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The Pre-Raphaelites



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The Pre-Raphaelites

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was formed in the Autumn of 1848. It was made up of seven young artists of whom Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt are the best known. Ford Madox Brown, an older artist who had trained in Europe, never joined the Brotherhood although he was closely associated with their art and ideas.

Their aims were a reaction against contemporary fashionable painting which they viewed as insipid and stultified and lacking in any sincerity or truth to nature.

As the name of the Brotherhood suggests, they admired and deliberately emulated early Italian art before the time of Raphael and the High Renaissance. This source of inspiration was largely prompted by Ruskin's second volume of his influential 'Modern Painters' which was published in 1846 and praised the work of Giotto, Fra Angelico and Tintoretto. The Pre-Raphaelites admired not only the naive charm and clear colours of Italian 14th and 15th century painting, but also its lack of artifice and freedom from convention.

Differences in the work of Rossetti on one hand and Hunt and Milllais on the other, were soon apparent. Hunt and Millais moved towards a greater naturalism while Rossetti's subjects became increasingly imaginative, inspired by his belief that woman enshrines the mystery of existence. The most obvious characteristics of the early Pre-Raphaelite style are minute naturalistic detail and bright colour with little shadow. This laborious attention to detail was also inspired by Ruskin who stated that a picture was incomplete unless it contained the inexhaustible perfection of nature's details'. The brightness of the palette was achieved by painting on a white ground, a technique partly derived from fresco painting. Interest in early Italian art also led to an interest in fresco painting.

In 1857, Pre-Raphaelite art changed direction when Rossetti was commissioned to decorate the walls of the Oxford Union building. He brought together a new group of artists to work on the commission, the most important of whom were William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, who was born in Birmingham and established an international reputation that none of the others achieved. The dreamlike quality and fanciful medievalism of his work influenced the Symbolist movement in Europe towards the end of the century. Rossetti's later work became increasingly haunted by his grief for his wife, Lizzie Siddal who died of an overdose of laudanum in 1862 and later, his obsessive love for Jane Burden who married William Morris. Jane Morris' striking facial features and thick crinkled hair have become synonymous with the late Pre-Raphaelite style.

The movement had no direct followers and all the original members changed their styles with the exception of Holman Hunt who applied his Pre-Raphaelite ideals to the illustration of Biblical events. Perhaps their most original contribution, notably in the work of Ford Madox Brown, was the convincing depiction of the light effects of the open air on landscapes and figures. In this respect, they were the forerunners of the Barbizon and Impressionist schools in France.

The Early Pre-Raphaelite Style

William Holman Hunt (1827-1910)
Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus 1850-51

This was Hunt's first exhibited work on a Shakespearean theme and the frame is inscribed with quotes from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Act V, Scene IV). Valentine, standing in the centre, has just prevented Proteus, his best friend, from attempting to rape his beloved Sylvia (now kneeling at his feet). The scene is one of reconciliation as Proteus, rubbing his injured neck, asks for forgiveness. The other young woman present, Julia, who is disguised as a youth, looks on in private dismay, fingering the ring that Proteus had given her as a pledge of his devotion. The underlying theme is that of parental opposition to young love which, in this case, had driven Sylvia to the forest in search of the banished Valentine, Sylvia's father, the Duke of Valentine, approaches in the background and the final scene of the play, shows a reconciliation between father and daughter.

The landscape was painted out-of-doors in parkland at Knole from mid-October to mid-November. In a letter to a friend Hunt drew a sketch of himself sitting with his oils under a large umbrella surrounded by deer. The figures were painted in the studio, friends posing for the figures of Valentine and Proteus. The costumes of Julia, Sylvia and Proteus were made to Hunt's own design but Valentine's and the leg armour were based on two plates from Bonnard's Costumes Historiques. Lizzie Siddal, later to marry Rossetti, modelled for the figure of Sylvia.

The intense, bright colours and sharply defined naturalistic detail are typical of early Pre-Raphaelites. The heads of Valentine and Proteus, their hands and the brightest costumes were painted with the wet white technique adopted by the Pre-Raphaelites. This involved covering a small area of the canvas with a white chalk-based ground and painting on it while it was still wet. This method allowed the colours to retain an almost translucent brightness which caused considerable controversy because of its startling and often garish, effect.

Alexander Munro (1825-1871)
Paolo and Francesca 1851-'2

Munro was a close friend of Rossetti and shared a studio with Arthur Hughes in the 1850's.

Paolo and Francesca is a rare example of the early Pre-Raphaelite style in three dimensional form. The story illustrates an historical event. Francesca da Rimini (died about 1288) was betrothed to the deformed Giancotto Malatesta of Rimini; it was said that she fell in love with Giancotto's younger brother Paolo while they sat reading together. One day, Giancotto surprised the young lovers together and stabbed them both to death. Dante later described them in the Divine Comedy with other tragic lovers of history condemned to be swept along on the wind in the second circle of hell.

Rossetti was preoccupied with the story of Paolo and Francesca at this period and probably influenced Munro's choice of subject. Also, John Flaxman's line engraving of 'The Lovers Surprised', from his illustrations to Dante of 1793 was admired by the Pre-Raphaelites in general and particularly by Munro.

The slightly angular and simplified plans of the figures and the pseudo-medieval dress has much in common with early Pre-Raphaelite drawings by Rossetti, Hunt and Millais.

The Late Pre-Raphaelite Style

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882)
Beata Beatrix 1877

Beatrice was the daughter of a prominent citizen of Florence. According to Dante in his Vita Nuova, he experienced a consuming love for Beatrice on first meeting her, which lasted beyond her death in 1290 at the age of twenty-four years. The Vita Nuova is a series of love poems inspired by her memory which Rossetti equated with his own love and grief for the late Lizzie Siddal, who had died from an overdose of laudanum in 1862. The face in Beata Beatrix is recognisably that of Lizzie.

Rossetti described the subject in a letter of 1873:
'The picture must of course be viewed not as a representation of the incident of the death of Beatrice, but as an ideal of the subject, symbolised by a trance or sudden spiritual transfiguration. Beatrice is rapt visibly into Heaven, seeing as it were through her shut lids (as Dante says at the close of the Vita Nuova): "Him who is Blessed throughout all ages"; and in sign of the supreme change, the radiant bird, a messenger of death, drops the white poppy between her open hands. In the background is the City which, as Dante says, "sat solitary" in mourning for her death; and through whose streets Dante himself is seen to pass gazing towards the figure of Love opposite, in whose hand the waning life of his lady flickers as a flame. On the sundial at her side, the shadow falls on the hour of nine, which number Dante connects mystically in many ways with her and with her death'.

The Birmingham oil is a later version of the picture in the Tate Gallery. It was left unfinished at Rossetti's death and was completed by Ford Madox Brown. Beatrix holds red instead of white poppies. The colours green and purple symbolise hope and sorrow as well as life and death.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882)
Proserpine 1882

The model for this painting, one of eight versions, was Jane Morris, wife of William Morris, with whom Rossetti had begun an intimate relationship by July 1869. Her striking features become synonymous with the late Pre-Raphaelite style and epitomise Rossetti's belief that Woman enshrines the mystery of existence.

From the 1860's onwards, under the influence of Rossetti, Pre-Raphaelite subjects were inspired by imagination rather than reality. Colours were used in a symbolic way to create a mood and atmosphere.

Rossetti explained the subject in a letter to a friend:
'The figure represents Proserpine as Empress of Hades. After she was conveyed by Pluto to his realm, and became his bride, her mother Ceres importuned Jupiter for her return to earth, and he was prevailed on to consent to this, provided only she had not partaken of any of the fruits of Hades. It was found, however, that she had eaten one grain of a pomegranate, and this enchained her to her new empire and destiny. She is represented in a gloomy corridor of her palace, with the fatal fruit in her hand. As she passes, a gleam strikes on the wall behind her from some inlet suddenly opened, and admitting for a moment the light of the upper world; and she glances furtively towards it, immersed in thought. The Incense-burner stands beside her as the attribute of a goddess. The ivy-branch in the background may be taken as a symbol of clinging memory'.

Frederick Sandys (1832-1904)
Medea 1868

In Greek mythology Medea was a sorceress who married Jason. Later, Jason deserted her to marry a Greek woman, Glauke. In revenge, Medea prepared a poisoned dress for Glauke which would consume her body in flames.

Sandys has depicted Medea in half length, standing behind a shallow ledge against a flat background. The format is close to Rossetti's femme fatal' portraits of the 1860's, although in Sandys painting the mood is menacing rather than sensual. At this period, Rossetti and Sandys were close friends and Sandys devoted some time to painting. He is better known, however, for his work as a book illustrator.

Edward Coley Burne-Jones
The Merciful Knight 1863

The subject illustrates the miracle said to have happened in the 11th century when St. John Gualberto, a Florentine knight, spared the life of his enemy. While he prayed at the convent of St. Murato, a wooden figure of Christ came to life and embraced him. The picture was said to have been Burne-Jones' favourite amongst his early works.

Burne-Jones visionary chivalric world began to attract considerable attention both in this country and abroad. Walter Crane described his reaction to Burne-Jones works of the early 1860's thus: 'The curtain had been lifted, and we had a glimpse into a magic world of romance and pictured poetry... a twilight world of dark mysterious woodlands, haunted streams, meads of deep green starred with burning flowers, veiled in a dim and mystic light.'

The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape

Ford Madox Brown (1821-'93)
An English Autumn Afternoon, Hampstead 1852-'3, 1855

The view is north-east over Hampstead Heath towards Highgate, with Kenwood House and the spire of St Anne's church, Highgate visible on the left of the horizon. The picture was painted from an upper room of a house in Hampstead where Brown had taken lodgings. In 1854, Brown noted that it took me about 6 months, was sold at Phillips Auction for 9 guineas to Dickinson (print sellers), the frame having cost 4.'

Like 'Work' and 'The Last of England' painted at the same period, 'An English Autumn Afternoon' celebrates the ordinary and everyday from Brown's own middle class viewpoint. The elliptical shape is carefully chosen to lead the eye across the panoramic landscape. Despite the figure group in the foreground, the focal point of the composition is the landscape bathed in autumnal sunshine. Brown was a friend of the photographer Roger Fenton and it seems likely that this unusually uncontrived landscape painting owes something to the contemporary developments in landscape photography. Brown's real originality was in his observation of light and here he has captured the flattening effect of the low-lying light on the massed bank of foliage in the middle distance.

When first exhibited in 1855, it was either critised or ignored. Ruskin asked Brown "What made you take such a very ugly subject, it was a pity for there was some nice painting in it". It's true merit was not recognised until ten years later when exhibited in 1865. The art critic for the Athenaeum wrote 'Be it the blazing July noon of Work; the time "twixt night and day" of The Hayfield; the fading glories of October in an English Autumn Afternoon; the broad ineffable daylight at sea of The Last of England; or any of those places which Mr Brown has chosen, we recognize at once and in all the keen observation of an independent thinker guiding the skill of an admirable executant'. Brown's intention to avoid the distinction of narrative subject matter is made clear in his statement in the 1865 catalogue: 'It is a literal transcript of the scenery round London, as looked at from Hampstead. The smoke of London is seen rising half-way above the fantastic shaped, small distant cumuli, which accompany particularly fine weather. The upper portion of the sky would be blue as seen reflected in the youth's hat: the grey mist of autumn only rising a certain height. The time is 3 p.m., when late in October the shadows already lie long, and the sun's rays (coming from behind us in this work) are preternaturally glowing, as in rivalry of the foliage. The figures are peculiarly English - they are hardly lovers - more boy and girl neighbours and friends...'

Ford Madox Brown (1821-'93)
Walton-on-the-Naze 1859-'60

Walton-on-the-Naze on the Essex coast developed as a popular resort from the 1820's onwards, particularly with Londoners who could travel there by steamer (one is visible on the far right of the horizon). Brown noted in his Account Book that it was painted on the spot in 1859. It was the last of his small landscapes painted with the intense vision of his Pre-Raphaelite period, in each of which he attempted a different light effect. Here the low raking light of the late summer afternoon sharply focuses every detail and paradoxically gives the picture a surreal quality.

Brown used himself and his wife and daughter as models for the family in the picture. Mother and daughter have untied their hair to dry after bathing.

Ford Madox Brown (1821-'93)
The Pretty Baa-Lambs 1851-'9

Together with Hunt's *Hireling Shepherd* (Manchester City Art Gallery) and Millais's *Ophelia* (Tate Gallery), *'The Pretty Baa Lambs'* is considered to be one of three revolutionary paintings begun in 1851, which attempted to depict the effect of sunlight on figures and landscapes. Brown's painting, however, is the most significant, because unlike Hunt and Millais, Brown painted the figures out of doors in the bright sunlight, thus anticipating the interests of the French Impressionists in the 1860's. The stark bright light on the figures and the blue/violet shadows have more in common with, for example, Manet's *Women in the Garden* of 1866-67 (Louvre) than with earlier English art.

In his diary of 1854, Brown wrote 'The baa lamb picture was painted almost entirely in sunlight which twice gave me a fever while painting. I used to take the lay figure out every morning and bring it in at night, or if it rained. My painting room being on a level with the garden, Emma sat for the lady and Kate for the child. The lambs and sheep used to be brought every morning from Clapham common in a truck. One of them ate up all the flowers one morning in the garden where they used to behave very ill'.

The figures are dressed in eighteenth century costume but, according to the artist, no particular subject or meaning is intended. It remained unsold until 1859 when it was bought by a Newcastle industrialist. When exhibited in the same year, Brown called it 'Summer Heat', 'which is', he wrote, 'seriously the subject. However, the old quaint title of the Pretty Baa Lambs still pleases me best'.

Scenes of Contemporary Life

Ford Madox Brown (1821-'93)
The Last of England 1852-'5

The picture was inspired by the emigration movement from England to Australia in the 1840's and early 1850's and in particular by the departure of the sculptor Thomas Woolner to Australia in July 1852. The poignant vision of the young couple is accentuated by the touching detail of the baby's fingers enclosed by the mother's hand. The oval format of the composition enfolds and concentrates the image, heightening the emotional response of the husband and wife leaving their native land for good. As in *Pretty Baa-Lambs,* Brown's interest in the effect of light on figures in the open air anticipates French Impressionist paintings of the 1860's. The artist wrote: 'To insure the peculiar look of light all round, which objects have on a dull day at sea, it was painted for the most part in the open air on dull days, and when the flesh was being painted, on cold days'.

Emma, his wife sat for the woman, Brown painted himself as the man and their two children, Kathy and Oliver were painted as the child with the green apple and the baby. Local people posed for the background figures and Brown bought spoiled cabbages from his greengrocer to use as 'props'. 'The Last of England' is not only a scene from contemporary life, it represents the artist's own class in society as he saw it.

Brown wrote of the picture:
'The educated are bound to their country by quite other ties than the illiterate man, whose chief consideration is over food and physical comfort. I have, therefore, in order to present the parting scene in it's fullest tragic development, singled out a couple from the middle classes, high enough, through education and refinement, to appreciate all they are now giving up, and yet depressed enough in means, to have to put up with the discomforts and humiliations incident to a vessel 'all one class'. The husband broods bitterly over blighted hopes and severance from all he has been striving for. The young wife's grief is of a less cankerous sort, probably confined to the sorrow of parting with a few friends of early years. The circle of her love moves with her.'

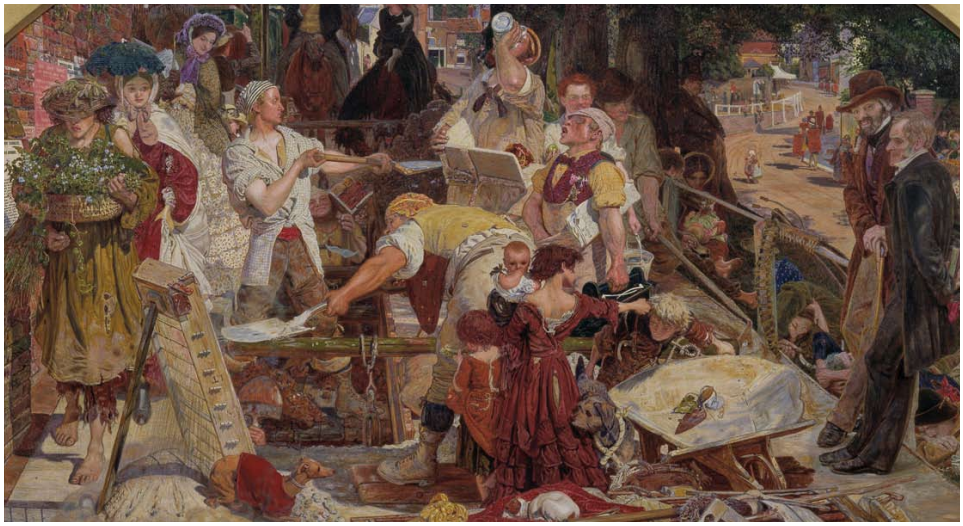
Arthur Hughes (1832-1915)
The Long Engagement c.1854-'9

The picture was first exhibited in 1859 with a quotation from Chaucer's 'Troilus and Criseyde': 'For how might ever sweetnesse hav be known To hym that never tastyd bitternesse?'

It depicts an impoverished cleric who has insufficient means to marry and support a wife. His frustration at his inability to end the long engagement and marry is reflected in his tense facial expression. His betrothed tries to comfort him, her gaze echoed by the silky haired black and tan setter or spaniel who symbolises faithfulness. The ivy covering the name 'Amy' carved on the tree indicates the time that has already elapsed.

The figures are in contemporary dress, the artist almost revelling in the harsh tones of the purple cape and shawl. The surrounding bower of foliage is treated with photographic realism. It was painted out-of-doors in the summer of 1854 with some difficulty. Hughes wrote of the wild roses in the picture: The least hint of rain, just a dark cloud passing over, closes them up for the rest of the day perhaps. - One day a great bee exasperated me to a pitch of madness by persisting in attacking me, the perspiration drizzling down my face in three streams the while.'

Ford Madox Brown (1821-'93)
Work 1863



This is a smaller duplicate version painted concurrently with the larger painting at Manchester City Art Gallery. It shows the subject of work as it affects all stratas of contemporary society and was inspired by a group of navvies digging up the road in Hampstead. Brown admired the navvies who earned their living by honest manual labour. To the left, the ragged seller of medicinal plants and herbs is someone, as Brown commented, 'who has never been taught to work'. Behind him are richly dressed ladies distributing religious tracts 'who have no need to work'. In the foreground, at the bottom of the social scale, are a group of 'exceedingly ragged, dirty children' with their mongrel dog. They are motherless, have a neglectful father and are cared for by a harassed elder sister who wears the remnants of an adult woman's dress.

Brown describes the squat, muscular beer-seller with his cut and blackened eye as 'in all matters of taste vulgar as Birmingham can make him look in the 19th century.' To the right of the painting are two influential Victorian figures who 'are the brain workers, who, seeming to be idle, work, and are the cause of well-ordained work and happiness, in others'. They are portraits of the writer Thomas Carlyle and the Christian Socialist the Rev. F.D. Maurice who founded the Working Man's College where Brown, himself, taught art. In the shadow of the bank lie distressed agricultural labourers, Irish immigrants and vagrants who have come to the city in search of work.

Although the composition is carefully designed, the effect is to give a feeling of the bustle of activity in the hot sunlight and Brown has painted some startling juxtapositions such as the dismembered spade and hand appearing out of the ground and the sleeping bodies of the vagrants by Carlyle and Maurice's feet. The main version was begun in the studio in about June 1852 and the background was painted on the spot during July and August, using a specially rigged costermonger's truck to carry a large canvas. F.D. Maurice sat to Brown, but the portrait of Carlyle is based on a photograph specially taken in 1859, - a copy print is in the Birmingham Museum. The intense, bright sunlight of the hot summer's day was deliberately chosen by Brown 'because it seems peculiarly fitted to display work in all its severity'. The whole project became a monument to work as it took thirteen years to finish and the Manchester version is dated by the artist 1852-65. It was the culminating work of the artist's Pre-Raphaelite style.

John Everett Millais (1829-1896)
The Blind Girl 1854-'6

Although the subject deals with the disturbing social problem of the day, vagrancy amongst children and the disabled, the painting is a compelling image of the pathos of blindness. We witness, together with the young girl, the beauty of Nature which is denied to the blind woman. However, her alert expression and the position of her hands show her effort to compensate through the senses of touch, hearing and smell. The background is an accurate view of Winchelsea in Sussex. However, the painting was completed in Perth, Scotland in 1855, where Millais settled after his marriage.

The models were the same two Perth girls who appear in the right side of 'Autumn Leaves' (Manchester City Art Gallery). Thinly painted with the familiar meticulous attention to detail, Millais is less successful than Ford Madox Brown however, in capturing the effect of the fall of light on figures in the open air.

Henry Wallis (1830-1916)
The Stonebreaker 1857

The subject illustrates a familiar sight in rural areas where, under the much criticised Poor Law system, workhouse guardians frequently employed paupers in breaking stones for the repair of parish roads in return for food and lodging. This remarkable painting is all the more shocking for its lack of sentiment and inspired some deeply felt responses from critics of the day; A writer in the *Daily News* for 10th May 1858 gave the following vivid commentary: 'we dimly distinguished the dead stonebreaker, with his pauper smock-frock and corduroys and highlows* partly lying on the heap of hard granite he has been toiling at through the cloudless, sultry, day with insufficient nourishment; and partly toppling forward among the brambles which line the road-side. Poor wretch, all his path in life has been beset with thorns! But he is at rest at last; no-one waits for, or will seek him; no-one will miss him. His pale, parchment-drawn face and low brow, tell of stolid ignorance and abject misery. He has never been poacher or housebreaker, or come to London to be refined into a swindler and pickpocket and he is still more harmless and uncomplaining now. He is very dead. A long, writhing stoat has mounted his foot, and lifts it's nose, scenting death...'

The painting was first exhibited in 1858 with a quotation in the catalogue from Thomas Carlyle's 'Sartor Resartus'. Carlyle identifies two types of men whom he honours most, the first being the 'toilworn craftsmen' and the second 'not earthly craftsmen only, but inspired Thinker', who can be named 'Artist'. It is possible that Wallis considered this picture to be a pendant to an earlier work on the subject of the creative artist 'Chatterton' (Tate Gallery) of which there is a smaller version in the Birmingham Museum.

The squalid, lonely death of 'The Stonebreaker' was a powerful antidote to conceived notions of poverty and the lot of the poor and is paralleled by social realist novels of the period such as Mrs Gaskell's 'North and South' (1854-5).

* 'Highlow' - type of boot worn as part of the workhouse uniform.

Scenes from the Bible

William Holman Hunt (1827-1910)

The Finding of the Saviour In the Temple 1854-'6

The scene illustrates chapter two of St Luke's Gospel. Mary and Joseph have anxiously searched for the young Christ child in the city of Jerusalem and have discovered him in the Temple. Their relief is apparent. The Biblical text states that Jesus said to his parents: "how is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?"

Hunt was at this time living in the house of a missionary in Jerusalem. He had travelled to the Holy Land in 1854 with the express intention of painting scenes from the life of Christ in their correct setting. Hunt researched into the history and appearance of the Temple of Jerusalem at the time of Christ. He also studied the Talmud and attended a Passover service. Hunt knew he would have difficulty in finding female sitters and deliberately chose a subject that included only one female figure. However, his wish to use Semitic models attracted considerable hostility from the Jewish populace as it was rumoured that the picture was destined to be put in a church and worshipped in breach of the Second Commandment. The landscape view to the right is of the Mount of Olives from the roof of the Mosque As Sakrah.

Hunt returned to London with the painting half-finished in 1856. The Temple is based partly on Biblical descriptions of the Temple of Solomon and partly on the Alhambra Court of the Crystal Palace London. Hunt also found a number of other models he needed from Jewish schools in London.

The picture was an immediate and sensational popular success and was exhibited extensively throughout the country. It was sold to a London dealer and after passing through several collections, was presented to Birmingham Museum by Sir John T. Middlemore in 1896. Today, Holman Hunt's paintings appear laboured and over-complex in comparison to the originality of composition and treatment of light depicted by Ford Madox Brown.

Select Bibliography

- Catalogue to exhibition The Pre-Raphaelites organised by the Tate Gallery in 1984
- Allen Staley The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape Clarendon Press, Oxford 1973

Publications available from Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery:

- The Pre-Raphaelites and their Circle
- Pre-Raphaelite Portraits

Web Resources

- www.preraphaelites.org