

THE PRE-RAPHAELITES

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The Pre-Raphaelites is an exhibition which celebrates artistic creativity as decisively masculine! This exhibition brings together works by five 'major' male artists — Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne-Jones, William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti — and their 'followers'. Everything is constructed in terms of individual achievement.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of seven artists and writers, is said to have been dominated by Hunt, Millais, and Rossetti, described as 'three enterprising and variously (but hugely) gifted young men' who developed their own different and highly individual paths. The lengthy period — from the founding of the Brotherhood in 1848 to Rossetti's death in 1882 — is reduced to a chronology of individual development marked by switches in artistic style and lifestyle. The catalogue entries put the works into a narrative of the artist's personal and artistic life, relations with his models. Little attention is given to the critical reception of the paintings or public debates about them. Life and art have been collapsed together, presented as mutually explanatory: art is a matter of private biography.

Pre-Raphaelite art is therefore offered to us as a domain where changes occur because of personal impulses. It has been effectively taken out of its historical context, the social and material conditions in which it was produced and consumed.

In this exhibition art practice is considered to be the outcome of the innate talent and genius of artistic personages. This celebration of innate genius is an account of the past which actively denies the class struggles and gender conflicts of nineteenth-century society, the ways in which historical individuals were formed by and acted within class and gender power relations.

Artistic creativity is presented in this exhibition as the prerogative of men, the attribute of the male artist, of his masculinity. *The Pre-Raphaelites* includes only one woman artist, Elizabeth Siddall; in this showing of 250 items her work is represented by two water-colours. The exhibition has signally failed to include works by the many other women artists of this cultural group such as Rosa Brett, Catherine and Lucy Madox Brown, Georgiana Macdonald (later Burne-Jones), Marie Spartali. This exhibition denies the historical existence of women artists, refuses to acknowledge that women were producers of culture. Moreover, because the exhibition deals with fine art, the work of women such as Jane Burden Morris in embroidery and textiles has once again been erased. Indeed the omissions and silence on women artists are structural to this hagiography of great masculine genius. High cultural events such as *The Pre-Raphaelites* function powerfully in the production of patriarchal ideology. Male



Arthur Hughes: *The Long Engagement*

Channel Five

artists and their works are accorded the privileged focus of attention and scholarship. Masculinity and creativity are not only set against the absence of women artists but also against the spectacle of 'feminine beauty'. Above all this is an exhibition about great men who made pictures of women.

Most of the reviews already published have dwelt at length on the spectacle of beautiful women provided by this exhibition. Intense interest has been generated around the female models. Art is consumed as that 'natural' condition of men looking at, being inspired by women. Such interpretations are also set in play in the catalogue. Rossetti, whose attributes are his artistry, genius and masculinity, is represented as making art because of his

and men have been misrepresented. These bourgeois male artists persistently sought out working-class women for their difference and their sexual availability. Women like Elizabeth Siddall and Jane Burden were subjected to a programme of drastic reform. They were withdrawn from their working-class families and environments and drawn into this cultural group to work as artists, embroiderers, writers, models. The material conditions of existence of these women, located in specific gender and class power relations, determined their work as models for male artists, their sexual and social subordination. In *The Pre-Raphaelites* stereotypical notions of the languorous melancholy of these women have been projected onto and read off from the paintings for which

women, masculine fantasies about woman as 'the mystery of existence', or daily occurrences in these women's lives. Visual representations render visible the difference of Woman. Historians have drawn attention to the nineteenth-century construction of Woman in terms of gender contrast, and around the polarity of virgin/whore, Madonna/Magdalen, indicating that this distinction was drawn between women especially on the axis of class. The pure bourgeois woman stood against the impure adulteress, prostitute, working-class woman. Visual images worked to secure this polarity between the pure woman — figured in Beatrice, the Virgin, the nun — and the impure woman — the 'fallen woman' of *The Awakening Conscience*, the adulterous Guinevere. Pre-Raphaelite paintings were engaged in representing a complex of class and gender power relations. Works such as Millais's *Isabella* or Hughes's *The Long Engagement* assisted in the generation of the ideology of heterosexual romantic love, so crucial to the formation of the bourgeoisie, which bound women effectively and willingly in subordination to men.

Today women are subordinated to men across a wide and diverse range of social institutions. High culture is a key institution for women's oppression. By erasing the complex histories of class and gender in which images were made, the knowledge produced in art history and high culture about art and the artist actively work to secure present-day patriarchal power relations, sexual and social. In *The Pre-Raphaelites* artistic creativity is decisively tied to masculinity, art proposed as the outcome of men desiring women, and Woman defined as Image, that beautiful object to be looked at, desired by and deflected over by men. By contrast Man is the active agent, he who has power to define Woman in terms of desirable appearance and passivity: her beauty feeds his desire which by his innate talent is effortlessly turned into his great art, or so art history tells us. Such patriarchal definitions of Woman, desire and sexuality are pervasive in our society, and high culture provides no safe or tranquil retreat.



William Morris: "Queen Guinevere" (detail)

amorous and sexual encounters with a series of 'beautiful' women. William Morris's picture *Queen Guinevere* is understood in terms of 'the aloof, withdrawn personality' of Jane Burden Morris and considerable speculation on the relations between her, Rossetti and William Morris. Pre-Raphaelite women are offered to us as stereotypes of passive femininity: mysterious, melancholy, silent. Their active work and historical existence have been silenced. The class and gender relations between these historical women

they are said to have modelled. But these women and their lives do not explain the images of Woman shown in this exhibition. The images are neither expressions of the male artist's sexuality nor reflections of the female model's features and personality.

These images of women were produced in a regime of representation of Woman. This was historically situated in the shifting material and ideological practices of the period, 1840s — 1880s. The painted and drawn images of women do not record individual men's obsessions with individual

¹The Pre-Raphaelites Exhibition is on at the Tate Gallery in London until May 28.

²For an extended consideration of these issues see Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock, *Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: A Study of the Representation of Elizabeth Siddall in Art History* VII 2, June 84.