John Ruskin

Edinburg Conferences

I – John RUSKIN

The contradictory legacy of John Ruskin's artistic and social critique

The centenary of the death of John Ruskin has helped provoke a renewed interest in his works, including several biographies and an exhibition at the Tate Britain art gallery called *Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites*. By the time of his death in 1900, Ruskin had become Britain's leading art and social critic. He was also an accomplished artist in own right, maintained a great interest in science and left behind a vast literary output containing some of the best English prose writing. Born in 1819 of an **Evangelical Protestant** mother and a successful wine merchant, Ruskin was treated "*effeminately and luxuriously*" by his parents who payed for his education, artistic tuition, travels across Europe and studies but "*thwarted [him] in all the earnest passion and fire in life*".

The combination of the religious intensity of the Evangelical Revival and the artistic excitement of English Romantic painting laid the foundations of Ruskin's later views. In his formative years, painters such as J.M.W. Turner, John Constable, and John Sell Cotman were at the peak of their careers. At the same time religious writers and preachers such as Charles Simeon, John Keble, Thomas Arnold, and John Henry Newman were establishing the spiritual and ethical preoccupations that would characterize the reign of Queen Victoria.

At the time, the rapid development of capitalism had, as Frederick Engels put it, "*in a matter of a few years swept away what had been the most venerable, sacrosanct and important classes in society, substituting in their place new, formerly unknown classes whose interests, sympathies, attitudes and way of life were quite incompatible with the institutions of the old English society*". These new classes were the industrial bourgeoisie, whose interests were represented in the Whig party, and the working class, who had formed the Chartist movement.

According to Engels, face to those Whigs were only "*sentimental Tories, for the most part utopian visionaries, wallowing in reminiscences of the extinct patriarchal cottage-industry exploitation and its concomitant piety, homeliness, hidebound worthiness and its set patterns handed down from generation to generation*". In the arts, the Romantic Movement and Gothic

Revival saw nature and the religious and feudal order of the middle Ages as an antidote to the upheavals brought about by Capitalism.

In 1843, after Ruskin left Oxford University, he started on the first of five volumes called *Modern Painters*.

As the full title suggests —*Modern Painters. Their Superiority in the Area of Landscape Painting to all the Ancient Masters, Proved by Examples of the True, the Beautiful and the Intellectual from the Works of Modern Artists, especially from those of J.M.W. Turner Esq., R.A.* — the series was a defence of Turner and a survey of art from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. In his writings, Ruskin portrays Turner as a misunderstood artist hero. He already promoted and patronised the artists in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood hoping they might provide a new and noble British Art. At first sight these two artistic tendencies — Turner's **use of whirling patterns of colour** and the Pre-Raphaelites' minute **attention to detail** — might seem opposites. Ruskin, however, said they were both "Living Art, true to Nature". In their distinct ways they both **revealed God's work**.

For Ruskin, Gothic 15th century Venice was the peak of artistic achievement. Its greatness, he said, arose through the "powers of labouring citizens and warrior kings". Its rise and fall was a lesson for the British Empire.

In 1849 (so we're getting closer to our Conferences), Ruskin continued his study of art & architecture in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (referring to the Christian virtues such as truth, beauty and justice) soon after the revolutions that swept Europe.

His first purpose was to insist on the "truth" of the depiction of Nature in Turner's landscape paintings. Neoclassical critics had attacked the later work of Turner, with its proto-Impressionist concern for effects of light and atmosphere, for mimetic inaccuracy, and for a failure to represent the "**general truth**" that had been an essential criterion of painting in the age of Sir Joshua Reynolds. Drawing on his serious amateur interests in geology, botany, and meteorology, Ruskin made it his business to demonstrate in detail that Turner's work was everywhere based on a profound knowledge of the local and particular truths of natural form. One after another, Turner's "truth of tone," "truth of colour," "truth of space," "truth of skies," "truth of earth," "truth of water," and "truth of vegetation" were minutely considered, in a laborious project that would not be completed until the appearance of the fifth and final volume of *Modern Painters* in 1860.

This shift of concern from general to particular conceptions of truth was a key feature of Romantic thought, and Ruskin's first major achievement was thus to bring the assumptions of Romanticism to the practice of art

criticism. By 1843 Avant-garde painters had been working in this new spirit for several decades, but criticism and public understanding had lagged behind. More decisively than any previous writer, Ruskin brought 19th-century English painting and 19th-century English art criticism into sympathetic alignment. As he did so, he alerted readers to the fact that they had, in Turner, one of the greatest painters in the history of Western art alive and working among them in contemporary London, and, in the broader school of English landscape painting, a major modern art movement.

Ruskin did this in a **prose style** peculiarly well adapted to the discussion of the **visual arts** in an era when there was limited reproductive illustration and no easy access to well-stocked public art galleries. In these circumstances the critic was obliged to create in words an effective sensory and emotional substitute for visual experience. R worked in the tradition of the Romantic poetic prose of Charles Lamb and Thomas De Quincy, the descriptive writing of Sir Walter Scott, the rhetoric of the Bible, and the verses of William Wordsworth.

In the process Ruskin introduced the newly wealthy commercial and professional classes of the English-speaking world to the possibility of **enjoying and collecting art**. He defined painting as "*a noble and expressive language, invaluable as the vehicle of thought, but by itself nothing*." Conscious of the spiritual significance of the natural world, young painters should "*go to Nature in all singleness of heart…having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember her instruction; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing*."

Three years later, in the second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846), Ruskin would specifically distinguish this strenuously ethical or Theoretic conception of art from the **Aesthetic**, undidactic, or art for art's sake definition that would be its great rival in the 2nd half of the 19th century. Despite his friendships with individual Aesthetes, Ruskin would remain the dominant spokesman for a morally and socially committed conception of art throughout his lifetime.

Art, architecture, and society

It was after the publication of the first volume of *Modern Painters* that Ruskin became aware of the critical rediscovery of the painting of the Gothic Middle Ages. He wrote about Giotto, Fra Angelico, and Benozzo Gozzoli and this medievalist enthusiasm was one reason that Ruskin was so ready to lend his support to the PRB, this group of young English artists formed in 1848 to reject the neoclassical assumptions of contemporary art schools. Ruskin published an enthusiastic pamphlet about the PRB (in which he misleadingly identified them

as the natural heirs of Turner) in 1851, wrote letters to the *Times* in 1851 to defend them from their critics, and recommended their work in his *Edinburgh Lectures* of 1853.

II – The Edinburgh Lectures

There were four of them delivered at the Philosophical Institution in Queen Street.

The **first two lectures** – on architecture – swung a wrecking ball at Edinburgh's sense of civic pride in its New Town, the *Athens of the North*. He told his audience they shouldn't be building Greek, but Gothic. His **next lecture**, on landscape painting, was a passionate defence of J.M.W. Turner, who had died only two years before. His moving account of the artist's final years still brings a lump to the throat. Ruskin's **last lecture**, on contemporary painting, focused on a scandalous group of Young British Artists calling themselves the PRB. 150 years later, the Edinburgh Lectures still entertain and provoke. **The buildings Ruskin spoke of still stand and a walk through the city will never be the same after hearing him.**

Paul O'Keefe (Scottish National Gallery, 16th August)

- **GENERAL STYLE of his lectures**

John Ruskin presents his ideas in a manner that is **original** and **impressive**. He puts forth propositions in an ingenious way with a direct perception of things, a keen sensibility to beauty, a purity of feeling and an exalted moral tone. Half of this discourse is consisting of generalizations extending beyond the writer's direct experience and too frequently of theological eccentricities in which evident earnestness constitutes the only redeeming element. Yet the grand and gorgeous rhetoric which so often bursts forth in *The Stones of Venice* is here subdued to a more colloquial strain, and the essential value of his ideas will on that account be more readily discerned. Critics who found his exhaustive analysis ridiculous and tiresome will probably base a charge of **obscurity and incompleteness**. Incomplete the lectures will undoubtedly appear to those who expect in them a manual of architecture, painting, for they are nothing but four hours' talk of artistic debates, by a man profoundly in earnest, about a few practical matters in the two arts.

- **The Fourth Lecture** (the one we're interested in)

November 18th

108. "**Schism** among British artists." "Popular **heresy**" "Singularity"
109. **Attack** = "*PRB wish to bring back a time of darkness and ignorance, when the principles of drawing were still unknown*".

In this lecture, Ruskin explains that Modern Academic art is not so much distinguished from old art by **greater skill**, as by a **radical change in temper, habits, method of existence, and heart of the whole creature**.

Then he introduces his Theory of the Trinity of Ages. The *Three Ages of the World* would be: Pagan Classical Age = CLASSICISM (represented by Leonidas), which extends until the fall of the Roman Empire, Religious Middle Age = MEDIEVALISM (Saint Louis), which extends to the late 15th century, and Secular Modern Age (Lord Nelson).

115. The transition between medieval and modern art would be the *Stanze* of Raphael in the Vatican: '*I say that a change took place, about the time of Raphael, in the spirit of Roman Catholics and Protestants both; and that change consisted in the denial of their religious belief, at least in the external and trivial affairs of life, and often in far more serious things*.'

- **Apollo** and Muses presiding Poetry **vs. Christ** presiding Theology

'*Raphael had neither religion nor originality enough to trace the **spirit of poetry**, and the spirit of philosophy, to the **inspiration of the true God**, as well as that of theology; but that, on the contrary, he elevated the creation of*

fancy on the one wall, to the same rank as the subjects of faith upon the other . . . The ***doom of the arts*** *of Europe went forth from that chamber, and it was brought about in great part by the very excellences of the man who had thus marked the commencement of decline. . . . The medievalist principles led up to Raphael, and the modern principles led down from him.'* (p. 213-215).

Same in Education = about children taught at great schools and universities. *'Is it Christian history, or the histories of Pan and Silenus? Your present education, to all intents and purposes, denies Christ, and that is intensely and peculiarly Modernism*.'

Same in governments = Christian governments in the Middle Ages confessed fear of God, confessed authority of His Law : 'All ancient art was *religious*, and all modern art is *profane*.'

'God will put up with a great many things in the human heart, but there is one thing He will *not* put up with in it : a second place. He who offers God a second place, offers Him no place.'

Certain service = peculiar form

The PR had the mission to rediscover the unconscious self, the religious spirit that animated the predecessors of the painter of the School of Athens.

- Middle Ages influence in **subjects**

Left : William Morris : *Queen Guinevere* (1858) oil on canvas, Tate Britain

Right : Frederick Sandys : *Morgan Le Fay* (1864) oil on panel, Birmingham Art Gallery

- Middle Ages influence in **techniques** and rendering

Edward Burne-Jones : *Angels with harp and horn*, W. Morris & Co, Montreal MFA

Dante Gabriel Rossetti : *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, (1848-9), oil on canvas, Tate Gallery

Van Eyck : *Het Lam Gods* (1432)

By 1853, Ruskin was prepared to redefine the once **dreaded medievalism** by reinventing this "*formerly shadowy and suspect period*" (p. 153) as a time when the conventions of art harmoniously incorporated religious devotion. Most Victorians had a vague notion that medieval art existed at some point before Raphael, and Ruskin contributed to such **impreciseness** in this speech. In 1853, the Victorian public knew so little about the so-called medieval period that it could function as a useful imaginative space for a critic or artist.

The Pre-Raphaelites themselves were influenced by a wide range of artists and, quite literally, they were prepared to examine any available art that predated Raphael. While this sometimes meant examining **Books of Hours** (cf. Julian Treherz, *The Pre-Raphaelites & Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts*), a reading of *The Germ*, the group's short-lived publication, reveals that the artists themselves had confused notions. Different periods are thrown together under the definition of medieval art and Rossetti invents a medieval artist for his essay 'Hand and Soul' rather than researching the background of a real individual. It seems ironic that a highly

educated critic such as Ruskin was prepared to exploit the gaps in his audience's knowledge to support the Pre-Raphaelites, while he was maintaining the importance of truth in art.

III – Analysis of *Excerpt* no.1

- **Calumnies**

129. It was asserted that the Pre-Raphaelites **did not draw well**, in the face of the fact, that the principal member of their body, from the time he entered the schools of the Academy, had literally encumbered himself with the medals given as prizes for drawing. It was asserted that they **did not draw in perspective**, by men who themselves knew no more of perspective than they did of astrology; it was asserted that they **sinned against the appearances of nature**, by men who had never drawn so much as a leaf or a blossom from nature in their lives. And, lastly, when all these calumnies or absurdities would tell no more, and it began to be forced upon men's unwilling belief that the style of the Pre-Raphaelites *was* true and was according to nature, the last forgery invented respecting them is, that **they copy photographs**.

John Everett Millais : *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1849-50), Tate Britain

CHARLES DICKENS

"You come in this Royal Academy Exhibition, which is familiar with the works of WILKIE, COLLINS, ETTY, EASTLAKE, MULREADY, LESLIE, MACLISE, TURNER, STANFIELD, LANDSEER, ROBERTS,

DANBY, CRESWICK, LEE, WEBSTER, HERBERT, DYCE, COPE, and others who would have been renowned as great masters in any age or country you come, in this place, to the contemplation of a Holy Family. You will have the goodness to discharge from your minds all Post-Raphael ideas, all religious aspirations, all elevating thoughts, all tender, awful, sorrowful, ennobling, sacred, graceful, or beautiful associations, and to prepare yourselves, as befits such a subject Pre-Raphaelly considered for the lowest depths of what is mean, odious, repulsive, and revolting.

"You behold the interior of a carpenter's shop. In the foreground of that carpenter's shop is a hideous, wry-necked, blubbering, red-headed boy, in a bed-gown, who appears to have received a poke in the hand, from the stick of another boy with whom he has been playing in an adjacent gutter, and to be holding it up for the contemplation of a kneeling woman, 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 gin shop in England.

"Two almost naked carpenters, master and journeyman, worthy companions of this agreeable female, are working at their trade; a boy, with some small flavour of humanity in him, is entering with a vessel of water; and nobody is paying any attention to a snuffy old woman who seems to have mistaken that shop for the tobacconist's next door, and to be hopelessly waiting at the counter to be served with half an ounce of her favourite mixture. Wherever it is possible to express ugliness of feature, limb, or attitude, you have it expressed. Such men as the carpenters might be undressed in any hospital where dirty drunkards, in a high state of varicose veins, are received. Their very toes have walked out of Saint Giles's. »

- David WILKIE (1785-1841)

Chelsea Pensioners reading The Waterloo Dispatch (1822)

- William Collins (died 1842)

- Eastlake (1793-1865)

Left : *Napoleon* (1815) / **Right** : *Choosing the Wedding Gown* (1823)

- Etty (1787-1849) : *Andromeda* (1840)

- Mulready (1786-1863)
- Charles Robert Leslie (1794-1859) *Sancho Panza in the Apartment of the Duchess* (1844)

- Daniel Maclise : *Scene from Twelfth Night: Malvolio and the Countess* (1840)

- Landseer : *Castle in Modern Times* (1841) : a family **portrait**

- Roberts : *The Castle of Alcalá de Guadaíra* (1833): an eerie **landscape**

- Danby : *The Deluge* (1841) : a **religious / mythological scene**

- Thomas Webster : *The Village Choir* (1847) : a **genre scene**

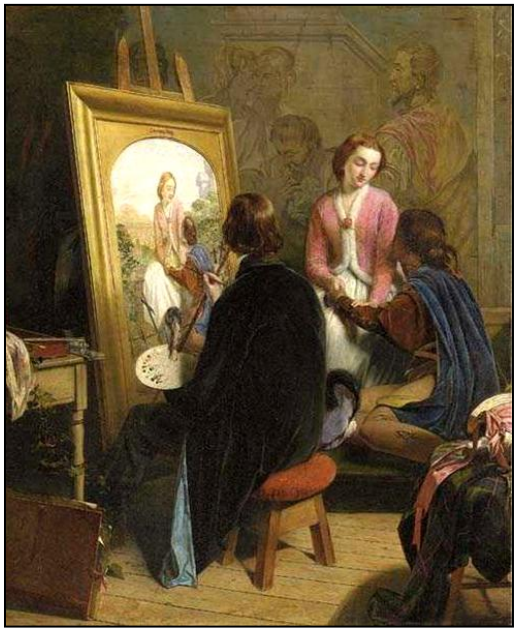
- Dyce : *The Meeting of Rachel and Jacob*

Inspired by the very Raphael-like Josef von Führich's *Jacob Encountering Rachel* (1836)

- Charles West Cope : *Oliver Cromwell & his secretary John Milton* : a **historical** scene

THE CLIQUE

The Clique was a group of English artists formed by Richard Dadd in the late 1830s. Other members were Augustus Egg, Alfred Elmore, William Powell Frith, Henry Nelson O'Neil, John Phillip and Edward Matthew Ward. In the 1850s most members of The Clique became inveterate enemies of the PRB, believing their art to be wilfully eccentric and primitivist. Frith and O'Neil wrote many attacks on Pre-Raphaelite principles.



Henry O'Neil, *The Pre-Raphaelite*, a satire on the Pre-Raphaelites painted by O'Neil in 1853

- **1 PRINCIPLE = Truth in details**

The Brotherhood's early doctrines were expressed in 4 declarations leading to that 1 principle:

1. to have genuine ideas to express = *spiritual and creative integrity*
2. to study nature attentively, so as to know how to express them
3. to sympathise with what is **direct** and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parodying and learned by rote
4. most indispensable of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues

➢ **Just before our extract**

128. '*What do you at present mean by* ***historical painting****?' (...) 'Now-a-days it means the endeavouring, by the power of imagination, to portray some historical event of past days. But in the Middle Ages, it meant representing the acts of their own days; and that is the only historical painting worth a straw.' (...) 'Suppose the Greeks, instead of representing their own warriors as they fought at Marathon, had left us nothing but their imaginations of Egyptian battles; and suppose the Italians, in like manner, instead of portraits of Can Grande and Dante, or of Leo the Tenth and Raphael, had left us nothing but imaginary portraits of Pericles and Miltiades? What fools we should have thought them*!'

130. Modern Painting = **Falsified Truth**
131. PRB disliked **copying the Antiques** = they **copy life faithfully** instead.

The group clearly rejected easy solutions, prettiness, conventional Victorian formulae, and what they considered to be the mechanistic approach first adopted by the Mannerist artists then by the followers of Sir Joshua Reynolds. Their approach was to return to the **abundant detail, intense colours, and complex compositions of Quattrocento Italian and Flemish art**. Their beautifully observed landscapes anticipated the open-air effects of the Impressionists.

- **LANDSCAPES in open air *from the thing itself***

cf. *Pre-Raphaelite Landscape and Outdoor Painting* by Allen STALEY (1966) New Haven, Yale University Press

William Holman Hunt : *The Hireling Shepherd* (1851), Manchester City Art Galleries

134. As landscape painters, the PR do not confine themselves to **conventional foreground work** with evanescent and effects and distant sublimities. With singularly enough, they were tempted away from this work, and tried themselves at a more daring rendering of truth.

William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) : *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus* (1850)

The landscape was painted out-of-doors in parkland at Knole from mid-October to mid-November. In a letter to a friend Hunt drew a sketch of himself sitting with his oils under a large umbrella surrounded by deer. The figures were painted in the studio, friends posing for the figures of Valentine and Proteus. The costumes were invented but Valentine's and the leg armour were based on two plates from Bonnard's *Costumes Historiques*. Elizabeth Siddal, later to marry Rossetti, modelled for the figure of Sylvia. The intense, bright colours and sharply defined naturalistic detail are typical of early PR. The heads, hands and brightest costumes were painted with the **wet white technique** adopted by the PR. This involved covering a small area of the canvas with a white chalk-based ground and painting on it while it was still wet. This method allowed the colours to retain an almost **translucent brightness** which caused considerable controversy because of its startling and often garish, effect.

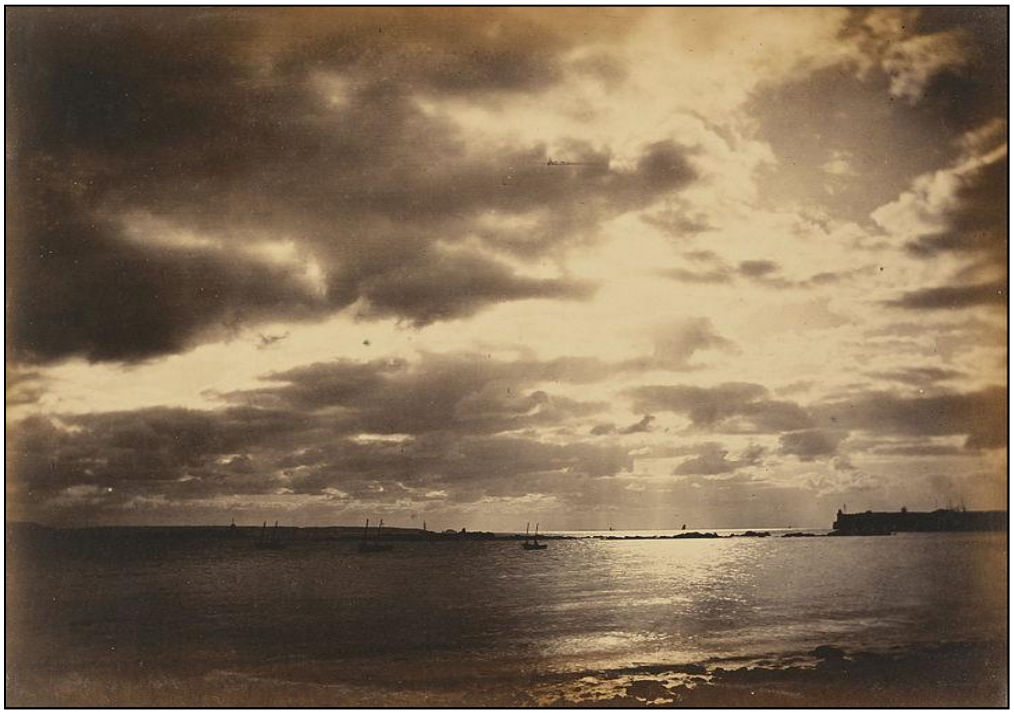
- **FIGURE = true PORTRAIT of living person + study of expression**

Link with PHOTOGRAPHY

At first glance, the Art of the Pre-Raphaelites looks **otherworldly.** Ladies in flowing gowns stare somewhere off in the distance, surrounded by sumptuous details and a prevalence of mist (Rossetti's *Proserpine*). Garden scenes are painted with the bright and flat luminosity you'd expect to see in an **illuminated manuscript** from the 14th century (Waterhouse's *The Enchanted Garden*). The real world, the one we inhabit in a day-to-day manner, has been banished altogether – so you might think. But then you would be wrong.

As an excellent show at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. (*The Pre-Raphaelite Lens: British Photography and Painting, 1840s–1860s*) makes it clear, that the PR were, in fact, heavily influenced by what was at that time the newest of technologies: photography. They loved the way photographs captured elements of nature and human beings in such **realistic detail** : blades of grass, flecks of colour. One of the paintings in the show, Inchbold's *Anstey's Cove*, looks as if it might be a touched-up photograph in the way that the shrubs and the water and the birds are so painstakingly rendered.

And the photographs Pre-Raphaelites took — like Colonel Henry Stuart Wortley's *The Clouds Are Broken in the Sky* — have a distinct painterly feel as well.



John R. Parsons : *Jane Morris* / Dante Gabriel Rossetti : *Jane Morris* (‘The Blue Silk Dress’)

We are thus left with something of a dilemma. We have an artistic movement with a professed desire to escape from modern times and return to a medieval aesthetic on the one hand, and a commitment to extreme realism and immediacy on the other.

PRB & NATURE

Pre-Raphaelites: The Vision of Nature was the first exhibition to centre exclusively on the profound fascination the Pre-Raphaelites felt for the **natural world**. The exhibition has been curated by Allen Staley and Christopher Newall, and opened from 29 September 2004 to 9 January 2005 in Madrid. It was divided into 6 sections. The (1) "Rejecting Nothing, Selecting Nothing" addresses the Pre-Raphaelite painters' fascination for minute detail and its representation. Within this context, reference is also made to the appeal of photography to the Pre-Raphaelites, a medium that faithfully represented reality.

John Everett Millais (1829-1896)
The Blind Girl (1852)

Although the subject deals with the **disturbing social problem** of the day, vagrancy amongst children and the disabled, the painting is a **compelling image** of the pathos of blindness. We witness, together with the young girl, the beauty of Nature which is denied to the blind woman. The background is an **accurate view** of Winchelsea in Sussex. However, the painting was completed in Perth, Scotland in 1855, where Millais settled after his marriage. The models were the two Perth girls.

(2) "The Mere Look of Things" looks at the concern for the ordinary and the mundane, which led certain artists to represent city outskirts, as in Ford Maddox Brown's (1821-1893) *An English Autumn Afternoon* (1852)

The view is north-east over **Hampstead Heath** towards Highgate, with Kenwood House and the spire of St Anne's Church, Highgate visible on the left of the horizon. The picture was painted from an upper room of a house in Hampstead where Brown had taken lodgings.

WHICH TRUTH ? '*An English Autumn Afternoon'* celebrates the **ordinary and everyday** from Brown's own middle class viewpoint. The elliptical shape is carefully chosen to lead the eye across the **panoramic landscape** bathed in autumnal sunshine. Brown was a friend of the photographer Roger Fenton and it seems likely that this unusually uncontrived landscape painting owes something to the contemporary developments in landscape photography. Brown's real originality was in his observation of light and here he has captured the flattening effect of the low-lying light on the massed bank of foliage in the middle distance.

(3) "Holy Lands" explores a new type of landscape painting that emerged as a result of the growing fascination with the East and places with Biblical echoes, as well as a wish to accurately document, through immensely detailed paintings, sites and edifices believed to be in danger of disappearing. This section includes works like *The Sphinx, Gizeh, Looking towards the Pyramids of Sakhara* by William Holman Hunt.

(4) "Understanding the Landscape" dwells on the interest shown by these painters in geology. Works like John Brett's *The Glacier of Rosenlaui* (1853) reflect the impact on art of the scientific research of the period into mountain erosion and glacier movement.

In contrast, the section (5) "The Inhabited Landscape" does not treat the landscape as the creation of nature or God, but rather as conceived increasingly more frequently as the scenario of human activities in pre-industrial rural Great Britain. Another outstanding work in this section is William Dyce's *Pegwell Bay* (1860).

The closing section, "Impression of the Effect", enables the spectator to observe the abandoning of intricate detail in favour of a more poetic type of landscape, as can be seen in John Brett's monumental picture *The British Channel Seen from the Dorsetshire Cliffs* (1871), one of the revelations of the exhibition.

John Everett Millais : *Isabella* (1849), Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

Transition. 133. So there was a real BATTLE = principal resistance comes from the attractiveness and temptation (mark the religious words) of spurious beauty (against the more noble quality of sincerity) which is characterized by a total absence of **sensibility to the ordinary** and popular forms of **artistic gracefulness**. It looks like dead statuary. This character occasionally renders the PRB work comparatively unpleasing.

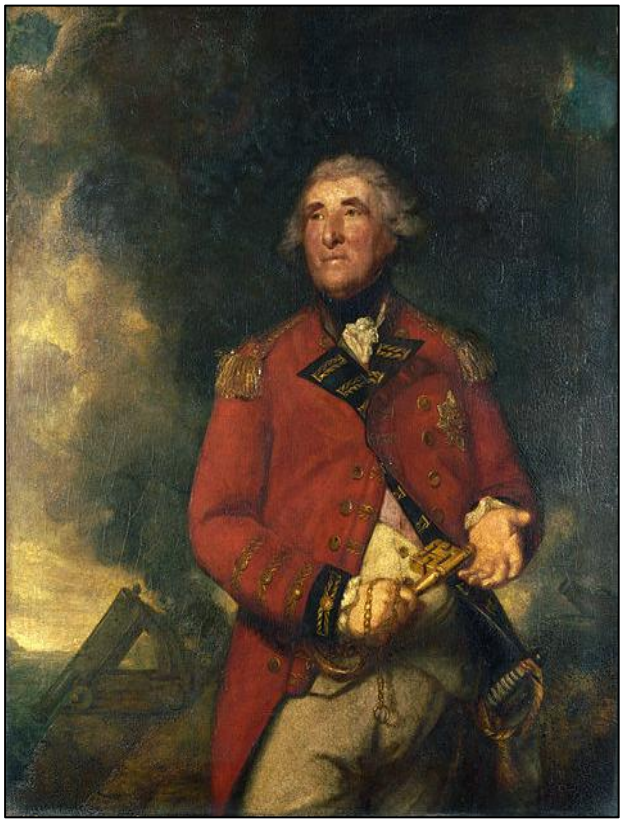
OTHER ARTISTS = Victorian Classical Paintings

« The Family of Queen Victoria » (1846) by Franz Xavier Winterhalter

- Left: George Hayter : *Queen Victoria in her coronation robes* (1860)
- Right: Sir Francis Grant (1803-1878) : *Portrait of Queen Victoria* (1843) 96 x 58 inches

Portrait of Prince Albert and *Queen Victoria* by Franz Xavier Winterhalter (1806-1873)

Inspired from Joshua Reynolds **Grand Style** from the Royal Academy



« History » and Heroic Portraits

Commodore Keppel (1753) / *Lord Heathfield* (1787)

- Reynolds's characteristic manner is exemplified by his 1753 portrait of *Commodore Keppel* (left), which relies like Ramsay's Scottish chief on the (reversed) pose of the Apollo Belvedere, yet endows its naval subject with a more solid, powerful presence through a skilful handling of lights and shadows. The stormy background of the picture would fit the taste of a nation that was often at war and delighted in 'manly' heroics ; Reynolds's later portrait of *Lord Heathfield* (the commander of Gibraltar) shows the consistency of his career in that respect.

"I am not ignorant that some will censure me for placing the Venetians in this inferior class, and many of the warmest admirers of painting will think them unjustly degraded ; but I wish not to be misunderstood. Though I can by no means allow them to hold any rank with the nobler schools of painting, they accomplished perfectly the thing they attempted. But as mere elegance is their principal object, as they seem more willing to dazzle than to affect, it can be no injury to them to suppose that their practice is useful only to its proper end. But what may heighten the elegant may degrade the sublime. There is simplicity, and I may add, severity, in the great manner, which is, I am afraid, almost incompatible with this comparatively sensual style. Tintoretto, Paul Veronese, and others of the Venetian schools, seem to have painted with no other purpose than to be admired for their skill and expertness in the mechanism of painting, and to make a parade of that art which, as I before observed, the higher style requires its followers to conceal."

Portraits in Disguise ?

The Duchess of Hamilton and Argyll (1762)

Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces (1765)

Replete with learned Classical allusions, those 2 paintings illustrate Reynolds's idealized and timeless style of portraiture, in which refined expression was deemed superior to exact resemblance.

- In his celebrated *Discourses to the Royal Academy*, however, Reynolds was a staunch upholder of Academic principles, asserting the superiority of the Classical tradition (Florentine and Roman Renaissance via the Bologna school to 17th century French and Roman artists) over the Venetian colourists and their Flemish and Dutch successors. As his *Fourth Discourse* particularly suggests, this opposition between simplicity and display, between design and colour, espouses traditional notions about the soul / body dualism and the superiority of the 'liberal' artist over the 'mechanical' one. Similar ideas underpin the 14th Discourse, where Reynolds describes the way Gainsborough's "odd scratches and marks" would, when seen at a proper distance, combine into a perfect harmony : significantly, in this half-grudging, half-generous tribute to a recently deceased rival, Reynolds also warned his pupils that it would be dangerous for them to follow Gainsborough's example.

ACADEMIC PAINTERS

Jules Joseph Lefebvre : *Nude* (1870)

The Victorian academic painters concentrated on producing an illusion of depth in the image (again competing in this with the photograph and especially the stereoscopic photograph) and located their expressiveness in the drama of space itself, drawing the eye into the painting as a prelude to seducing the mind into the emotional content of the scene depicted, as in the painting below by **John William Waterhouse** :

Saint Eulalia (1885)

Conclusion

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood itself lost its cohesion as a group in 1853 and no longer held meetings after this date. Ruskin, however, continued for some time to write about these same artists and the movement they had inspired in confident tones, with no note of disharmony. Fortunately, he had generally referred to the Pre-Raphaelites as a school and continued to do so in a seamless fashion. Having begun to defend the P.R.B. at a rather late stage, Ruskin seems to over-compensate by making no mention of the group's break-up in his critical writings. In his published notes on the Royal Academy exhibition of 1856, he pointed out that a significant change had taken place and his tone is almost ecstatic. His narrative seems to peak here, as his imagery is that of a Holy War between Raphael and the Pre-Raphaelites ; "the battle is completely and confessedly won" (p. 207) as painters have abandoned Raphael, "struggling forward out of their conventionalism to the pre-Raphaelite standard" (p. 207). The desired goal has been attained, as the majority of the exhibited works now show a clear Pre-Raphaelite influence and the Grand Style is no longer the accepted norm. The following year's Academy notes would begin to register some disillusionment, but for now Ruskin was triumphant as the vindicated standard-bearer of the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

In a sense, Ruskin's identity and critical voice were being stolen, as his defences of the Pre-Raphaelites were popularised. The anonymous writers for *The Times* did their best to write like Ruskin, and in some instances, they were uncannily successful. Ruskin's response was extreme : he switched to the other side of the debate. Perhaps most surprisingly, Ruskin now finds something good to say about Joshua Reynolds, the first President of the Royal Academy and the artist who had popularised Raphael's style. He decides that Reynolds was "grace consummate [...] in the rendering of the momentary loveliness and trembling life of childhood" (p. 290).

Given Ruskin's unhappiness that the Pre-Raphaelites had achieved too much popular success, however, there is a certain pointed irony to his defence of Joshua Reynolds. The P.R.B. had always disliked Reynolds more than Raphael himself, blaming the former for the endless and inferior copies of Raphael's work. Ruskin always adjusted his Pre-Raphaelite theories to suit the moment and perhaps he now identified with Reynolds as never before. To a certain extent, Ruskin is responsible for the popularisation of Pre-Raphaelite art and thus he may blame himself for the inferior works from "the men of ordinary genius" who had once copied Raphael and now copied the Pre-Raphaelites. Like Reynolds, he is guilty of tainting the art that he once loved, undermining his own purpose as a critic.

The progress of Ruskin's thoughts and theories can be traced from 1851 to 1858 without much difficulty, if his works are read in the correct order. Since Ruskin rarely admits that such a progression exists, however, his Pre-Raphaelite writings will present a considerable challenge to the casual reader who does not follow a strict chronology, ranging from detachment to passion, from advocacy to hostility without much explanatory comment.