

INTRODUCTORY LECTURE ON PRE-RAPHAELITE POETRY

Pre-Raphaelitism was a countercultural movement that aimed to reform Victorian art and writing. It originated with the foundation, in 1848, of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) by, among others, the artists John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and William Holman Hunt. The name Pre-Raphaelitism derives from these artists' controversial admiration for painting before the era of Raphael (b. 1483–d. 1520). Other principles they followed in their art included rejecting academicism, representing nature faithfully, and stressing the interconnections between literature and painting. The innovations championed by the Pre-Raphaelites immediately attracted widespread condemnation, but they won the important support of John Ruskin, who played an important role in promoting the movement. Together with Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites were instrumental in spreading a taste for medievalism in evidence in several aspects of Victorian literature and arts. In the 1860s Pre-Raphaelitism underwent a second wave, associated mainly with the work of Edward Burne-Jones, which departed from the realism of early pre-Raphaelite works and moved instead toward myth and aestheticism. While the origins of Pre-Raphaelitism are in painting, the ideas behind the movement quickly spread to literature, especially poetry. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, one of the original founders of the PRB, was also a poet, and aspects of Pre-Raphaelitism can likewise be seen in the work of authors such as Tennyson, Christina Rossetti, A. C. Swinburne, William Morris, and Walter Pater. Pre-Raphaelitism was the first of a series of interconnected movements that introduced a note of dissent in the Victorian public culture of art: from the 1860s onward it can therefore be seen to shade into aestheticism first and then into decadence, two movements in which the literary component is more pronounced. As such, Pre-Raphaelitism should be understood to encompass a range of arts including painting and sculpture but also poetry, fiction, and criticism. Pre-Raphaelitism also became one of the dominant influences on English literature from the 1850s to the end of the 19th century.