there nothing to be learned from that terrible lustre of it, from its fatal newness?’³ Pre-Raphaelite realism therefore inaugurated a new register of pictorial meaning.

Some of the most striking Pre-Raphaelite paintings bring together the historical and the contemporary in a single image. Thus Millais’s Christ in the House of His Parents (no.85) presents the carpenter’s shop with vivid immediacy, every woodchip enumerated with absolute fidelity. Yet Millais also connected present and future events through a complex typological symbolism that alludes to the subsequent life and suffering of Christ within the context of a believable narrative of his childhood: drops of blood from a scratch foreshadow stigma, and tools suggest the instruments of the Passion. The imagery of labour, replete with dirty fingernails and imperfect, everyday bodies, forged unmistakable connections between the members of the Holy Family and modern working-class people. This caused consternation among Victorian viewers seeing the work for the first time. One disgruntled academic painter decried its ‘pictorial blasphemy’ perpetrated through a ‘circumstantial Art-language from which we recoil with loathing and disgust’.⁴ Charles Dickens was particularly affronted by the central figure of the Virgin Mary, who appeared ‘so horrible in her ugliness, that (supposing it were possible for any human creature to exist for a moment with that dislocated throat) she would stand out from the rest of the company as a Monster, in the vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest ginshop in England’.⁵ As with many later avant-gardes, the Pre-Raphaelites were subjected to a sustained barrage of critical abuse before finally finding a group of progressive writers, led by Ruskin, willing to champion their work.

In this exhibition religious history paintings and images of modern life hang side by side, indicating the interpenetration of Protestant faith and morality in Victorian Britain. The resulting ideas often chafed against the conventions of the time. Hunt submitted to the same exhibition The Awakening Conscience and The Light of the World (no.92). The latter was perhaps the most important and widely reproduced religious image of the nineteenth century, and an unforgettable vivid representation of
Ruskin described it as 'one of the very noblest works of sacred art of this, or any other age'. Hunt's juxtaposition of the two paintings was no accident. Perhaps the young woman turns to the path of righteousness precisely because she hears Christ knocking on the door of the human soul. It was a bold move indeed to suggest that an outcast figure such as a kept woman, considered by mainstream opinion to be a social deviant, was in direct dialogue with Christ. By the time these works were on the walls of the Royal Academy in 1854, Hunt had set sail for Palestine. There, pursuing his mission as self-declared 'painter of the Christ', he would create a series of works that moved beyond the realism of Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents* by observing actual biblical sites and offering a purportedly archaeological reconstruction of the life of Jesus. *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* (no.101) is a spectacular result of this project, a painting that adroitly reprises some of the formal elements in Millais's earlier, ground-breaking work, while binding together Hunt's deep Evangelical faith with an essentially imperial form of ethnography, in which Jewish 'types' of the present day were made to stand in for their historical forebears. Recognised as a 'thoroughly English and Protestant' account of the scene in which the young Christ argues with the rabbis in the temple, it is replete with historical detail and absolute in its rejection of established artistic conventions.

The juxtaposition of other pictures is equally suggestive. In *Work*, one of the most ambitious realist paintings of the nineteenth century, Brown presented a panorama of social types, but paid special homage to the powerful manual labourers digging a trench for new waterpipes (no.95). By depicting *Jesus Washing Peter's Feet* (no.93) with a similar hard-muscled physical type – a portrayal echoed in Hunt's later epic canvas *The Shadow of Death* (no.112) – Brown asserted that redemption can be achieved through manual labour. The workman's connection to Christ is more direct than that of the bourgeois. To find 'perennial nobleness, and even sacredness' in the activities of the working classes, as Carlyle and Brown both did, was to up-end Victorian social hierarchies, a manifestly radical proposition. It is no surprise to find that Rossetti and Brown, as well as Ruskin himself, dedicated themselves to teaching art classes at the Working Men's College, a Christian Socialist philanthropic venture led by Frederic Denison Maurice, the pensive clergymen who can be seen with Carlyle in the right foreground of *Work*.

Encouraged by the fervent support of Ruskin, the pre-eminent art critic of the period, the Pre-Raphaelites turned their attention to the representation of nature with the same intensity of detail and with a consistent desire to unlock secrets of the past to comprehend the present. This development in their art coincided with a widespread enthusiasm, both professional and amateur, for natural history, especially geology and botany. In the 1850s Millais, Hunt and their young Ruskinian followers, such as John William Inchbold (1830–88) and John Brett (1830–1902), dedicated untold hours of laborious care to the precise rendering of landscapes, from familiar vistas of southern England to Alpine scenery of the utmost grandeur, paying close attention to underlying geological structures as well as to minute details of flora and fauna. Even familiar scenery could provide a landscape of revelation. Dyce's *Regwell Bay* (no.82) forms a profound meditation on mankind's place in time and space as understood through geology and astronomy: members of the painter's family collect fossils and shells in the foreground, while above the cliffs, in the pale dusk sky, is Donati's comet.

Pre-Raphaelitism's apparently contradictory status as both a revivalist and a realist movement dates from its very inception. This unexpected combination of the historical and the modern is one facet of the unorthodox and original character of Pre-Raphaelite art, and its continued power to perplex, provoke and delight more than a century and a half after its contentious début.

*Pre-Raphaelite 'otherhood'*

Like all avant-gardes, the PRB cultivated a mystique, emphasising the group's foundation and the conspiratorial intimacy of its members. It originated as an act of rebellion by seven very young men dissatisfied with what they saw as the degenerate and rule-bound art of the day. The three leaders of the group had been students at the Royal Academy Schools but had lost faith in its traditions and their teachers. They deliberately positioned themselves as 'other' to the Academy and its doctrines, as laid down in the *Discourses* of the founding president, Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–92). The Pre-Raphaelites reviled Reynolds's own tenebrous and ungainly painterly style, created in emulation of the old masters, referring to him as 'Sir Sloshua'.

Millais had distinguished himself as a prodigiously gifted and prize-winning student, precocious in his mastery of drawing and painting techniques. Rossetti, the scion of a family of
intellectual Italian immigrants, was already, at twenty, an accomplished poet richly endowed with visual and literary creativity. Hunt, a Londoner from a more modest background, showed signs of the uncompromising originality and constant striving for truth in representation that would mark out his mature work. They were joined by the sculptor Thomas Woolner (1825–92) and two painters of lesser talent, James Collinson (1825–81) and Frederic George Stephens (1828–1907). Stephens, along with the seventh member of the group, Rossetti's younger brother William Michael (1829–1910), would turn to writing and become a critic and chronicler of Pre-Raphaelitism. Brown, a struggling artist with a comprehensive training in the European academic tradition, briefly taught both Hunt and Rossetti. He was well versed in the latest continental art, and especially familiar with the early-nineteenth-century German Nazarene group (no.1), whose religious revivalism foreshadowed aspects of Pre-Raphaelite practice. Brown was both leader and follower, simultaneously teaching and learning from the PRB.

In its early days the Brotherhood expressed itself as a single artistic entity, adopting a shared gothic style of draughtsmanship (nos.28, 29). Tight, linear and shadowless, these early drawings referenced an eclectic range of sources, modern and medieval. This linear style also gave early Pre-Raphaelite paintings a distinctive quality of precision and equal focus throughout, which was heightened by the use of unusual techniques, discussed in Alison Smith's essay below (pp.18–23). It was a remarkable achievement of the sculptor Alexander Munro (1825–71), a friend of the Pre-Raphaelites, to find a three-dimensional analogy to this style. Munro's Paolo e Francesca (no.38), viewed from any angle, presents pointed outlines, precisely rendered detail and the atmosphere of youthful ardour familiar from early Pre-Raphaelite drawing and painting.

For a handful of years after 1848 there was an intense artistic exchange among the Pre-Raphaelites, as commemorated in the portraits they made of each other as tokens of friendship. The PRB was notable for the homosocial bonding of its members, as an exclusive club of young men who provided each other with comradeship and emotional solidarity as well as artistic and critical expertise and professional contacts (fig.1). Yet the individual style and inclinations of each artist were never fully subsumed into a collective identity. Indeed, the art of the Pre-Raphaelites is more notable for its multiplicity and variety than for a singularity of style or approach. The sphere of Pre-Raphaelite influence was extremely wide, encompassing two generations of British artists, but as this exhibition aims to provide full exposition of the work of a core group of figures, it does not include work by many artists who adopted a Pre-Raphaelite idiom, such as the Liverpool painters James Campbell (c.1825/8–1903) and William Lindsay Windus (1822–1907), or associates of the PRB, such as George Price Boyce (1826–97) and Joanna Boyce Wells (1831–61).

The Pre-Raphaelites' variety of method and style contrasts with the unified approach of later avant-garde groups such as the Cubists, Vorticists and Italian Futurists, but the impact of their intervention was both immediate and long lasting. Pre-Raphaelitism was an attempt to make change from within. By showing their work at the Royal Academy's annual exhibitions, the highlight of the artistic calendar in Britain, under the scrutiny of a burgeoning art press, they issued a very public challenge. It is a testament to the quality of their work that the Pre-Raphaelites succeeded in changing the nature of the curriculum in the Royal Academy Schools and rapidly influenced the productions that would hang in future shows. Within just a few years established academicians of an earlier generation, such as Dyce (no.4), Richard Redgrave (1804–88) and Daniel Maclise (1806–70), adopted aspects of Pre-Raphaelite practice and style.

Fig. 2. Unknown photographer, Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall, c.1850s, albumen print with hand colouring possibly by D. G. Rossetti, 5.1 x 7.6. The Walters Art Museum; gift of the A. Jay Fink Foundation, Inc., in memory of Abraham Jay Fink, 1963 (Washington only)
Pre-Raphaelite sisterhood

The Brotherhood was, by definition and rather unimaginatively, initially premised on the exclusion of women. There were, however, many influential female figures in the wider Pre-Raphaelite circle, and their numbers grew over time. The poet Christina Rossetti (1830–94), younger sister of Dante and William, developed a distinctive Pre-Raphaelite idiom in her literary work, marked by acute visual observation and deep religious conviction. The most significant female artist, however, was Elizabeth Siddall, whose work has emerged to deserved prominence in recent decades through the work of feminist scholars.  

Siddall's physical features became well known after she modelled for Millais's Ophelia (no.69), one of the pictures that established his popularity with a mass audience. Her luxuriant red hair, pallid skin and striking physiognomy (fig.2) ran counter to widely held Victorian ideals of beauty, which more closely resembled the demure countenance of a Raphael Madonna or the young Queen Victoria herself. Siddall, who was the daughter of a Sheffield ironmonger, sustained herself by working in a London milliner's shop. She probably agreed to model as a way of entering the Pre-Raphaelite circle, and to pursue her own ambitions as an artist — ambitions that her sex and her class position placed beyond her reach. She became Dante Gabriel Rossetti's model, muse, lover and, eventually, wife. Rossetti created an obsessive series of drawings and paintings of Siddall, culminating in the posthumous tribute Beata Beatrix (no.124), in which his own conflicted love for her is conflated with that of Dante Alighieri for Beatrice Portinari.

The dialogue with Rossetti, followed by patronage from Ruskin, allowed Siddall some limited freedom to develop her own distinctive artistic style. Although relatively little work has survived, Lady Clare (no.50) demonstrates her characteristic willingness to push further against academic norms than her male colleagues. She adopted a self-conscious flattening of figures and a bold palette of colours, in emulation of medieval stained glass and illuminated manuscripts, with subject matter that either drew attention to the restrictions on women's freedoms or placed women in a position of power, however briefly. Siddall's death, aged thirty-two, of an overdose of laudanum, perhaps a suicide, deprived Pre-Raphaelitism of one of its most distinctive talents.

Many other women would contribute to the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Most were sisters or daughters of male artists: in addition to Christina Rossetti, Rosa Brett (1829–82), the sister of John Brett, created a small corpus of works of hypnotic intensity (nos.79–80) but abandoned her art when expected to fulfil a domestic role within her family. By contrast, the life of Jane Burden (1839–1914) was closer to that of Siddall. Born the daughter of an Oxford stableman, she was discovered as what they called a ‘stunner’, or distinctive beauty, by the group of young men whom Rossetti had gathered to work collaboratively on a mural scheme for the Oxford Union building. She soon married Morris, who had painted her as La Belle Isidèle (no.53), and, in collaboration with her sister Elizabeth 'Bessie' Burden, developed an artistic identity as the creator of subtle and ambitious works of embroidery (no.140). Women played a key role in the revival of the applied arts and crafts in the Morris circle, working both as designers and as expert practitioners of many craft skills. William and Jane Morris's younger daughter, May (1862–1938), became a leading exponent of revivalist needlecraft, the author of important publications, such as the illustrated Decorative Needlework (1893), and an active socialist.

In addition to her own work as an artist, Jane Morris deserves credit for collaborating in the creation of the images in which she appears as a sitter, notably the series of drawings and paintings by Rossetti and a group of photographs by John Robert Parsons. Another significant figure in the Pre-Raphaelite circle, Fanny Cornforth, can be credited with the fabrication of an entire persona. Born Sarah Cox in a rural corner of Sussex, 'Fanny Cornforth' became emblematic of sensuous womanhood in Rossetti's works, including Boccaccio (no.119) and The Blue Bower (no.126). Like an actress creating a role, she 'played' Fanny Cornforth, both in Rossetti's paintings and in a memorable photographic portrait (no.127). She also took the part of housekeeper in the bohemian ménage at Tudor House, Chelsea, where Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne lived during the 1860s, accompanied by a veritable menagerie, human and animal, which included at various times a wombat and a Canadian woodchuck — a scene affectionately caricatured years later by Max Beerbohm (fig.3).

From a different part of the social spectrum was the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79), a highly respectable, though hard-up, member of an imperial family newly returned.
from Dimbola, their tea plantation in Ceylon (now Dimbula, Sri Lanka). She knew many of the Pre-Raphaelite circle and photographed some of them. She corresponded with Rossetti, of whom she was a fervent admirer. Cameron’s response to Pre-Raphaelite imagery rejected the all-over razor-sharp clarity of daguerreotypes. In her hands the wet collodion negative and albumen print, the primary photographic process in use by the mid-1850s, became a subtly textured medium, allowing the smudges, blots and imperfections of her method to play a role analogous to the rich, painterly style adopted by Rossetti in the 1860s. Many of Cameron’s finest works (nos.128–9) are exquisitely lit and modelled single heads, offering a photographic response to paintings such as Rossetti’s *Bocca Baciata* and *Blue Bower*, and substituting female agency for the dominant male gaze. Cameron’s distinctive refashioning of Rossetti’s idiom defied convention in two important ways. Her work asserted both that photography belonged among the fine arts and that women could succeed as creative artists.

**Capital of the nineteenth century**

Pre-Raphaelitism was the distinctive product of a particular place and time. London was, in many ways, the capital of the nineteenth century. The city lay at the heart of an unprecedented global web of trade and communications, and of an empire that covered a quarter of the world. The census of 1851 recorded that the population of the London area was 2,659,999; in the same year over six million people, from all over the world, visited the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, many of them also seeing Pre-Raphaelite paintings on the walls of the concurrent Royal Academy exhibition and reproduced in the pages of the *Illustrated London News*. The railways formed great arteries for the movement of people and goods into and out of the capital. London’s docks saw a massive volume of trade, while the stock exchange was the epicentre of the world economy. The visual sphere, too, was undergoing a revolution. The speed of production and distribution of mass-produced images via the steam press was only one aspect of an expanding image economy.

The most formidable manifestation of steam power was found in the large-scale manufacturing industries based in the Midlands and the north. The mill owners, ‘Captains of Industry’, who for Carlyle were ‘virtually Captains of the World’, provided a key patron-group for the Pre-Raphaelites. Whereas in France ambitious painters could seek support from the state, the Pre-Raphaelites looked for patronage from the newly prosperous and confident industrial middle class of mid-Victorian England, often more progressive in outlook than the aristocratic and professional collectors of earlier generations. Rossetti developed a network of private patrons and rarely exhibited his work after the mid-1850s. Many Pre-Raphaelite paintings, however, were sold on the open market and purchased off the walls of exhibitions like that of the Royal Academy.

One of the earliest Pre-Raphaelite patrons was Thomas Combe, printer at the Clarendon Press in Oxford, who had become wealthy largely through the sale of Bibles to a worldwide public. With a hint of condescension, Stephens compared him to ‘the class of merchant princes, as in Florence of old, aiding their own native art, and with characteristic common sense, [who] inquired the sternal meaning of a picture before he bought one’.

Among the most prescient Pre-Raphaelite patrons was Thomas Flint, the Evangelical stockbroker of Leeds who assembled a lustrous collection of Pre-Raphaelite works before his untimely death in 1861. He bought or commissioned Millais’s *Christ in the House of His Parents*, Hunt’s *Finding of the Saviour in the Temple*, and Brown’s *Jesus Washing Peter’s Feet* and *Work – paintings brought together again in the section titled ‘Salvation’ in the present exhibition. These images seemed to enact Flint’s proselytising belief in ‘the moral religious element at work’.

Perhaps the most influential of all Pre-Raphaelite patrons was Thomas Fairbairn, the very personification of the ambitious Victorian industrialist, who purchased *The Awakening Conscience* and commissioned from Hunt portraits of himself (no.110) and his wife and children (no.109). Fairbairn, who inherited from his father a thriving engineering business, was also a pioneer of the design reform movement and a key figure in the transformation of Manchester into a cultural as well as an industrial and commercial centre. He was centrally involved in a bitter industrial dispute, a direct test of strength between capital and organised labour, in which a cartel of Manchester employers united to overcome the fledgling union, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. Under Fairbairn’s leadership the union was defeated after a lock-out of four months, which reduced the workforce to starvation. It seems unlikely that Fairbairn would have sympathised with Ruskin’s radical analysis of industrial ‘slavery’ or with the ‘certain socialist twinge’ experienced by Brown, who was later involved in setting up an employment bureau in Manchester.

The patrons of Morris & Co. – mostly oblivious of William Morris’s increasingly radical beliefs – were also largely drawn from the suburban and provincial bourgeoisie.

Mid-Victorian prosperity supported a boom in the art world with vastly increased sales. Individual works sold for unprecedented sums: Hunt was able to secure £5,500 for *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple*. The popular market for reproductive engravings and photographs, too, offered rich rewards. Millais achieved great wealth and high social status not only from the sale of original oils but also from smaller-scale watercolours after their compositions, copyright payments from engraved reproductions and unceasing portrait commissions. Other Pre-Raphaelites were less successful: the uncompromising and
often tactless Brown, in particular, struggled to make ends meet for much of his career.

Pre-Raphaelite paintings became prominent through various forms of reproduction and through public exhibitions. The short-lived Hogarth Club (1858–61), an independent society of artists, held semi-public exhibitions that included much Pre-Raphaelite work. Millais remained largely loyal to the RA, where even his most provocative early paintings had been prominently shown. He quickly rose to the rank of Associate (1853) and Academician (1863), and after being awarded a baronetcy in 1885, became President shortly before his death in 1896; his ascent from PRB to 'PRA' – President of the Royal Academy – was widely noted. Hunt preferred to exhibit major works as single pictures in well-publicised exhibitions such as that for *The Finding of the Saviour* in 1860. In 1855 Brown organised a private one-man retrospective with *Work* as its centrepiece. Advertisements were placed in railway stations, and the show garnered excellent critical attention but few sales.

In addition to the RA, there were many large public exhibitions outside London that followed on the heels of each other, with the transport of works to the north, to Edinburgh or abroad made possible, and secure and fast, by the spread of the railways. The Pre-Raphaelite works were admired and purchased at exhibitions of the Liverpool Academy and in other regional venues. Although there was no display of paintings at the Great Exhibition, the Art Treasures of Great Britain exhibition at Manchester in 1857, spearheaded by Thomas Fairbairn, included a significant selection of Pre-Raphaelite works, many of them (including *The Awakening Conscience* and *Autumn Leaves*, no.117) lent by local collectors. In 1852 the International Exhibition at South Kensington included a display of the newly formed Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co.'s productions in the decorative arts, bringing them before a large public. Burne-Jones and Rossetti both shunned the large popular exhibitions, but when the Grosvenor Gallery opened on Bond Street in London in 1877 – an exquisitely appointed, aristocratic palace of art to counter the RA's department-store atmosphere – Burne-Jones's works took pride of place, along with select portraits submitted by Millais. The new museums of the industrial cities – Liverpool (opened in 1877), Manchester (1882), Birmingham (1885) and Newcastle (1901), in addition to the National Gallery of British Art established by Henry Tate in London (1897) – quickly assembled the best collections of Pre-Raphaelite work. These galleries are the major lenders to the present exhibition. As with other avant-garde groupings, the Pre-Raphaelites relied on a small cadre of sophisticated and sympathetic patrons, but ultimately their work circulated within the larger art market, whose success was predicated on the economic prosperity of Victorian Britain.

The Pre-Raphaelites also participated in the emerging global art scene through the presence of their works at international exhibitions, ranging from Paris in 1855, 1867, 1878 and 1889 to Chicago in 1893. In the United States, where a touring exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite paintings had been displayed in Boston and New York as early as 1857, the example of Pre-Raphaelitism gave rise to a new school of painting with its own journal, *The New Path.*28 Familiar and influential across Europe, Pre-Raphaelitism seems to have had a particularly strong following in Poland, Central Europe and Russia, but more research is needed on such international responses to the movement.29

**Pre-Raphaelite Aesthete**

The PRB disintegrated by 1853, and its members followed independent careers. With the exhibition of *Autumn Leaves* in 1856, Millais, the group's most prodigiously talented painter, established a benchmark for modern images of a subjectless nature, lacking a clear narrative or concise meaning. It was the initial step towards a further rethinking of the aesthetic potential of art, and it was accompanied by a loosening of the precise painting techniques of early Pre-Raphaelitism. W.M. Rossetti wrote at the time that with this picture, 'Millais is confirming himself in the tendency to paint with greater breadth, and more for distant effect; but, if he keeps up the standard of the *Autumn Leaves*, I conceive this to be still Preraphaellitism, and perfectly legitimate.'30 For Millais it was a natural evolution, and maturation, into a new mode of imaginative realism in his art, which would deeply influence later Victorian painters as various as John William Waterhouse (1849–1917; figs.27–8) and John Singer Sargent (1856–1925).

At the same time Rossetti, increasingly reclusive, became the centre of another unorthodox grouping of artists and poets. During this period he created a series of intimate oil paintings in which he pursued 'beauty for beauty's sake'. He embraced a range of historical exemplars, notably the painterly style of Venetian art from *after Raphael;* he became interested in Japanese ceramics; and, above all, beginning with *Bocca Baciata* in 1859, his work pursued a fleshly and eroticised ideal of beauty. This marked departure from the chaste ideals of early Pre-Raphaelitism shocked Hunt, who detected in it 'gross sensuality of a revolting kind, peculiar to foreign prints' – a reference to pornography.31 Rossetti's works became a keystone of the British Aesthetic movement, passionately collected by a circle of devotees and, especially after the posthumous retrospective exhibition of his works at the Royal Academy in 1883, widely influential on British and European painting.

Rossetti and Brown joined the young poet and designer, Morris, and the painter Burne-Jones in an inventive scheme to reform the decorative arts through newly simplified designs inspired by medieval European and, later, Islamic examples, many of which were available in the new South Kensington Museum. The group rejected mechanical production and revived
traditional craft techniques in a radical move paralleling that of early Pre-Raphaelite paintings that emulated the processes of early Renaissance art. Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., formed in 1861, was based on the ideal of a workshop organised along medieval lines. All the artists contributed designs, as did the architect Philip Webb, and the Pre-Raphaelite project of reforming the present with reference to the past took on a new life. Rossetti, Morris and Burne-Jones had already begun painting elaborate designs on the surfaces of furniture, after the manner of Renaissance cassoni (marriage chests). The Prioress’s Tale Wardrobe (no.54), made by Burne-Jones as a wedding present for William and Jane Morris, eliminates the boundaries between fine and decorative art, creating an object that is avant-garde and medievalist at the same time, as well as aesthetic and functional. Morris, meanwhile, pioneered the revival of embroidery, tapestry, block-printed textiles and hand-printed books, and carried Victorian stained-glass making to new heights. Some of the idealism of the project had to be sacrificed in order to make ‘the Firm’ financially viable, and by the late 1870s Morris had become convinced that the radical analysis of society found in Ruskin’s Stones of Venice, and shared by Brown since the 1850s, could only take effect through major political change. Well versed in the ideas of the French theorist Charles Fourier (among the first to use the term ‘avant-garde’ in his political writings of the 1830s) and Karl Marx, by 1882 Morris had become a committed socialist, who saw his literary, aesthetic and political activities to be inextricably intertwined. His prose work, News from Nowhere (no.151) is a utopian fantasy in which the post-revolutionary, egalitarian Britain of the twenty-second century (it is set in the year 2102) revives the bright colours, communal institutions and hand technologies of the Middle Ages – a Pre-Raphaelite vision of the future. In Morris’s invention Ruskin’s industrial ‘slavery’ of Victorian Britain is a thing of the past.

Perspectives on the Pre-Raphaelites

Each generation has reinvented the Pre-Raphaelites in its own image. The early history of Pre-Raphaelitism is remarkable for having largely been written by its members.11 Towards the end of the nineteenth century Hunt began to write memoirs, which he eventually published in 1905 as Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and intended as a definitive history of the movement. The text is filled with detail available only to a protagonist, but Hunt was determined to emphasise his own and Millais’s achievements at the expense of Rossetti, Brown, Burne-Jones and Morris. William Michael Rossetti, by contrast, produced a large corpus of memoirs and edited documents, emphasising his elder brother’s pre-eminence, an argument largely supported by the other writer who had been a member of the PRB, F.G. Stephens. The old struggle between realism and reviverealism resurfaced in controversies over Pre-Raphaelite legacy. As late as 1895, Hunt wrote to Millais just before the latter’s death:

You may have more or less noticed that the press whenever it talks of Pre-Raphaelitism attaches the word to what Rossetti did with his extreme mannerism of his last days, and to what Burne-Jones does now, which is treated as tho’ it were ultra refined P-Rism ... [Stephens] never did understand what PR ism meant, but believed that instead of being a real attempt to go back to healthy nature, as you and I did in all our pictures, it was an attempt to revive gothicism as Herbert, Dyce, and others, including Brown, were doing, and as Rossetti in his own sensuous not to say sensual manner did, as far as he was able, for he was at the end only an amateur ... You probably care as little about the mere credit of having begun this attempt with me to reform art, but you will have at least my amount of interest to prevent the world from thinking that our philosophy was on a level with Pusey’s, and that of other revivalists.12

This exhibition aims to demonstrate that in the creative tension between the idiosyncratic realism of Hunt, Millais and Brown and the poetic freedom of Rossetti and Burne-Jones lies the dynamic force of Pre-Raphaelitism as an avant-garde movement.

Elizabeth Prettejohn charts the twentieth century’s response to the Pre-Raphaelites in her essay in this volume, noting, against received opinion, that Pre-Raphaelitism never really disappeared from sight during the twentieth century. The modern exhibition history of the movement began with a revelatory reassessment of Brown mounted by Mary Bennett at Manchester in 1964, followed by full-scale retrospectives of Millais (1967), Hunt (1969), Rossetti (1973) and Burne-Jones (1975). These exhibitions won popular and critical acclaim in the ‘swinging 60s’ and psychedelic early 1970s: audiences found resonances with the Rossettian avant-garde, with even the clothing and hair in works by Rossetti and Burne-Jones seeming to mirror Carnaby Street. These exhibitions culminated with the Tate Gallery’s magnificently comprehensive The Pre-Raphaelites in 1984, an exhibition of paintings, drawings and sculpture, excluding photography and the decorative arts and with a very limited number of works from after 1860. It charted, in more detail than ever before, the interaction between a broad range of artists in the movement and the chronological development of Pre-Raphaelitism. But it was circumspect, even timid, in the claims it made. History, moreover, had moved on. By 1984 Britain had endured a painful recession and race riots, and was in the middle of the miners’ strike, a power struggle perhaps recalling Fairbairn’s campaign against the Amalgamated Society of Engineers in 1851. The government was openly advocating a return to ‘Victorian values’ as a rejection of the ‘permissive society’ of the 1960s, while
commercial companies like Laura Ashley co-opted Morris-like designs as suburban lifestyle choices rather than expressions of countercultural rebellion. In particular, the presence of the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, at the opening of the exhibition on 28 March 1984 seemed to symbolise a newly conservative reading of the Pre-Raphaelites (fig.4). A contrasting account of the movement was offered by a wide-ranging exhibition titled William Morris Today, on display at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London at the same time. With contributions by leading thinkers of the left, such as E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, it celebrated Morris as a father of English socialism.

The Tate exhibition in 1984 turned out to be a beginning rather than an end, just as the Thatcher era was a formative moment for contemporary art in London: Freeze, the breakthrough exhibition of the ‘young British artists’, took place in July 1988. By placing an unprecedented wealth of Pre-Raphaelite art on show with a thorough and informative catalogue, The Pre-Raphaelites made a major contribution. For a new generation of museum visitors – including the authors of this book – the exhibition and related publications were revelatory, opening up the potential for new analysis and interpretation. In a significant review the feminist art historians Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock took issue with the curators’ biographical, rather than thematic, approach to art history and the patriarchal account of gender relations they appeared to endorse. A collection of essays edited by Marcia Pointon in 1989, Pre-Raphaelites Re-Viewed, noted the exhibition’s reluctance to address ‘cultural politics’ – particularly issues of class, gender and religion, but also questions of technique, which have recently returned to the centre of scholarship in the field – and turned a refreshing, deconstructive gaze on the mythologies surrounding the Pre-Raphaelites.

Since 1984 there has been a dramatic expansion of critically engaged Pre-Raphaelite scholarship. New studies of Millais (Barlow, Goldman, Rosenfeld), Hunt (Jacobi), Brown (Bendiner), Rossetti (Prettjohn, Marsh, McGann, Bullen), Morris (MacCarthy, Ascroft) and Crane (O’Neill) have emerged in parallel with thematic publications, including new accounts of painting techniques (Townsend, Hackney and Ridge), Pre-Raphaelite religious painting (Giebelhausen), questions of labour and class (Barringre), and Aestheticism (Prettjohn, Staley). There has been a new generation of important monographic exhibitions: Siddall (1991), Morris (1996), Burne-Jones (1998 and 2009), Rossetti (2003), Solomon (2005), Dyce (2006), Millais (2007), Hunt (2008) and Brown (2011). And in addition to publishing important catalogues of the major Pre-Raphaelite collections, museums have explored significant related themes, including the influence of Pre-Raphaelitism on American art (1985); Pre-Raphaelite patrons (1989); Pre-Raphaelite sculpture (1991); the Grosvenor Gallery (1996); Pre-Raphaelite women artists (1997); Pre-Raphaelitism within Victorian art (1997); Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts, and British Symbolism (1997); Millais’s portraits (1999); Turner, Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites (2000); Pre-Raphaelite landscape (2004); the Pre-Raphaelites and Italy (2010); Pre-Raphaelite photography (2010); the Aesthetic movement (2011); and Pre-Raphaelite drawing (2011). A well-conceived Pre-Raphaelite survey, including the fine arts, photography and decorative arts, was mounted in Stockholm in 2009.

A thematic survey of Pre-Raphaelite creativity in multiple media over five decades, this exhibition and publication intend to produce a new account of the whole movement, drawing together the revisionist ideas of recent decades. The organisation is thematic within a broadly chronological framework, allowing focus to be placed on the formal qualities and the meaning of works in the context for which they were produced, rather than on the development of the style or career of the individual artist.

The aim in placing as comprehensive a collection as possible of Pre-Raphaelite art before the public in London, Washington DC, Moscow and Tokyo is to engage a wide audience, stimulate new research from scholars and perhaps spark further responses from artists, who are well placed to interpret the disrespectful, vibrant productions of the youthful rebels of 1848. Certainly, Pre-Raphaelite art-making resonates vividly with the art and culture of the present day. The emphasis on complex and unresolved narrative, on social commentary, on aspects of gender, sexuality and desire, and on race, empire and travel; the dialogue with photography and mechanical image-making; the questioning of conventional values, accepted concepts and canons of beauty; the relationship of current art-making to the art of the past; and issues of appropriation and synthesis: all these are preoccupations in the art and culture of our own turbulent times that were vividly explored by the Pre-Raphaelites, the Victorian avant-garde, at the moment of the inception of modern society.
MEDIUM AND METHOD IN PRE-RAPHAELITE PAINTING

Alison Smith

For the Pre-Raphaelites, artists' materials and the expectations that went with them became a way of constructing meaning in their work. Looking back to earlier art was central to their avant-garde project, and the adoption of historical technical processes accordingly became an important means through which they set about asserting their identity in the present. As students, they found the methods taught by the Royal Academy to be debased and irrelevant for what they wanted to achieve. Thus they rejected the more traditional and academic methods of 'dead-colouring', or underpainting in earth tones to establish the darker areas of a composition, and chiaroscuro, used to define broad areas of light and shadow and to establish key and subsidiary areas within a picture. Also abandoned were the academic technique of 'facture', or conspicuous brushwork, to convey texture, and the merging of tone to harmonise the disparate elements of a design. Instead, they took inspiration from the emerging and more marginal practices of the time: the most striking of these was the novel daguerreotype process resulting in sharp photographic images with glassy luminosity. Another important influence was the watercolourist's technique of applying local colour in small touches, like pixels on a white prepared ground, used by the established Victorian artists William Henry Hunt and J.F. Lewis.

Above all, the Pre-Raphaelites deferred to pre-Renaissance art, taking inspiration from miniaturist techniques employed in medieval manuscript illumination, the smooth clear colours found in Italian and Flemish quattrocento tempera and oil painting, and the reflective brilliance of early stained glass. They saw these methods as formally pure and, consequently, thematically moral: essentially clean when compared to the mucky medium of oil, as practised by European Baroque masters such as Annibale Carracci, Rembrandt van Rijn and Peter Paul Rubens, and upheld within the Royal Academy. In looking to art forms that thrived beyond the RA's influence and approval, they produced works of astonishing visual originality and effect, each distinguished by a sharp focus, the use of pure, unmixed colours, and attention to detail across the surface.

In its revolutionary use of colour Pre-Raphaelitism did not, however, represent a complete break with mainstream practice. The artists took advantage of certain developments within contemporary art, in particular the idea of preparing a canvas with a white ground to heighten colour. This was a method adopted extensively by artists such as J.M.W. Turner and the ambitious Irish genre painter William Mulready, as well as by William Dyce and the fresco revivalists working on the new decorations of the Palace of Westminster in the 1840s. Significant support for the use of white ground was found in Sir Charles Eastlake's translation of Goethe's Theory of Colours published in 1840. More generally, the interest in the techniques used by early Renaissance painters was encouraged by publications such as Mary Philadelphia Merrifield's 1844 translation of Cennino Cennini's fourteenth-century Il Libro dell' Arte and her Original Treatises ... on the Arts of Painting of 1849. In the former Merrifield recommended the purity and permanence of the pigments manufactured by the theorist and artists' colourman George Field as the closest approximation to those used by early Italian painters, a point that would not have been lost on the Pre-Raphaelites who were regular users of Field's pigments.

However, the Pre-Raphaelites went further than their contemporaries in their use of brilliant colour. This had a dramatic effect at public exhibition, where the Pre-Raphaelite paintings were accused of 'killing' all surrounding works with their jarring strident hues, an accusation earlier levelled at Turner. The assault on the eye presented by their paintings has not diminished much over time despite fading of small numbers of the pigments employed. In Millais's Ophelia (no.69), for instance, the chromatic pitch would have been even higher when the picture was first exhibited, due to the yellow gamboge used in the sunlit, nearer riverbank and to the mixing of that pigment with blue for the background leaves, which faded during the course of the artist's lifetime. The more obvious result is that these background leaves now appear much bluer than they originally would have been.

In achieving their brilliant iridescent effects, the Pre-Raphaelites evolved a particular way of working. Panels were sometimes used, as with Millais's Mariana and Brown's 'Pretty Baa-Lambs' (nos.35, 69), but more often a canvas support on a stout stretcher, as for Rossetti's Girlhood of Mary Virgin (no.24), which is on a fine-weave canvas so smooth that the work was wrongly described by William Michael Rossetti as being 'Painted on panel'. Although the Pre-Raphaelites often purchased canvases from suppliers or colourmen such as Roberson or Brown of High Holborn, firms that had a reputation for high-quality supports, it was not unknown for them to customise their supports with an additional white imprimatura layer, often of zinc white, so that the ground took on what Hunt called a 'stone-like hardness', as well as a fresh, white and grime-free appearance. Rossetti was in fact the first to apply his own
additional ground of lead white for The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, but Hunt and Millais soon took up the practice using zinc white in oil as an extra priming layer for Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus (no.34), The Hireling Shepherd (no.76) and Ophelia. Whereas lead white was known to turn yellow over time, zinc white (an industrial product that first became widely available from the later 1840s) offered a bluer, more intense white. It allowed the Pre-Raphaelites to exploit the brightness of the ground by maintaining transparency in the application of subsequent layers of paint. At all costs they wanted to avoid the soft effect caused by painting into a mid-toned ground but aimed to establish evenness of colour and tone across the picture surface to achieve an advantage in the display of dazzling colour at public exhibition. Brown thus advised the portrait painter Lowes Cato Dickenson in 1851: 'As to the pure white ground, you had better adopt it at once ... for Hunt and Millais, whose works already kill everything in the exhibition for brilliancy, will in a few years force everyone ... to use their methods.'

The absence of dead-colouring explains why the Pre-Raphaelites would have had to draw directly on the white-primed canvas in graphite pencil to map out their compositions. They would then apply paint in mosaic patches as a single thin layer of pure, mainly unmixed colour, with no glazing and the minimum of facture. This method accentuated luminosity by allowing the ground to remain visible through the thick yet transparent paint layers, for which the artists employed sable brushes typical of watercolour, not the squirrel or hoghair customarily used for oil. Their emulation of watercolour techniques is further evidenced by the tendency to leave the white ground untouched or reserved in places so it could assume a particular shape, as with the distant white horse in Hunt's Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus. The artists also adopted the miniaturist practice of hatching in fine strokes for flesh, Millais being particularly adept in this technique, as seen in the faces in The Order of Release, 1746 (no.40), a composition for which he also exploited the angle of the brushstrokes to create the twill weave in the man's kilt and the child's tartan smock. Although time consuming, the methods used were not particularly complicated, but pure and simple in keeping with Pre-Raphaelite ideology, the aim being to respect the material nature of each object represented, as seen in the sewing thread in both The Girlhood of Mary Virgin and Ecce Ancilla Domini (no.87), formed through the application of gold over green underpaint with hatched lines to lend texture.

In making their pictures, the Pre-Raphaelites favoured transparent pigments such as emerald green and cobalt blue, both relatively new colours, as well as the more traditional rose madder, ultramarine and gamboge (transparent yellow). It was not the newness of the pigments that mattered: in fact the artists prided themselves in being traditional in their use of materials and methods, continuing to use oil paint bladders, rather than immediately opting for the collapsible metal tubes patented in 1841, and frequently combining ultramarine with madder to make purple (as seen in Arthur Hughes's April Love, no.43). Even after 1859 they did not use the newly available cobalt violet.

What was different, however, was their concern to maintain the pitch of colour throughout a composition, and to achieve this goal, they sometimes used white porcelain palettes for preparing their paints to emulate the white grounds on which they laid them. The artists also regularly adopted copal-based vehicles for binding their pigments in preference to a thinned oil one. They found copal, a tree resin used for high-quality durable varnish, to be glossier on drying and capable of forming a thick layer in one application of the brush, thus giving an intense coloured glaze in just one layer, rather like stained glass. It was also good for using out of doors since it formed thick, tacky paint that was easier to transport wet than drippy, thinned oil paint.

An important innovation was the practice of painting with transparent colour onto discrete areas of wet ground to heighten luminosity. According to Hunt, this method was first utilised by himself and Millais for sunlight effects, enabling them to move beyond the linearity of their early work and to repair and repaint.

Fig.5 Infra-red photograph of Mariana 1851 (no.35), showing Millais's confident drawing with no hesitation or alterations.
scraped areas without the loss of luminosity.9 Hunt describes the method in great detail in his memoir in relation to the heads of Valentine and Proteus in *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus*, making clear the analogy with fresco painting where the fresh plaster (*intonaco*) is applied at the onset of each day’s work (*giornata*) and worked into with pigments when still wet.10 Unlike the Impressionists who aimed at dissolving form through the rapid application of pure and regulated touches of colour, the Pre-Raphaelites worked slowly to establish form, according equal weight to both illuminated and shadowed recessed areas. Although the practice of building up a composition in sections like a jigsaw puzzle was clearly an acknowledgement of pre-Raphaelite or early Italian methods, it was a risky, somewhat perverse strategy in that it introduced the possibility of colours acquiring a pastel appearance by mixing with the wet white, or muddy if they became grimey by attracting dirt. Such was the case with Brown when he tried the technique ‘on Millais’s lying instigation’ for the principal figures and the crimson cloth on which Christ kneels in *Jesus Washing Peter’s Feet* (no.93), a not altogether successful attempt, as seen in the rather streaky application of paint in these areas.11 Despite its risks, the method was capable of achieving brilliant results if the artist got it right – as, for example, in the red reflections and effect of sunlight streaming through the loose threads of Proteus’s hair in no.34.

Although the wet-ground technique was limited in that it dictated how much work an artist could complete in a session, its great advantage was in maximising the optical impact of a white ground. Rather than the painted object possessing a fixed local colour, different areas of colour would be placed close to one another on the surface so that they would fuse on the retina once the spectator stepped back from the picture, as later seen in avant-garde paintings by the Neo-Impressionists in France, led by Georges Seurat. Hunt and Brown were probably the greatest experimenters when it came to representing the optical effects of simultaneous contrast, as seen in the use of complementary colours for the wool of the sheep in *Our English Coasts*, 1852 (no.71), where blue and lilac are placed next to orange and yellow, and in the mauve shadows on the faces of the mother and child in *The Pretty Baa-Lambs*, where the illuminated areas are literally bleached by the sun. In the latter work Brown set out to represent the optical illusion of an after-image, using the unconventional juxtaposition of an emerald green glaze for the cavity of the woman’s mouth against the madder of her lips and cheeks. This startling contrast is only noticeable on close inspection; from a distance the effect appears natural and correct, suggesting an intuitive understanding on Brown’s part of the laws of simultaneous contrast being advanced by the pioneering French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul around the same time.12

The Pre-Raphaelites’ original aim of subsuming individual identity within an overarching artistic goal began to collapse around the late 1850s as each artist evolved a more personal and what might be termed post-Raphaelite working procedure.
This change was accompanied by a shift towards opaqueness in the way the artists used their pigments. *Autumn Leaves* (no.117) marked a turning point for Millais in this respect, with soft gradated, sfumato modelling used to suggest ambiguity in facial expression. The more painterly execution and uneven areas of focus in this work anticipate Millais’s mature productions, which are drawn in less detail on canvas and grander in scale, the paint applied with larger brushes and interlaced with varnish to create an active surface that matched the vitality and energy that Millais wanted to express in his sitters and landscapes (see no.162). The act of painting itself became more physical. Instead of crouching close to the canvas, Millais would move back and forwards, checking each stroke of the brush against the subject in hand.

Of all the artists associated with the PRB, Hunt remained most committed to the early principles of the movement, becoming increasingly obsessed with the permanence and stability of his pigments, the sturdiness of his supports (for which he sometimes used blind stretchers with panels slotted in between the stretcher parts to protect the back of the canvas, as with *The Triumph of the Innocents*, no.169) and perfecting his compositions through endless scrapings and revisions. There had been an element of risk in the early paintings of the PRB in that the youthful, confident artists had no guarantee that their methods would endure with the passing of time. Hunt made it his mission to ensure that they would: he inscribed notes about his original painting methods and materials, and any subsequent restoration, on the unpainted spandrels of the pictures he later came to rework, such as *The Awakening Conscience* (no.98), and engaged in long and bitter disputes with colourmen over manufactured pigments that he believed were inferior to those used in early PRB productions, particularly the vermilion colours that had been made by Field.13 Hunt also recommended that his works be covered with glass to protect what the art historian Carol Jacoby calls the ‘smooth unbroken skin of his aesthetic’.14 This practice echoed his idea that a painting should appear like a mirror or a window onto the world. As with Millais, Hunt veered towards opacity in his mature works, as seen in the denser application of paint in *Il Dolce far Niente* (no.121) and in the background of *The Triumph of the Innocents*. Working on a large scale militated against the continued use of the wet-white ground technique, which would have been too time consuming. Instead, Hunt encouraged the process of using a stone-coloured ground and, in an inversion of early Pre-Raphaelite procedure, would also lay figures in first before working up the background with large brushes. W.M. Rossetti described how Hunt employed brushes of great length for *The Shadow of Death* (no.112), which allowed him to stand back from the canvas as he synthesised each mark into the general design.15 In Hunt’s case the quest for strength and durability relates to the steadfastness of his religious beliefs and his determination to fix meaning in the material substance of paint itself.

Rossetti had been unique among the PRB in abjuring oil paint, after his initial experimental works in the early phase of the Brotherhood. Instead, throughout the 1850s he opted to use watercolour, finding it less intractable than oil and better suited for a smaller scale. His decision to work almost exclusively on paper was also prompted by his practice as a writer, encouraging a close reading of details and symbols as if they represented poetic form in paint. Rossetti’s unique watercolour system can be seen at its finest in his chivalric paintings of 1857 (see nos. 46–8). Bought by William Morris, they present an imaginative vision of the past with their rich decorative surface patterns and vibrant prismatic colours influenced by the medieval illuminated manuscripts Rossetti so admired. Although Rossetti used the favourite Pre-Raphaelite pigments – blue ultramarine, emerald green and rose madder – he added to these his own gem solutions and varnish to deepen tone in selected areas with the aim of modifying the aqueous properties of the watercolour medium. *The Tune of Seven Towers* (no.47) is typical of his practice in being conceived as a solid object. To strengthen the support, the medium-wove paper was sized with glue to withstand vigorous working with the brush and then lined on to a similar paper, before being attached to unprimed canvas and wrapped around a stretcher. Two extra strips of paper were added to the sides after Rossetti had begun the central figure when the composition outgrew the support, an additive process he often used in his watercolours, most works disclosing similar butt joins at the edges. Technical examination of this work carried out in 1993 revealed how the artist applied paint in a counter-intuitive way, rubbing in dry colour first and then building up forms with tiny strokes.16 Rossetti used a range of techniques to create whites: the yellow hatching on the seated woman’s red gown is
counterbalanced by scraping through or reverse-hatching in other areas, notably the wall hanging on the right, to lend detail and vibrancy to the surface. Rather than using scratching-out to register white, in this instance Rossetti applied lead white for the veil, sleeve and skirt trimming of the central woman in red. This has since discoloured, probably due to atmospheric pollution from coal-burning, thereby undermining the original role of white in accentuating the flickering patterns of colour across the composition. It seems that Rossetti, in comparison with Hunt, cared little about the permanence of his colours, delighting rather in their immediate brilliance.

Rossetti also differed from the other Pre-Raphaelites in that he used the colour and texture of his paint to direct the viewer's attention away from any purported external world. Instead, colour, line and pattern were exploited to evoke texture and sound in a form of synaesthesia, as if the artist were making a direct appeal to the viewer's aural imagination. This helps explain why The Tune of Seven Towers and The Blue Closet (no.48) inspired Morris to write sonnets, thereby extending the idea of correspondence across media, which was reinforced by these pictures' relation to the heavy furniture, decorative ceramic tiles and embroidered wall hangings produced by Morris and his associates at Red Lion Square around the same time (see nos.54, 135).

Towards the end of the 1850s Rossetti started to venture beyond watercolour as he, like the other Pre-Raphaelites, sought a more monumental dimension in his art. He did not forsake all aspects of his earlier practice, retaining for instance a tendency to expand his canvases in a piecemeal fashion. The oil painting Beata Beatrix (no.124) thus comprises six pieces of canvas to allow space around Beatrix's hands as well as for the distant background. Recent analysis of the paint surface reveals that Rossetti was not so meticulous a craftsman as his peers, being more interested in the idea behind a work than its actual execution; Holman Hunt described him as 'at the end only an amateur'. This explains the unfilled gaps in the white preparatory layer of Beata Beatrix and the bits of studio debris and brush hairs trapped within the paint surface. In his memoir of 1931, Time Was, the painter and connoisseur W.G. Robertson, like Hunt, recalled the self-conscious 'amateur' aspect of Rossetti's technique, describing his horror on encountering a painting by the artist at public exhibition that struck him as marred by 'distorted drawing' and 'tortured "gormy" paint'. Yet Robertson also goes on to say how the image returned to haunt him with its beautiful presence, a revelation that led him to conclude that the essence of a picture lay in its idea, not its final appearance: 'The mental photograph, taken during that momentary stance, should be that of the picture that might have been instead of the picture that was.'

Rossetti's opaque and hermetic form of watercolour painting, and even the avowedly 'amateur' aspects of his practice, became the inspiration for a number of untrained artists within the Pre-Raphaelite circle, such as Elizabeth Siddall and Edward Burne-Jones. However, while Rossetti composed in colour, in keeping with Pre-Raphaelite principles, Burne-Jones was (as Ruskin put it) 'a chiaroscuroist': in his early works dark and sinister forms emerge from 'the dimness and coruscation of ominous light'. Burne-Jones's radical use of the watercolour medium can be seen in early paintings such as Sidonia von Bork (no.56). For this he utilised two pieces of heavy cartridge paper wrapped around a stretcher in keeping with the Pre-Raphaelite emphasis on robust three-dimensional supports. The paint surface consists of watercolour and gouache interlaced with thin layers of gum arabic. As with Rossetti's watercolours, the application of gum at an early stage of painting rather than as a finish was unusual for the time and reminiscent of the syrupy texture that distinguished the works in tempera by William Blake, such as The Ghost of a Flea (c.1819–20; Tate), which together with Sidonia was once owned by W.G. Robertson. Sidonia is distinctive for its sharp contrasts of black and white. For lighter areas Burne-Jones used zinc white but restricted it to the hatching at the bottom of the witch's dress. For other areas of the collodion fabric he marked in the pattern first and then scratched heavily into the painted surface, almost as if making an engraving, the idea being to expose the underlying white paper before layering in darker lines on top in order that the snake-like configurations should writhe menacingly across the surface of the design. It was later said that even so discerning a connoisseur as Laurence Binyon (Keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum) was not entirely convinced that Sidonia was actually a watercolour, so intent had the artist been on disguising his materials to create a dark and unsettling work in keeping with the disturbing nature of the subject, the murderess Sidonia, taken from the gothic romance, Sidonia the Sorceress, by the Pomeranian poet Johann Wilhelm Meinhold.

It is important to note that Burne-Jones was not alone in using complex mixed-media techniques at this time. For instance, Samuel Palmer, who had been influenced by William Blake's idiosyncratic techniques in printing and painting, ignored successive bans imposed by the watercolour societies on gum and varnish. But whereas Palmer's materials functioned to convey atmosphere and distance, Burne-Jones's served to reinforce the flatness and texture of paint itself. It is thus hardly surprising that Burne-Jones's early exhibits at the Old Water-Colour Society consequently met with a hostile reception from critics complaining about the artist's disregard for the specificities of the watercolour medium and the sullied nature of his surfaces. As he branched out in the 1870s to work on a larger scale in oil, he continued to adopt an experimental approach, flaunting conventional expectations of how oil paint should look as
he pursued a synergy of method across media. Robertson described how he would wilfully ignore the intrinsic nature of his medium by putting it to uses for which it was never intended: ‘In water colour he would take no advantage of its transparency, but load on body colour and paint thickly in gauache; when he turned to oil he would shun the richness of impaste, drawing thin glazes over careful drawings in raw umber heightened with white; if he used pastel, it was to imitate oil.”

Burne-Jones’s paintings in oil thus incorporate characteristics of his earlier practice despite being conceived on a grander scale. Not only did he use dainty sable brushes for details, but he deliberately set out to deny the viscosity of the oil medium by employing dry, granular paint, to which he may have added chalk for the preparatory layer. He also rejected copal as a means to lend transparency and refused to take advantage of the white ground, painting into the still-wet *imprimatura* layer to obtain the ‘muddy’ effect Hunt, Millais and Brown had been so anxious to avoid. Moreover, in contrast to the smooth supports found in early Pre-Raphaelite productions, Burne-Jones used coarse canvases, which he accentuated with broken effects of scumbling—the practice of dragging paint across the surface so as to disclose the influence of the colour beneath it. Not being especially interested in natural translucent effects, Burne-Jones made it his purpose to imbue his works with a sense of solidity or hardness as if they were formed of metal. His art, as Robertson affirmed, was close to that of a jeweller’s, to which end he would incise lines into the pigment, use gold mordant and fill up the spaces of his designs with various hues to make a beautiful pattern: ‘Some of his pictures, the “Laus Veneris” (no.165) for instance, were like clusters of many-coloured gems or stained windows through which shone the evening sun.”

Although Burne-Jones’s mature work in many respects represents the antithesis of early Pre-Raphaelite practice, it should also be seen as its culmination, given that his aim was also to realise on canvas the material quality of the objects depicted, be it the gilded staircase in *The Golden Stairs* or the shot-colour draperies and heavy metal shield and crown in *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* (nos.168, 170). And like Hunt, Burne-Jones aspired to permanence, the durability and stability of his materials having been proven by the fact that very little treatment of these two works has been required since they entered the Tate collection, other than a surface clean. By using his pigments to create a sense of solidity, Burne-Jones took the lead from the Pre-Raphaelites in refuting the idea that a given medium possesses intrinsic qualities to be adhered to and enhanced by the artist. Instead, he sought to determine new possibilities for his materials in close dialogue with the interiorised subjects he elected to represent. The controversy that surrounded the Pre-Raphaelites at all stages of their careers thus reveals something about the challenge their art presented at a time when the boundaries of media did matter and to reject them was both an aesthetic and an ideological commitment.

Fig. 9 Detail of the shield and crown in *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* 1880–4 (no.170).
NOTES

VICTORIAN AVANT-GARDE (pp.9-17)

1 This interpretation was hinted at in the introduction to the catalogue of the previous extensive Pre-Raphaelite survey exhibition of this kind, at the Tate Gallery in 1982; see Parrish 1988. Elizabeth Prettejohn fully enunciated the claim in her major authoritative Art of the Pre-Raphaelites (London and Princeton 2000), which explored the comparison between English and French avant-gardes. Her essay here expands on this theme (see pp.43-1).


3 See Prettejohn 2000, pp.63-5.


5 Carlyle 1912.


7 Nos.26-7 exhibited in London only.

8 John Ruskin, Letter to The Times, 27 May 1851, Ruskin 1903-4, XII, p.624.


11 See Michaela Giebelhausen's excellent Painting the Bible: Representation and Belief in Mid-Victorian Britain, Aldershot 2008, especially pp.111-26, and also Eva Pérő, Victorian Approaches to Religion as Reflected in the Art of the Pre-Raphaelites, Budapest 2003.

12 Ruskin 1903-12, XII, p.310.

13 On prostitution and 'decease' see Noad 1988.

14 On the links between empiricism and 'ethnology' in Victorian Britain, see George W. Stocking, Jr., Victorian Anthropology, New York 1987.


17 Rosenfeld 2000.

18 See the drawing by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Curator of John Everett Millais, 1816-18, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, in which Millais is given a speech bubble with the word 'Slosh!'

19 Sources including engravings by Liazid after Italian frescoes, contemporary German engravings by Moritz Rethz (which themselves echoed the style of Northern Renaissance woodcuts) and, surprisingly, the classical drawings of John Flaxman. For an excellent study of Pre-Raphaelite draughting see Cruise 2001, especially 'The Outline Style', pp.47-57.

20 See March 1991. In this publication we have chosen to use the original form of her name, ' Siddall', (for reasons for changing the name to ' Siddall' in 1853 are unknown; some speculate that this 'seems to indicate a new consciousness of artisanic identity' (March 1991, p.19), but there is good reason to believe that the 'final' 'I' in her surname was discarded to please Rossetti) (Virginia Surtees, Siddall, Elizabeth Eleanor (1823-1863), Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford 2004). Speculative, but replete with new material, is Thas Hawkins 2006.


24 Carlyle 1912, p.261.


27 John Googe, George Field and his Circle: From Romanesque to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, edn. cat., Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge 1989, p.213; Mary Philadelphia Merrifield (ed.), A Treatise on Painting, Written by Comino Cornell in the Year 1477, ... , London 1844, and Original Treatise, dating from the Sixth to Fifteenth centuries, on the arts of painting in oil, miniature, mosaic, and on glass, of cutting glass, and the preparation of colours and artificial gems: preceded by a general treatise on painting, with transalations, prefaces, and notes, London 1849.


30 Townsend et al. 2004, Appendix. When they first used zinc white, the Pre-Raphaelites would not have known that it would take on the same appearance as lead white within a few years.

31 Haverfield 1896, p.27.


33 Information provided by Joyce Townsend.

34 Hunt 1875, p.46.


36 Surtees 1861, p.216 (diary entry: 16 Aug. 1842).

37 Chevreul’s Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colours was first published in English in 1854 and discussed by John Swainsex in 'The Natural Philosophy of Art', Art Journal, January 1852, p.3. The detail of the mouth is reproduced in Townsend et al. 2004, p.23.


39 Jacob 2006, p.110; Hunt 1875, p.45.


42 Natalie Walker, 'Tate Condition Report', May 2012; Morgan Library, Millais Papers, MAA 4285, K.415, Hunt to Millais, dated 'March 18th 1881'.

43 Robertson 2001, p.57 (the painting described was possibly the artist's Vision of Flanneta, no.169).


45 I am grateful to Annika Eriksen for this information.


47 Robertson 2001, p.83.

48 Robertson 2003, p.82.