Truth and Beauty explores the Pre-Raphaelites’ fascination with the early Italian old masters, such as Fra Angelico and his northern Renaissance contemporary, Jan van Eyck. The galleries trace the Brotherhood through the nineteenth-century “rediscovery” of Sandro Botticelli and the tempera-paint revival by the second-generation Pre-Raphaelites. Juxtapositions also demonstrate the influence of High Italian Renaissance painter Raphael and artists of the late Italian Renaissance, such as Paolo Veronese. The Pre-Raphaelites’ attraction to the art of the past was not limited to paintings: the exhibition also features, books, furniture, stained glass, tapestries, and works on paper. The varied sources that informed the Pre-Raphaelites’ aesthetic vocabulary, presented in dialogue with their own nineteenth-century creations, demonstrate the importance of the work that inspired the PRB and redefine their style more broadly. These arrangements highlight their efforts to be fundamentally modern by emulating the past. This timeline provides a selection of key dates for the periods covered in the exhibition.
In 1848—a year of political revolution across Europe—seven young Englishmen with aspirations to rebel against the contemporary art world formed a secret artistic alliance. Calling themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB), these renegade artists—including William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti—opposed the fundamental training at London’s Royal Academy of Arts, the dominant authority of artistic taste. They christened its first president, Sir Joshua Reynolds, “Sir Sloshua” and rejected his aesthetic philosophy. Instead, the PRB revered examples by artists who preceded Raphael and his followers (the “Raphaeelites”). They appropriated the mandate outlined by the influential art critic John Ruskin, an early supporter of the Pre-Raphaelites, in his treatise Modern Painters (1843) that artists should seek truth in nature. This is the first major exhibition to bring works of art by members of the nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood into visual dialogue with examples of the sources that inspired them.

Melissa E. Burton
Director, Art Division

Queen Victoria and the Victorian Period
In 1848, Britain was the world’s superpower. The young Queen Victoria had reigned for a decade following her coronation at age nineteen. Her death in 1901 marked the end of the Victorian era, when the British Empire comprised nearly one-quarter of the earth’s population. Britain’s financial supremacy, due in part to a vast naval network and resources from colonies, also generated extreme poverty and social inequality for many of its citizens and subjects.

1848: A Year of Revolution
The founding of the PRB in 1848 coincided with a year of political unrest and revolutionary fervor across Europe. King Louis-Philippe of France abdicated his throne; Karl Marx published The Communist Manifesto, and in England, the working-class Chartist movement demonstrated for political reform and voting rights. The PRB artists experienced a period of intense change over their careers, witnessing both the promise and the perils of industrialized society.

Queen Victoria (1819-1901) by Franz Xaver Winterhalter (1835-1873), The Royal Collection Trust. © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018

POSTER: The Mirrored Garden (Genoa), 1851-1872, The Royal Collection Trust. © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018

#TruthxBEAUTY
THE PRE-RAPHAELITES:
A Cast of Characters

- Mentor/ Patron
- Muse
- Married
- Related
- Founding Members
- Other Featured Artists

WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT

John Reddam
Spencer Stanhope

Edward
Burne-Jones

William
Morris

Evelyn
(Pickering)
De Morgan

DANIE
GABRIEL
ROSETTI

Edith (Wormald)
Holman Hunt

Fanny (Wormald)
Holman Hunt

John Ruskin

Euphemia "Effie"
(Grey) Millais

Jane (Burne)
Morris

Elizabeth
(Macdonald)
Rossetti

Alex Wilding

Georgiana
(Macdonald)
Burne-Jones

#TruthxBeauty
“The so-called Pre-Raphaelites . . . have really nothing of the old Italians in them, and much more deserve the epithet of Ante-Durerites or Memlingers.”


Pre-Raphael: The Inspiration of Early Netherlandish and German Art

This gallery demonstrates the importance of Northern art on the Pre-Raphaelites. Although their name suggests that early Italian art before Raphael was a primary source of inspiration, concurrent artistic developments north of the Alps also provided important examples. Artists of the PRB emulated fifteenth-century Netherlandish artists using such elements as a jewel-toned color palette, angular postures, and highly detailed symbolism.

In 1849 Rossetti and Hunt traveled on a “Pre-Raphaelite pilgrimage” that included a stop in Belgium, where they admired firsthand the luminous paintings of Jan van Eyck and Hans Memling. As students at the Royal Academy Schools, members of the PRB also studied works from the British national collection, housed in the same building. There they would have known a rare example on public view from the early Flemish school, Van Eyck’s Amolfini Portrait of 1434. This work has never been loaned from the National Gallery, London, since its acquisition. Both the founding PRB artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the second-generation member Edward Burne-Jones stated that the Amolfini Portrait influenced them more than any other early art they saw.

The Northern Renaissance and Netherlandish Painting

In the fifteenth century, the cities of Bruges, Brussels, and Ghent (in modern Belgium) formed a major trading network that extended across the continent. Netherlandish paintings by Jan van Eyck and Hans Memling reached many European courts and were highly prized for their accomplishments in oil on panel: astonishing sensibility and brilliant colors. Prints by virtuoso engravers such as the German Albrecht Dürer also helped establish the influence of Northern art throughout Europe.

Oil Paint

Early Netherlandish artists are credited with the development of paints that used oil as a binding agent (rather than tempera paint, popular in Italy, which used egg yolk). During the fifteenth century, Northern paintings were typically executed on wood panels rather than canvas. The slow-drying and unique properties of oil paint allowed for the incredibly precise details, textural variations, and bright colors characteristic of early Netherlandish art, seen in depictions of brilliant jewels, luscious textiles, and gleaming surfaces.
Pre-Raphael: The Inspiration of Early Italian Art

The three main PRB artists, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and William Holman Hunt, were nineteen, twenty, and twenty-one years old, respectively, when their provocative new aesthetic was unveiled to the public, and it shocked the art world as these youthful rebels intended. Critics reprimanded them for their choice of angular figures over idealized ones and their minute attention to accurate details that were often unflattering. The Pre-Raphaelites in their initial years (1848–1853) looked not to the masters (such as Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael) taught at the Royal Academy, but to early Italian art from the era preceding the High Renaissance. Collectively, the group rejected techniques innovated by Italian Renaissance masters and sanctioned by the Royal Academy: bright highlights and deep shadows (chiaroscuro) and the gradual gradation of tones (sfumato). They also painted on a white ground, which enhances brilliant colors. Their themes reflected both modern and medieval literary sources, such as poems by the nineteenth-century Alfred, Lord Tennyson and the medieval Dante Alighieri.

Early Italian Art and Medievalism

The medieval period (or Middle Ages) lasted roughly from the fifth to the fifteenth century, bracketed by late antiquity and the Renaissance, a period when many cultural and artistic values from classical antiquity were revived. This rebirth is represented by early Italian painters such as Cimabue and Fra Angelico, who were revered for their advances in perspective and in rendering the human body with greater realism. The Pre-Raphaelites admired these artists as the key masters before the time of Raphael and perceived an aesthetic sincerity and emotional truthfulness in their figures.

Dante

Dante Alighieri was an important Florentine poet of the late Middle Ages. His most famous work, The Divine Comedy, recounts an imagined pilgrimage through hell (Inferno), purgatory (Purgatorio), and heaven (Paradiso). In the nineteenth century, renewed interest in Dante accompanied the Risorgimento, a political and ideological movement to unify Italy. The Pre-Raphaelites admired Dante as an icon of early Italian culture. In homage to the great poet, Rossetti even changed the order of his given names to have Dante appear first.


“People have begun to find out the charms of Botticelli’s work and his name is quickly becoming important.”

—Walter Pater, author and critic (1870)

The Rediscovery of Botticelli and the Tempera Revival

Art critics John Ruskin and Walter Pater are credited with the nineteenth-century "rediscovery" of the early Renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli. Ruskin especially admired the Italian artist’s close observations of nature and his unrivaled mastery of painting in tempera. The Pre-Raphaelites and their circle were inspired by Botticelli, as his complex compositions represented a connection to both the past and the modern age. Some traveled to see Italian art in person (with the exception of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was arguably the most interested in Italy among the PRB's first generation). John Roddam Spencer Stanhope even owned a villa in the hills outside Florence, and his aesthetic reflects access to Botticelli’s paintings in that city’s Uffizi and Accademia galleries. Since international travel was expensive and challenging in the nineteenth century, the Arundel Society was created in 1848 to promote watercolor and print reproductions of famous and important works of art. These works in color revealed subtleties that the era’s black-and-white copies could not supply, and also encouraged attempts by the Pre-Raphaelites to recover old-master techniques and materials, such as tempera paint.

Botticelli

Sandro Botticelli was a Florentine painter of the early Renaissance who produced works of eternal beauty and erudite complexity for patrons including the powerful Medici family. His paintings combined mythological and religious imagery and conveyed a sense of both pleasure and melancholy that resonated with the PRB. Given the iconic status today of paintings such as The Birth of Venus and Primavera, it may be difficult to imagine that Botticelli was largely forgotten until the nineteenth century, when the case for the artist became so fashionable it was frequently mocked.

Tempera Paint

Early Italian paintings were traditionally created in one of two ways: pigments ground in water applied to walls prepared with wet plaster (fresco), or pigments bound in egg yolk (tempera) on wood panels prepared with gesso (a white ground typically made from gypsum and animal glue). Tempera dries quickly, allowing artists to immediately judge the effect of their work, but also leaving little margin for error. The nineteenth-century tempera revival sought to understand, revive, and adapt this forgotten technique. The tempera revivalists went to considerable lengths in all aspects of the artful process. Many raised chickens to ensure a steady supply of fresh egg yolks.
“On the whole we have to thank Rossetti, among other things, for the creation of a type of feminine beauty unsurpassed, and in some respects unequalled, by the works of the great Venetians, a type of woman in which physical and spiritual beauty are so perfectly blended that in some instances it is hard to say which claims supremacy.”

—Helen Rossetti, The Life and Work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1902)

The Inspiration of Raphael and the “Post-Raphaelites”

The Pre-Raphaelites’ initial style rejected the idealized aesthetics of the followers and imitators of the High Renaissance artist Raphael. They used the term “Raphaelites” as shorthand for those who repeated past formulas without infusing them with new life and meaning. They had no such contempt for Raphael, however, and even included him on their list of “Immortals,” a wide-ranging record of eminent luminaries they revered. Paradoxically, they also included select “post-Raphaelites,” such as the Venetian painter Paolo Veronese. As they matured, the Pre-Raphaelites began to pay more attention to High Renaissance art, as if they were growing up after their youthful experiments. Works from Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s late period are perhaps the most evocative examples of this shift. These sumptuous paintings reveal a surprising change in his appreciation for the Italian Renaissance, particularly sixteenth-century Venetian paintings. Abandoning the precise detail and bright coloring of his earlier manner, inspired by Jan van Eyck, he now developed a complex oil-painting technique of richly colored glazes and freer brushwork.

Sixteenth-Century Venetian Painting

Painters in Venice during the 1500s valued color, beauty, and compositional harmony over narrative or illusionistic inventiveness. The adaptability of oil paint, their preferred medium, allowed for this period of intense creative production. The play of light and shadow and the supremacy of textures in rich tones in these artists’ works were also impactful on the later creations of the Pre-Raphaelites, especially Rossetti, the PRB artist most closely associated with this aesthetic.

New Ideals of Beauty

Portraits of beautiful women painted during the Venetian High Renaissance were iconic sources of inspiration for the Pre-Raphaelites. Evolving far from the initial Pre-Raphaelite style, Rossetti’s mature compositions in this gallery, created at the height of his career, seem to have more in common with richly colored and sensual Venetian portraits, such as the works of Paolo Veronese and Paris Bordone, than with artists before Raphael and his followers. Rossetti often painted models with whom he had close personal relationships, such as the women represented in this gallery, including Jane (Burden) Morris and Fanny Cornforth.
Edward Burne-Jones and Italy

The second-generation Pre-Raphaelite Edward Burne-Jones—known as the “English Quattrocentist” (referring to the quattrocento, or the Italian fifteenth century)—made four visits to Italy between 1859 and 1873, and each included a stop in Florence. He also saw art treasures in Padua, Pisa, Rome, Siena, and Venice. He filled many sketchbooks with depictions of the works that impressed him, including Michelangelo’s frescoes decorating the Sistine Chapel in Rome. During his second trip, in 1862, he traveled in the company of his wife, Georgiana, and his friend and patron the critic John Ruskin. Throughout his career, Burne-Jones quoted from famous Italian painters and even from illustrations in early Italian books, such as the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (on view in this gallery). He was commissioned to decorate Saint Paul’s Within the Walls, an Episcopal church in Rome, although he never saw the completion of his mosaic project in person. The works in this gallery demonstrate Burne-Jones’s attraction to art by Italian masters and include sketchbooks, paintings, and designs for tapestries and stained-glass windows.

Collecting Copies
Collecting photographic reproductions of artworks was widespread practice in the Victorian period, and Burne-Jones amassed several hundred such photographs, possibly more. He often pressed his friends into securing coveted examples depicting works by Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Domenico Ghirlandaio, for example, whenever they traveled abroad. By the 1870s, Burne-Jones had had his several hundred photographs of Italian paintings, frescoes, and drawings placed into a series of albums and portfolios.

Sistine Chapel
For Burne-Jones, the Sistine Chapel was a highlight of Rome. It was decorated by many famous Renaissance painters, such as Perugino and Botticelli, but Michelangelo’s magnificent frescoes made the strongest impact on him. A description of Burne-Jones’s encounters with them in the Memoirs of Edward Burne-Jones (the biography written by his wife, Georgiana) gives a colorful picture of the artist at work: “He bought the best open glasses he could find, folded his rayas in a straight line, and, lying down on his back, read the ceiling from beginning to end, peering into every corner and peeling in its execution.”
The Pre-Raphaelite Legacy: Decorative Arts and the Chivalric Revival

John Ruskin and others championed the value of handcrafted furnishings over the inferior quality of industrially manufactured objects. The Pre-Raphaelites—William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, in particular—were inspired to create decorative arts that expressed their wide-ranging interest in the Middle Ages. Morris appreciated the period’s social structures as much as its art; in the fellowship and democracy of medieval guilds, Morris found a counterpart to his conceptions of modern socialism. This inspiration reached full expression in the Red House, a “Palace of Art” where Morris moved with his new wife, Jane, in 1860. Here Morris and his circle created furnishings and decorations to manifest his vision of a British medieval interior. Literature from the Middle Ages provided rich sources of subject matter for painted decorations, stained glass, embroidery, and tapestries. Morris and Burne-Jones also designed books inspired by medieval illuminated manuscripts. Works in this gallery suggest compelling connections between Pre-Raphaelite decorative arts and their medieval precedents.

Tapestries
A hallmark of medieval art, the production of large-scale tapestries had all but disappeared by the nineteenth century. Inspired to revive medieval and Renaissance workshop techniques, William Morris taught himself weaving on a loom set up in his bedroom. He admired the sixteenth-century French and Flemish verdure tapestries showing plant forms and emulated their appearance and technique, often in collaboration with Burne-Jones, who designed the imaginative compositions and figures. His assistant John Henry Dearle designed many of the recognizably medieval foregrounds of patterned flowers and leaves, known as silhouettes.

Kelmscott Press
John Ruskin, William Morris, and other Pre-Raphaelite artists collected medieval illuminated manuscripts. Works from Morris’s extensive collection, such as the Marquette Bible, on view in this gallery, inspired his elegant pages, patterns, and new typesetters. In 1891, Morris established the Kelmscott Press, named after his home, Kelmscott Manor. His publications redefined the art of the book, culminating in The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, New Nalily Imprinted (1892). An example of this important publication, known today as the “Kelmscott Chaucer,” is nearby.
Conservation and Repair

Conservators are in charge of the treatment, preservation, and technical study of works of art in their care. The glass panel of Saint Gereon required both structural and aesthetic conservation treatment to prepare it for display. The Museum reached out to Nejiani Glass Conservation in Oakland to undertake this highly specialized work.

Leadwork is an essential part of stained-glass craft. Medieval craftsmen built a window by connecting pieces of glass within a network of soldered lead strips called camees. Cames of different sizes and shapes defined the outlines of figures and other design elements and added subtle depth to their compositions.

Over the hundreds of years since this object’s creation, many pieces of glass had broken. The glass breaks had historically been repaired with lead strips, as shown here on the blue cloak and upper leg: these were originally single pieces of glass that became crisscrossed with breaks and repairs. Additionally, all of the medieval lead came had been replaced, likely in the late nineteenth century, in a manner that did not reflect the original craft. These repairs and replacements left the panel visually confusing as well as structurally weak, and a complete re-leading was proposed to restore the visual intent of the makers.

Conservators painstakingly removed each piece of glass from the lead skeleton, cleaned it, and then repaired breaks with clear epoxy. They reassembled the panel in the style of medieval construction, using different thicknesses of lead to outline the saint and the columns around him. The panel of Saint Gereon was now ready to be safely displayed.

Color

Early medieval craftsmen created designs by joining glass of different colors. Over time they began to make black and brown paints of a material similar to glass, and used it to apply washes and trace line details. “Stained glass” gets its name from an early fourteenth-century innovation: a silver-based stain used to turn areas within a clear piece of glass yellow, as seen here on the saint’s hair and the medallion on his hat.