

Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is an association of painters, sculptors, architects, craftsmen that worked in London in the middle of XIX century, sharing the same vision of art and society → although they are nowadays considered the greatest symbol of the Victorian Age, they fought against it in several ways.

The PRB is a very complex movement and the only way to get close to it is facing its theories; in particular two intellectuals have to be remembered: John Ruskin and William Morris.

Historical and cultural context

The opposition against the Royal Academy

During the half of the XIX century, in London, there was only one way for becoming an artist: attending the academy, participating to the academy exhibitions, following the rules of the academy about both the style and the subject that an art piece should represent. The greatest artist of modern age, according to the academy, was Sir Joshua Reynolds, a neoclassical artist, whose aristocratic portraits were famous in all Europe. All his paintings are characterized by a baroque-style composition, the use of light conditions similar to those of Caravaggio's masterpieces and the attention on precious details (such as the elegance of costumes) for celebrating the patrons. Each artist that didn't follow Reynold's way of painting was not considered a good example of artist by the academy.

The Pre-raphaelites were convinced that this way of controlling the arts was wrong, that other ways of painting were possible and that it was fundamental for the artist to be free of representing Nature as it was, without the refinements imposed by the academy.

John Ruskin

- he supported the movement but was never part of it: he wrote several positive art critics in favour of the group;
- his most important works - *The seven lamps of architecture* (1849), *The stones of Venice* (1853) and *Modern Painters* (1843-60) - were fundamental for the Pre-Raphaelites: before the group was founded, several future members of the brotherhood used to read passages from these texts and their style and vision of arts were influenced by that ↯ Ruskin celebrates in particular:
 - art ruins as a sacred witness of past values
 - neomedievalism as the perfect style for modern architecture since it recalls a period of high moral values (absolute faith, birth of European nations...)
 - Turner as the model of modern artist, capable of following his inner inspiration, rejecting the rules imposed by academies;
- he also wrote several texts for promoting the PRB - such as letters mailed to the director of the *Times journal* and destined to publication and a short pamphlet, entitled *Pre-raphaelitism*, where he expressed his ideas about the movement and about arts in general

William Morris (1834-1896)

- he's the principal founder of the movement;

Short biography:

- son of a rich family, he attended Oxford University where he met several future members of the brotherhood;

- he married a poor woman, Jane Burden, then known as Jane Morris, considered by everyone in the group the ideal archetype of beauty (pale, thin, with dark hair... she seemed the protagonist of a medieval fairy tale): she will be model not just for Morris, but even for other members of the group
- he dedicated himself to decorative arts and created different societies whose mission was to unite creativity and cheapness, so that it could be possible to avoid alienation and bad quality objects, the 2 most horrible consequences of the industrial revolution according to Morris → W. Morris, *Strawberry Thief* (1883)
 - o hand-made work was replaced by machine work, the artists were employed just as designers and they were asked for very simple creations (so that they could be produced by machines)
 - o costs were limited and production was successful → of course the possibility to buy the products was still unreachable for simple workers, but the idea that beauty could be shared at different levels of society became possible (this is the beginning of "design": an industrial object which is useful and good-looking at the same time)
 - the A&C Ex. Soc. was probably Morris' most important legacy:
 - 130 A&C Societies have grown in England between 1895 and 1905
 - Art Nouveau has its origins in A&C philosophy
 - the concept of design (an industrial object which is useful and good-looking at the same time) derives from Morris' A&C

Most important texts wrote by William Morris:

- *The decorative arts* (an address delivered before the Trades' Guild of Learning in 1877) → this text is fundamental to understand the PRB's work: for the Pre-Raphaelites art is the only possible solution to all economic and social contrast: making art something reachable for everyone will bring to a more equal and fair society -> this can be understood considering the historical and cultural context where the PRB was born:
 - o the Victorian society, where the condition of the poor was horrible and apparently unchangeable;
 - o the fact that in 1848, in London, the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* by Karl Marx was published, promoting a new way of perceiving industrialization, work and economics;
 - *News from Nowhere* (1891): it a utopian novel, based mostly on the dialogue between William Morris himself and a fantastic character, old Hammond, set in a London suburb, in a supposed future (the first years of XXI century): Morris will discover that, after the crisis of the industrial revolution and a great war between different social classes, everything has changed:
 - o production is organized according to communism: no one owns the machine and there's no commerce
 - o machines have cancelled the worst part of the job, but men are still called to produce for their own satisfaction
 - o there are neither poverty nor ugliness
 - o country and city live side by side
- this doesn't mean that PR art refuses all comforts created by modernity: for example the Pre-Raphaelites used a lot photography: photographs were useful for studying composition, for having a precise image of reality from which starting to paint a detailed

portrait and so on... many photographers were afraid of Pre-Raphaelite paintings because they were as detailed as photos but they were coloured

Romantic influence: the love for the Middle-Ages and for fairy tales engravings

The Middle-Ages is the period that has to inspire the modern artist: with "Middle-Ages" the PRs, just like the Romantics, referred generally to the last period of the Middle-Ages (XIII - XIV centuries): the period of Gothic cathedrals, of Dante's *Commedia*... a period that, according to the PRs had respect for man's creativity and dignity, and considered theology more important than science, moral values more important than money... this vision was of course strongly idealized → the name "Pre-Raphaelite" is due actually to a negative vision of Raphael and Renaissance in general, seen as a period too influenced by classicism and formal elegance.

Romanticism was also the period where the roots of nationalism were born thanks to the discovery of folk culture, symbolized, for example, by fairy tales and their illustration, generally realized by engraving techniques.

The Pre-Raphaelites' history (1848 - beginning of XX century)

Historical context

The group was officially founded in 1848 and closed in 1853, but actually the PR movement produced, even if not under the name of an association, until 1910 → this means that the Pre-Raphaelites covered the whole Victorian (1837-1901) and Edwardian (1901-10) Ages, a moment of strong contradictions:

- it was a period of highly moralist behaviour, even if most of the time moral values simply brought to censorship and fake respectability (during the Victorian Era for example prostitutes were called "unfortunates" as if the changing of term was sufficient to cover reality)
- nothing was done to solve misery or child labour if not encouraging charity.

FIRST PHASE (1848-1854) _ leader: Millais [members: Millais, Rossetti, Hunt]

- the movement was founded in September 1848 in John Everett Millais' family house, in London, by J.E. Millais, D.G. Rossetti and W.H. Hunt
- every artist (even women!) was accepted in the group as long as they shared Ruskin's opinion about modern art
- the founders soon realized that the only way to promote revolution in art and their production was participating to Royal Academy's annual exhibition, possibly joining the competition (just Millais, at the very end, will decide to compete) ...

the works for the 1849 exhibition...

○ **J. E. Millais, *Isabella or the basil vase***, oil on canvas, 100x150 cm, Liverpool (Walker Art Gallery), 1849

- subject: the painting illustrates one of the short stories written by Boccaccio in *Decameron* (4th day, unhappy loves, Filomena's short story): it's the story of Isabella da Messina, in love with Lorenzo, his brothers' servant; since she was destined to a rich merchant, his brothers kill Lorenzo; Isabella, desperate for her lover's loss, exhumes Lorenzo's body, takes his head and hides it in a vase with a plant of basil; since she cries every day on the vase, his brothers guess what she's hiding, bring away Lorenzo's head and Isabella dies because of her grief → the painting shows the moment during which Isabella's brothers guess that the two are in love: Isabella is taking half of an orange Lorenzo is offering; on the other side of the table there are

the brothers: one is looking through a glass of wine, the other has just kicked a dog and is breaking a nut;

- everything has a symbolic meaning:
 - o the orange divided into 2 parts symbolizes love (the platonic myth of the 2 halves) and the future decapitation
 - o wine is a symbol of power and money
 - o the kick and the nut represent violence
- style: the painting doesn't follow academic rules, but a particular new style:
 - o naturalism:
 - really detailed
 - everything is in full light: there are almost no shadows
 - costumes are credible for the Middle-Ages
 - o no traditional rules:
 - perspective is wrong
 - proportions are not completely right: dimensions are good, but there's no use of chiaro-scuro
 - the use of contrasting colours is a bit exaggerated
 - attitudes and movements are not realistic: characters seem to be stuck in their position
- the sign "PRB" is written on Isabella's chair and sounds like a declaration of independence towards Royal Academy
- the work was not appreciated by contemporaries, not because it was considered too much revolutionary, but because of the opposite: Millais was accused of having copied Botticelli and Piero della Francesca.

○ **W. H. Hunt, *Rienzi***, oil on canvas, 86x122 cm, private collection, 1849

- full title: *Rienzi vowing to obtain justice for the death of his young brother, slain in a skirmish between the Colonna and the Orsini factions* (Rienzi giura di ottenere giustizia per la morte del giovane fratello, ucciso in una schermaglia tra le fazioni dei Colonna e degli Orsini)
- subject: taken from Bulwer Lytton's novel (1835, *Rienzi*) that describes the character of Rienzi according to romantic ideals: as a man full of passions and attached to his family and country

○ **D. G. Rossetti, *The girlhood of Mary Virgin***, oil on canvas, London, Tate, 1848-49

- though this work was meant to be displayed with the other on the Royal Academy's annual exhibition, just a week before the opening Rossetti, afraid of the public judgement, took his work to the "Free Exhibition", where it even received positive critics! → in spite of his anger, Millais refused to expel Rossetti from the Brotherhood
- subject: it tries to show the Virgin's purity using symbols: the dove, the lily, the women's simple activities → even if style is similar to Millais', it's quite obvious that Rossetti's work is more attached to symbolism than those of the other members

Considering the paintings we've analyzed, it's obvious that in their first year the Pre-Raphaelites' necessities were finding a unique style and following Ruskin's instructions and the best for achieving these goals was to find inspiration in Middle-Age stories.

But soon they felt the necessity of opening their painting to something new, to contemporary themes and other myths:

- PR painting appreciated Shakespeare and in particular the character of Ophelia (since she refuses to deny her feelings and her madness derives from the contrast between her desire and the will of society)
- The Pre-Raphaelites were also interested in the woman's condition during the Victorian Era: she was forced either to live under the false rules of her society or to be considered a fallen woman

The legacy of the PRB

The last legacy of the Arts&Crafts movement can be considered the Art Nouveau movement. Its **main characteristics**:

- it's a European movement, but with several declinations (and so differences) in the countries it spread and this is well explained by the fact that it has different names in different countries: in Italy it's remembered as Liberty while in England as Modern Style
- it's based on the celebration of curve lines (seen as the unique organic forms) and on the socialist philosophy expressed by William Morris
- it has many similarities with the PRB's style and aims, but the subjects used by Art Nouveau artists, especially in England, are Freud's offspring: they're full of symbolism, modern fears, ambiguity: they represent well how the A&C's dream has become once again something different, has revealed itself for what it is: a nightmare, if set in real world

There are several connections between literature and art in this last period → one of the most interesting is the work created by Aubrey Beardsley: a series of illustrations for Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*.

○ **Aubrey Beardsley, *Salomé illustrations*, engravings, 1896**

- Oscar Wilde wrote his original, French version of the one-act tragedy of Salome in 1891 while living in Paris, the epicenter of the movement of Symbolism he was so attracted to; in England the play was initially banned formally because it didn't show respect for biblical characters, actually because it showed a too sexual image of woman
- the story described by the tragedy was particularly appreciated by Symbolists and used for several art products: one of the best example is Gustave Moreau's *Apparition* (1875)
- Beardsley's visual interpretation of Wilde's femme fatale was published in the debut of the London journal, *The Studio*, in April of 1893. The title of the Salome illustration was an echo of her final words before her death – *J'ai Baisé ta Bouche, Iokanaan* ("I Have Kissed Your Mouth, Iokanaan"). Wilde soon delivered Beardsley a copy of *Salomé* with the inscription, "For Aubrey: for the only artist who, beside myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance" and commissioned Beardsley to illustrate all of *Salomé* → anyway the magic didn't last very long: when the English edition of the work was published with all the 16 illustrations by Beardsley, Wilde was shocked: not only did he find their style inappropriate, but the illustrations had caused such public controversy with their fascinating, grotesque appeal that Wilde was concerned they would overshadow his work and "reduce the text to the role of 'illustrating Aubrey's illustrations'". Further, since the publishing of the English edition many have posed the question of whether

or not the illustrations even corresponded to the written text, but actually Beardsley limited himself to symbolistic view of illustration

The Climax

- both Wilde's text and corresponding illustration depict Salome in a state of perverse ecstasy and at the same time suffering as she holds the lifeless head of Iokanaan in her hands → in the text we can perceive her persistent sexual desire for St. John, in spite of the fact that he's already dead: this necrophiliac appetite is shown by Beardsley in a particular way:
 - o we see Salome literally floating in the air, lifted to a state of suspended rapture above a puddle of blood from whence a lily of perversion grows tall and erect
 - o in the upper left-hand corner of the picture we are reminded of the 'clusters of black grapes' to which Salome previously compared Iokanaan's hair in the text, again speaking of his body as something to be devoured, ravaged, thus reversing the traditional roles of woman and man in regards to sexuality

The Peacock Skirt

- probably the image shows the Young Syrian casting his gaze upon Salome (we can presume it just because this image was put just before the line "You are always looking at her" pronounced by the page of Herodias → the figure to the right, assumed to be the Young Syrian, can be identified as a man by observing his legs and knees that betray the androgyny of his face; though his expression does not convey the image of the gentle affection he feels for Salome according to the text, his eyes appear to be blinded by what he sees as her beauty, represented by the haze or veil of denial visibly clouding his vision, in opposition to Salome's clear, dead-white glare
- the elaborate dress and décor about Salome correspond to the Young Syrian's vision of her as the embodiment of ultimate femininity and elegance. Beardsley might have been inspired to use the peacock theme and imagery in this picture due to Herod's offer later in the text to give the princess all of the peacocks in his possession if only she would take back her request for the prophet's head → it is important that both the text and the illustrations give so much importance to dresses and jewelry used by women to be more attractive because this theme (the female capability of confusing men by seducing them with tricks) is really frequent in Art Nouveau paintings [vd. Klimt]

In all Beardsley's illustrations we can see several typical Art Nouveau characteristics:

- the use of the curve line, both as a decorative and structural/compositive line
- the "horror vacui": every angle of the image is full of details, in spite of the fact that the technique doesn't ease the creation of many details
- the habit to opposites: white-black, beauty-ugliness, innocence-cruelty... the image must shock the observer and its message must be strong and violent
- the frequent use of symbols: the scissors, the Harlequin mask, the flowers... everything has a double meaning, and not just the objects, but sometimes even the figures