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William Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelites: Artistic Aims, Worldview, and Influence on Nineteenth-Century Culture

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**William Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelites:
Artistic Aims, Worldview, and Influence on Nineteenth-Century Culture**

By

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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Abstract

This work seeks to study and clarify the aesthetic tenets and goals of Pre-Raphaelitism, one of the most significant artistic movements of the nineteenth century, in its formative years from 1848 to 1853. The Pre-Raphaelites rebelled against established artistic styles and methods, seeking instead to accurately depict nature and create art that conveys profound intellectual and spiritual ideas through its literary and religious themes. This project focuses particularly on William Holman Hunt, one of the founding members of the group, and argues that there exist important connections between his worldview, which is defined and discussed, and his art, of which three paintings are analyzed. The present work also examines the Pre-Raphaelites' influence on nineteenth-century British art by outlining the popular styles of the time and comparing these to the Pre-Raphaelites' work and principles. As evidenced in the work of their contemporaries and later artists, this small group of avant-garde artists transformed the art of their own era and beyond.

Introduction

The purpose of art is, in love of guileless beauty, to lead man to distinguish between that which, being clean in spirit, is productive of virtue, and that which is flaunting and meretricious and productive of ruin to a Nation.

- William Holman Hunt¹

In 1848, three passionate young artists in London, England, founded one of the most significant artistic movements of the nineteenth century. Their names were William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and John Everett Millais, and together they established a group of seven young men, which they christened the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in honor of the early Renaissance artists they admired. The Pre-Raphaelites were artistic rebels; discontent with the styles and themes of contemporary British art, they cast aside established practices and forged a new approach to art that emphasized meaningful messages and the careful representation and observance of nature.

This work seeks to study and clarify the aesthetic tenets of Pre-Raphaelitism in its formative years from 1848 to 1853. During this period the Pre-Raphaelites worked together, struggling to be recognized for who they were: artists applying their significant talents to create some of the most inspiring art in Victorian England. As an example of an individual from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Hunt receives primary focus in the following pages; his beliefs, values, and artwork are discussed, establishing the remarkable extent to which his principles informed his work. Finally, the Pre-Raphaelites' influence on their contemporaries is examined, which demonstrates how this small group of visionary young artists transformed nineteenth-century English art.

To begin, it will be useful to survey some of the existing scholarship on Pre-

Raphaelitism. The literature review gives an overview of scholars' work on the subject, focusing on topics that are particularly relevant to the present work. Various writings on the Pre-Raphaelites' artistic goals and principles are referenced, as well as biographies of Hunt that deal with his character, values, and art. The review also treats the much-debated subject of Hunt's reliability as a historian of Pre-Raphaelitism. Lastly, it discusses the artistic context of the movement and compares differing perspectives on the extent of the Pre-Raphaelites' influence on nineteenth-century art history.

After studying existing material and opinions, it will be necessary to lay the groundwork for discussion in the present work by defining the perspective offered herein. The question of the validity of Hunt's memoirs is of immediate importance and must be addressed; the theoretical framework seeks to determine the extent to which his writing may be relied upon for historical facts concerning the true goals of Pre-Raphaelitism. In addition to resolving this issue, the terms "Pre-Raphaelite" and "worldview" must be defined and clarified in order to gain complete understanding of the arguments to follow.

The history of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood will next be discussed, and intertwined with it, the artists' convictions and artistic aims. This work argues that, contrary to some scholars' opinions, there was direction and commonality of purpose in the Pre-Raphaelites' principles. Scholars such as Timothy Hilton and Robert de La Sizeranne, whose writings will be discussed shortly, claim that the movement was too diverse to have a clear system of unified aims imposed on it, but thorough research shows some consistency in its goals. The Pre-Raphaelites' principles included the determination to rebel against established artistic styles and practices and to accurately depict nature, representing each subject as it truly appeared. They also sought to emulate early Renaissance artists, for these masters' work possessed the sincerity, originality, and

dedication to observational detail that the Pre-Raphaelites so admired. Finally, they desired to convey significant, symbolic messages through the literary and religious themes of their work.

With an understanding of Pre-Raphaelitism's goals attained, this work will turn to examine their relation to the character and values of William Holman Hunt. Although both Rossetti and Millais were also important members of the group, Hunt has been chosen for deeper study partly because he is acknowledged to be one of the less well-known Pre-Raphaelites and is thus worthy of further research. More importantly, however, he has often been misunderstood and criticized for producing didactic works with painfully moralizing themes—an accusation which deserves to be addressed.² Thus, the character and worldview of the artist will be presented alongside three of his paintings executed between 1850 and 1853. The subject matter and symbolism of Hunt's work, as well as his own commentary, demonstrate how his distinctly Christian worldview shaped the art he created. In turn, his work communicates his convictions; it shows his strong faith, intellectual capacity, and above all, his commitment to and love of truth. Through his beautiful and complex paintings, he communicated ideals such as morality and truth which were important to him, and in doing so, he still challenges others to reevaluate their beliefs, motivations, and actions.

After studying Hunt, the focus shifts back to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, to explore the influence the group had on their contemporaries. To appreciate the changes they helped initiate, it will first be necessary to review the art at the time, the context in which the Pre-Raphaelites rebelled. A brief summary of artists and techniques from the first half of the nineteenth century is followed by a discussion of the wide range of artists who influenced the Pre-Raphaelites, including Benozzo Gozzoli, Albrecht Dürer, and

Ford Madox Brown. Although the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's influence was not immediately obvious, it had a profound effect on contemporary British art; the brief period from 1848 to 1853 was the genesis of an artistic movement that continued to gain followers and recognition throughout the remainder of the 1800s. Pre-Raphaelitism thus has proven its place as a truly significant artistic movement in the nineteenth century.

Before proceeding with the exploration of the Pre-Raphaelites' adventures, one more point must be made. This work concentrates on the beginning of the movement, its early history and goals, and the influence it had on contemporary artists. There is a much broader movement, also called Pre-Raphaelitism, which evolved from the original Brotherhood's principles and styles and flourished during the later nineteenth century, led by Rossetti and some of his followers. It acquired characteristics significantly different from those associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, rendering it an interesting and complex study, but one which lies beyond the scope of this work.³

The brevity of original Pre-Raphaelitism does not lessen its significance in the history of art, however. It was an avant-garde impulse in its own right, and it laid the foundations for the later movement and for future artists' work. Even today, the first Pre-Raphaelites' beautiful paintings are admired for their realism and attention to the rich details of nature, for their intriguing and thought-provoking themes, and for the insight they provide into the Victorian culture in which they were created.

Anna Olivia Funk
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Individuals who wish to read the full version of this thesis should contact the author.

Initial inquiries may be made through the WOU Honors Office at <honors@wou.edu>.

- 1 William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, vol. 2 (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1905), 493.
- 2 See for example Carole Silver, "Visions and Revisions," in *Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelite Vision*, ed. Katharine Lochnan and Carol Jacobi (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2008), 15. Silver notes at the very beginning of her essay that Hunt "has been called everything from a genius, mistaken in his choice of subjects, to the maker of images fit only for tasteless religious greeting cards." These harsh criticisms certainly cast Hunt in a negative light, necessitating a thorough examination of the issue. See also Judith Bronkhurst, *William Holman Hunt: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 3.
- 3 Scholars often discuss Pre-Raphaelitism as a broader movement, evolving from Hunt and Millais' focus on literary themes and nature to Rossetti's later attraction to design and medieval subjects, all of which were emulated by other artists. Thus, the complexity and diversity of the movement prohibit a complete examination in the present work. For an overview of the later aspects of Pre-Raphaelitism, see especially Timothy Hilton, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), and Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).