

The Pre-Raphaelites

A new phase in Romantic poetry was marked by The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The term The Pre-Raphaelite refers to an **artistic style** and also to a brotherhood founded in September **1848 by William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti**.

It was a movement of painters. These young artists rejected the art in vogue in the middle of the 19th century and wanted **to return to the medieval freshness of painting before Raphael**. The programme was vague but in practice the artists shared a **vividness of colour and passion for naturalistic detail** even brought to the extreme to maniacal fixity.

Apart from these qualities the artists differed, particularly in the kind of naturalism they employed.

D. G. Rossetti: the finest and most representative of the group painted the **faces and bodies of women with a sensual exaltation** that combined spiritual tension and erotic desire.

Millett's: his style was already moving towards the floral Art Nouveau style which would become popular at the end of the century.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was not only a painter but also a poet and writers such as **William Morris** regarded him as their leader. He was a point of reference for critics and artists of different tendencies, like **John Ruskin, Charles Algernon Swinburne, George Meredith** and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's own sister Christina Rossetti.

The **Pre-Raphaelites** brought a **striking sense of novelty** to a rather dull and extremely **conventional** artistic scene where the art of painting almost entirely consisted of either stock-portrayals of historical events or domestic scenes. Except for Rossetti, however, they did not detach themselves from this narrative tradition with its characteristic attention to detail.

What they did was **to focus in an hallucinatory way on particulars that become evocative losing through fixity their concreteness**. The overabounding proliferation of detail seems to suggest other presences, to evoke another dimension.

Rossetti's painful intensity, on the other hand, his beautiful and sorrowfully enchanted Beatrices are a prelude to the Aesthetic Movement at the end of the century.

As we have already said the term Pre Raphaelite does not only describe a school of painting ⇒ **it was also a way of thinking that produced literature, poetry, and in a confused way, also indicated a certain kind of radical mentality**.

The Movement's Journal *The Torch*, was radical to the point of anarchy. It opposed an industrial civilization based on mass-production, alienation of workers and the profit motive not only from the economic point of view but from the point of view **of both the nature of the product and the production process**.

The Pre-Raphaelites proposed instead an **idealized version of medieval civilization in which creativity and order** existed altogether. The world was to be based on love, for instance between the artisan and the product of his work, instead of the alienated seriality of mass production rather based on hostility. **The Pre-Raphaelites attacked a non-aesthetic industrialism and supported a social-economic revolution founded on the great values that art represented**.

The return to the Middle Ages meant for the Pre-Raphaelites a return to Nature, to exact and minute details, but at the same time to a highly symbolic kind of painting.

In 1850 with the publication of a literary magazine ***The Germ***, the movement extended also to literature.

Rossetti, Swinburne and Morris were the most remarkable poets under the influence of Pre-Raphaelite theories. Also Christina Rossetti and Coventry Patmore were connected to Pre-Raphaelitism.

Pre-Raphaelite poetry privileged **medieval themes, archaisms, pictorial images**. It drew inspiration from Keats and Tennyson for its languid cadence and its sensuous imagery.