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A MODERN VIEW OF THE PRE-RAPHAELITES

By BRYSON BURROUGHS

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In times of rapid change such as the world has been going through in the last century and a half, styles and fashions have been short-lived. It is noticeable that the young people of one generation, at least the out-stepping and worthwhile ones, hold two major beliefs: one, that their own existing fashions represent a finality of excellence; the other, that fashions of their fathers and grandfathers were absurd. A jerkiness in the evolution accompanies this state of mind. Society tests many devices as the ancient stabilities become shopworn. The orderly procession of ideals, as in the well-poised epochs of history, would be impossible in our disturbed and cosmopolitan age.

Ordinarily the estimates of a style are not freed from partisan prejudices until about the third generation after its flourishing. When that happens, the manifestations of the style take their chance for fame or obscurity before that nebulous tribunal, the Judgment of Time, the verdicts of which, though subject to constant revision, are the only standards criticism can refer to.

The time is not yet ripe for calm judgment of the Pre-Raphaelite school which dominated English art in the last half of the nineteenth century. Not in England, certainly, where the spell of Cézanne, Matisse, and Derain still seems to control the modern opinion. Nor in our own country, where the interest yesterday directed toward the post-impressionists and mannerists veers today toward an emphatic, crude, vigorous realism which allows no place

for the poetical and decorative ideals to which the war set a term. The pendulum of fashion must swing once again before prejudices against this school of art, or in favor of it, will have passed away.

Now Pre-Raphaelite pictures and drawings, which I knew by reproductions and articles in the magazines, were early passions of mine; and I must state frankly in starting, so as to warn away unsympathetic readers, that I still remain loyal, within reason, to my early admiration. Early likes and dislikes indicate pretty fairly one's inborn nature, which remains basically the same throughout life notwithstanding the modifications and affectations with which we overlay it.

My earliest direct contact with the works of the school took place in 1892, the first year of my study in Paris. It was the beginning of summer; the "season" was over; the Salons were visited, with great disappointment (it takes practice to see the Salons justly); and I betook myself and my homesickness, in the company of an English friend, to London. London was a benediction! The people looked like "folks," and they talked English and you could get a decent breakfast there. With elation I set out for the galleries to find the originals of some of the engravings I was familiar with. In the galleries and at a loan exhibition of excellent English paintings which happened to be on at the time, I made acquaintance face to face with Pre-Raphaelite pictures, and they fulfilled all my anticipations. I was prepared for the beauty of their designs and for their poetical and intellectual content, but their frank color, their straightforward handling without any smart tricks, above all, the earnestness and sincerity of their purpose, were revelations. Here, indeed, were examples of what a modern art could be (only modern art interests young people), and moreover was it not the European art

with which we in America were naturally in closest accord? By inheritance and right, our tradition is English—this French strain is only a late importation. Here among the Pre-Raphaelites surely I find my own appropriate place!

Such were my thoughts at the age of twenty-two, and the eagerness with which I questioned the pictures can readily be understood. The impression of these first-seen pictures remains clear in my memory: the solemnity and aloofness of Rossetti's *Dream of Dante*, the virginal freshness of his *Annunciation*, in which the halting, almost childlike handling enshrines miraculously the intensity of the young artist's sentiment; Hunt's vigorous and racy *Hireling Shepherd*, with its lovely landscape, his *Claudio and Isabella*; Ford Madox Brown's earnest and solidly painted *Christ and the Disciples*, and some cartoons of historical subjects by him which stand out by their force and masculinity; the profound allegories of G. F. Watts and his still more profound portraits; Millais's tender picture of *Ophelia*; Burne-Jones's *Wheel of Fortune and Love among the Ruins*—but the list is tiresome to all but myself.

I perceived the close bond that connects these pictures one with another—the common ground of their aesthetics. The contemporary poets appeared as the spiritual brothers of the painters; the pictures seem to be, and frequently are, in fact, the illustrations of the poems, and the poems often read like descriptions of the pictures. And the poems and the paintings were equally popular. The painters sold their pictures to waiting clients (it seems too wonderful to be true), and were enabled and encouraged to devote their entire energies to their art. Their work was a real commodity. Furthermore, a production of the decorative arts, in which the painters collaborated, was in progress—furniture, utensils, textiles, hangings, book illustrations, stained glass—all singularly in harmony with this same artistic and poetic spirit. Surely this wide movement must be the natural manifestation of the genius of England, a School of Art in the sense of the national schools of the past, the like of which, I then thought, existed nowhere else.

I was not aware that the vitality of the move-

ment was spent, that its best productions had already appeared; nor does that matter as far as the authenticity of the school is concerned. Famous schools of the seventeenth century lasted no longer than fifty years—one lifetime of work. But knowledge and a more removed viewpoint soon corrected my opinion of the uniqueness of the school in its time. The evolution of painting in France, underneath the contradictory tendencies on the surface, has followed since the early 1800's one grand general direction, and the nineteenth century in France must be counted among the great periods of the fine arts.

In reviewing the history of the Pre-Raphaelite school, or of any school, as a matter of fact, one notes curiously the manner in which the genius of a nation builds a structure appropriate to itself alone, on foundations which are common to the whole epoch. England, France, and Germany in the nineteenth century were inspired by similar thoughts and tastes, however different each national manifestation. English landscapists and genre painters were the pioneers in the realistic art which dominated nineteenth-century Europe, but their example was followed in France, not in their own country where there happened to be no great artists to carry on. In the late forties, English painting was in a perfunctory state. At that time, several young art students, disgusted with the situation, banded together in founding a secret society, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, to uphold one another in the application of certain principles they had agreed upon as necessary to the reformation of art. These principles were in the main a scrupulous and minute reference to nature in all matters, and a return to the simpler methods of picture-making as practiced before the time of Raphael, after which, they held, formulas had taken the place of observation.

Holman Hunt, J. E. Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were the active founders of the brotherhood and it was a rarely fortunate occurrence that these three earnest young men of congenial temperaments should have come together at the very outset of their careers. All were extraordinary; one, Rossetti, was a genius.



Le Chant d'Amour, by Sir Edward Burne-Jones. This painting, recently acquired by the Museum with income from the Punnett Fund, was begun in 1868 and finished in 1877.

He at that time was wavering between poetry and painting and had already written, or was just about to write, "The Blessed Damozel," the most famous of his poems. He was the exotic one of the group, with the frank sensuousness of his Italian ancestors and the childlike outlook of an artist of the fifteenth century. Millais was an artistic prodigy, a master of his craft while still in his teens. His picture of Lorenzo and Isabella (from Keats's poem), painted then, is a masterpiece of the movement. Hunt's talent, also very precocious, was of the doctrinaire, painstaking order. All he did was subjected to his theories. He must not invent: not an inch of his picture must be painted away from the model or from the spot in nature he had chosen as fitting the needs of his composition. He must go to Jerusalem to depict correctly incidents in the life of Christ and to Nazareth to paint the landscape which appears

out of the window of Saint Joseph's carpentry shop. Ford Madox Brown, several years older than the others, though never formally a member, was an important influence in the foundation of the brotherhood. His principles and theirs were closely similar, and his pictures—although at times crowded with incidents, to the detriment of any unity of expression—are among the most impressive of the school.

The art of both Millais and Rossetti weakened as time went on. Millais remained a remarkable technician, but desire for security and position tempted him to paint trivial, sentimental subjects unworthy of his talent. Rossetti also became commercial, repeating time and again those pictures which had proved most popular. Hunt's ideals were more robust, but a proneness to intense expressions, often painful grimaces, in fact, mars certain of his later works. Undoubtedly, the best period of

these three artists was their young manhood. The talent of Ford Madox Brown was not precocious, and the bluff, sturdy poetry of his art lost none of its vigor as he became older.

These were the painters who first displayed the spirit of Victorian art which is popularly named after their society. But the tendency was broader than the Pre-Raphaelite dogmas. Vigorous naturalism, as practiced by Hunt and Millais, does not fit highly imaginative temperaments, and Rossetti soon abandoned it. The world of his pictures is not that of his English surroundings, but an inner world which he created out of mediaeval poems, old legends, and fancies. It was under the impress of Rossetti's overwhelming personality that Burne-Jones was formed.

Burne-Jones was one of those fortunate artists, heart and soul in sympathy with the ideals of the group of which they form a part, whose careers fall into the period of the greatest success of these ideals. Under Rossetti's influence he found immediately, without hesitation or experiments, the paths natural to his genius, and his facility and fecundity were astounding. He was a painter of dreams, and fittingly the people of his pictures are wistful and calm apparitions. They solemnly enact old-world myths and fairy tales in a country whose name "never was writ in the traveler's chart." Those who expect life-enhancement from art are disappointed in Burne-Jones, but the contemplative find solace in his pictures, and no one can dispute his mastery of composition. All the qualities of his style are singularly decorative. His designs for windows and tapestries, altogether similar in manner to his pictures, were carried out literally under the direction of his friend Morris, and the results were and are regarded as the rejuvenation of these arts, as the modern examples in which the true limitations of the technique of these materials have been respected.

The rôle of William Morris was a momentous one in the success of the movement. He brought a dignified and congenial art of decoration into English homes. An odd mixture of idealism and practicality, Morris gave the so-called minor arts the same consideration and

importance which are given the fine arts, and strove to render articles of daily use, designed by artists and carried out under the direction of artists, accessible to people of moderate means. Owing to his initiative late nineteenth-century England is the single example, since the days of the First Empire in France, of a period in which the contemporaneous style extends even to domestic decoration.

The painting of George Frederick Watts contrasts in its vigor and substantiality with the languid art of Burne-Jones, although spiritually their work is closely related. Watts's aim was to express pictorially the noble ideals of life and conduct which inspired his time—ideals such as those we find proclaimed in the writings of Carlyle, Ruskin, and the novelists. He undertook to paint pictures that appeal to the imagination and the heart, and, in his own words, "kindle all that is best and noblest in humanity." He had, moreover, the intention to make his painting a living language, not alone for the cultivated, but for the entire people, and the large number of reproductions of his work which are still sold in the shops witness his success. Those great allegorical compositions, when not strained and confused by his didacticism (which sometimes happens, it must be said), are powerful and splendid paintings. But one makes no reservations in the admiration of his portraits. He had the rare power of giving to his sitters the look of their mental or spiritual distinction (and he painted many celebrities) as well as their physical likenesses—a combination of which the art of today seems to give no example.

These were the outstanding personalities of this remarkable group. They were all of the same generation. The spirit that inspired them did not outlast their own activities, and, these ended, the Pre-Raphaelite school dwindled rapidly and disappeared altogether with the elegant artificialities of Aubrey Beardsley.

The noble ideals of the movement, its enthusiasms and high anticipations, have left no impression on what is being done today. But even so the place of the school, all must allow, is a very honorable one in modern English art, second only to that of the landscapists and por-



Verdure tapestry designed by William Morris and J. H. Dearles in 1892 and woven in 1915 on looms established by Morris at Morton Abbey, England. Edward C. Moore, Jr., Gift Fund, 1923

traitists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The landscapists of that time, as has been said, led the world in the frank observation of nature; the portraitists formed a decorative and aristocratic style on the example of Van Dyck, in which a profound psychology would have been out of place. The ideals of the Pre-Raphaelites were more comprehensive than theirs. Besides being painters they must be thinkers, poets, philosophers. They insisted that the intellectual part of a work of art—its message—was as important as its surface beauty.

There is scant patience today for all this “literary stuff.” Painting is a matter of form, color, and handling, it is held, and should stand or fall by itself without any outside aids. “Pure painting” is the popular fashion, and as a corrective has a justification, it must be acknowledged. The one-sided but sturdy pictures—all the still-lives, crude landscapes, and studies of naked ladies—which make up the larger part of our present shows give a better impression surely than the sentimentalities and the poeti-

cal affectations which in a like proportion crowded the exhibitions of a generation ago.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that the idea of “pure painting” is a very recent newcomer in the tradition. The old masters knew nothing of it. The great paintings which the ages have agreed upon—those which one thinks of immediately as the greatest monuments of the art—are all story-telling pictures; their subjects, whether prescribed by the patron or chosen by the artist himself, in all but very exceptional cases are drawn from the common spiritual storehouse of the race, from religions, legends, famous poems—from literature, in fact. Such pictures are indubitably of the class of illustrations. In the light of history one sees that the present distrust of the literary subject in a work of art is ephemeral and bound soon to give place to a sentiment in accord with the immemorial ideal. Indeed there are signs that this change in the style already begins to take place.