

## Radical Victorians?

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Radical Victorians?

Abstract: A review of the exhibition *Victorian Radicals: From the Pre-Raphaelites to the Arts and Crafts Movement* (February through Christmas 2024) at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Rebecca N. Mitchell

The Pre-Raphaelites have long been at home in the British West Midlands. Among the treasures in Wightwick Manor, a historic, Aesthetic home in Wolverhampton with a large collection of Pre-Raphaelite art, is a large mahogany cabinet with Rossetti-inspired scenes painted by Henry Treffry Dunn. Inside is a small, single bed that can be folded down when the cabinet is open, with a little bedside table attached. Clever design aside, the bed's chief attraction is that it was used by Algernon Charles Swinburne. How it came to be in the Wightwick collection is emblematic of the Pre-Raphaelites and their successors: it was picked up at an auction in 1939 for the paltry sum of £4. Once a work of art uniting form and function, owned by one of the most radical of Victorian poets, and decorated in a style once at the leading edge of British painting, in less than fifty years it had become a relic of the fusty, Victorian past, nearly worthless in the eyes of the public. It is a common trajectory for much Pre-Raphaelite artwork, whose fate floundered through much of the early twentieth century, leaving recent revivals to resuscitate popular regard for the movement and its followers.

Further resuscitation is underway elsewhere in the West Midlands. Birmingham Museums Trust (BMT) holds one of the world's largest collections of works by Pre-Raphaelite and related artists. Highlights from that collection were featured in *Victorian Radicals*, a travelling exhibition curated in 2018 by Tim Barringer (Yale University), Martin Dean (former Curator of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery), and Victoria Osborne (Curator of Fine Art at BMT). After a successful stint in the covid-era US—the exhibition visited Seattle, San Antonio, and New Haven—it returned to Birmingham, where the contents were meant to be reintegrated into the museum's permanent collection. Instead, as most of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery is closed for renovations, *Victorian Radicals* is staged in the lovely Gas Hall exhibition space on the site.

*Victorian Radicals* joins a number of major recent exhibitions at British museums capitalising on and contributing to the resurgent popularity of the PRB: 2018 saw a major retrospective of Edward Burne-Jones's work at the Tate Britain, the first at that museum since 1933; *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters* graced the National Portrait gallery in 2019; the Ashmolean offered *Pre-Raphaelites: Drawings and Watercolours* in 2022; and in 2023 the Tate Britain hosted *The Rossettis*, featuring works of Christina alongside Dante Gabriel, to name but a few examples. The public having been won over, a common curatorial thread has been reestablishing the art historical import of the group, often by insisting upon the progressiveness or heterodoxy of an aesthetic often thought to be—like Swinburne's bed—wholly insignificant to a modern audience. Critics have not been convinced. Regarding the Tate's *Rossettis* outing, the *Guardian* reviewer bemoaned the overwrought, "exaggerated political claims" intended to frame the artist/poets as "radical" or "revolutionary."<sup>1</sup> Similar criticisms were levelled at *Victorian Radicals*—the title rather gives away the project—on its American tour: "At the Seattle Art Museum, 'Victorian Radicals' is certainly Victorian. But radical? Not so much," declared a headline in the *Seattle Times*, a common sentiment among reviewers.<sup>2</sup>

*Victorian Radicals* makes its case by proceeding chronologically across a sweep of sixty years, 1850 to 1910, in which three generations of radical change are defined: the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, William Morris and his socialist circle, and the Arts and Crafts movement. There are two challenges with making "radical" a viable descriptor for the works: the first is the absence in the exhibition of the kind of artwork produced and shown by the Royal Academy prior to the PRB's intervention. Without recourse to the works against which the PRB was rebelling, visitors may struggle to recognize the changes. The second challenge is the remarkable iconographic consistency of the works across the three generations.

Most interesting for readers of this journal will be the later section of the exhibition, but the early rooms do hold some promise of the later potential, even if most of the interventions are more subtle than radical. Two works by Henry Wallis hang in a compelling juxtaposition: a small, intimate version of his *Death of Chatterton* (c. 1855-56) [see Figure 1]—Tate Britain holds the larger version—centers the suicide

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Jones, "The Rossettis' Review," *The Guardian* 4 April 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Fagin, "At Seattle Art Museum, 'Victorian Radicals' is certainly Victorian. But radical? Not so much." *Seattle Times*, 20 June 2019.

of the Romantic poet, all emotion and drama, his youthful body bathed in a light that accentuates his ghost-like pallor. Next to it sits Wallis's *The Stonebreaker* (c. 1857) [see Figure 2]. So darkly rendered is the autumnal evening scene that it is difficult to make out the details of the solo figure in the foreground, a workman slumped on the ground, either sleeping or dead. Here, it is the brutality of manual labor that has left the man's body lifeless; the work is often understood as a protest against the Poor Laws. The painting's divergence from his *Chatterton* could be read as emphasizing the social and aesthetic correctives the PRB and its circle sought to make. Yet in the same room, the saturated hues and pastoral setting—not to mention the title—of Ford Madox Brown's "Pretty Baa-Lambs" (1851-59) [see Figure 3] seem only anodyne today, despite the gallery notes' insistence that the work marked a shift in PRB production, with Brown painting outdoors and taking care to produce the natural environment with near-photorealistic detail.

Brown was of course not a formal member of the self-defined Brotherhood, which banded together in 1848. They are well represented by varied works by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt; the collection is particularly strong in works on paper, and examples from the Moxon Tennyson, including sketches and original drawings of the eventual engravings, reinforce the PRB's commitment to the interplay of text and image. Hunt's sensitive oil portrait of DGR offers a fitting analogue to the exhibition itself: painted in 1882 following Rossetti's death, it is Hunt's attempt to capture the brio and intensity of the Brotherhood in its early stages, a reflective revival of powers long since dulled by the passage of time and tastes. The few bone fide stunners – Rossetti's *Beata Beatrice* or *La Donna della Finestra*— are balanced by more interesting faces from other circle members, including Simeon Solomon's gloriously androgynous *Bacchus* and Frederick Sandys's angry, vengeful *Medea*.

The middle period of the exhibition is represented primarily by William Morris and Edward Burne Jones, early partners in business as well as in aesthetic preference. An unfinished wallpaper pattern shows the fascinating mechanics behind long-familiar Morris designs. Birmingham-born Burne-Jones gets a larger platform, as the show features his stained-glass work (both as designs and executed windows), a four-painting series on Pygmalion and associated studies, a number of works on paper, and the unfinished painting *The Wizard*, among others. Again the emphasis on process amplifies the significance of the making, as opposed to the sheen of the finished artworks.

Given the nuance of some of the shifts that are characterized as “radical,” it is not surprising that one of the most successful rooms in the exhibition stages the kind of comparative viewing that foregrounds the interventions made by these groups. In it, two large textiles hang on opposing walls. One is a c.1851 carpet produced by Crossley & Sons [see Figure 4], whose steam-powered looms propelled it to become the world’s largest producer of carpets by 1879, with factories in Yorkshire and the West Midlands. Despite the pattern’s name—*Old Master*—its cluttered riot of vibrant red roses, garishly accented with gold and occasional pops of blue-violet, mark it as distinctly Victorian. It is the kind of mass-produced textile, with its intense hues and excess ornamentation, that would be frowned on a decade later in Henry Cole’s “Gallery of False Principals” in the Museum of Manufactures, the pre-cursor to the V&A. On the opposite wall in *Victorian Radicals* hangs Mary Jane Newill’s 1908 bedcover [see Figure 5]. Markedly restrained, the predominant dusty gray blue linen is accented with a hand-embroidered medallion in the center and complementary designs of dog roses in the corners, bound on all sides by lines from Wordsworth’s *Ode*. It is a calm and thoughtful counterpoint to the Crossley carpet, designed and made by hand, combining poetry and naturalistically rendered images from nature, aesthetic elements vaunted by the PRB some fifty years earlier.

What emerges as most radical is the practice of creation, not simply iconoclastic imagery. The fullest fruition of the early claims of the PRB—the equality of the sister arts, the elevation of handcraft to the status of fine art, a collective approach to creative practice—appears in the final rooms of the exhibition. Nominally representing the Arts and Crafts movements, they are more reflective of the particular iteration of handicraft developed through the Birmingham School. Founded in 1881 and sitting directly behind the current site of the museum, the Birmingham School of Art was the first municipal art school in England and was from its start a leader in the co-education of women, extending from the fine arts into book crafts, illustration, and jewellery design. The through-line from the earlier movements is unmistakable, but that inheritance propels the art rather than restricts it. Joseph Southall’s and Arthur Gaskin’s tempera works on paper are remarkably fresh, sharing the medieval inspiration and rich tones of their Pre-Raphaelite forebears but with a restrained visual vocabulary all their own. Kate Bunce’s *Musica* (c. 1895) [see Figure 6] similarly features many trappings of Rossetti stunners, rendered with a frankness that is enhanced, not overwhelmed, by luscious colour and detail. In Maxwell Armfield’s 1901 self-

portrait, a volume of Rossetti's poetry graces a shelf in the background. Elsewhere, traces of the past are hard to see even if the craft remains: metal work by Georgie Gaskin and Anne Grisdale Stubbs unapologetically embraces the art nouveau.

If it seems like there are a lot of women's names in the above, indeed there are. Throughout the exhibition, works by women are not noisily flagged as such, their role highlighted as an outlier, but rather simply included as fellow members contributing to an artistic collective. Shows such as *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters* sought to enhance the visibility of women in the PRB circle by emphasising the roles they played in the movement—most often muse and model, but occasionally manager—but offered few works by women. One reviewer at the time bemoaned that “the National Portrait Gallery is not the place for Jane Morris's wonderful embroidery[...]. This is not the place to cherish craft.”<sup>3</sup> *Victorian Radicals* offers a happy corrective, not only including such items but letting them tell the stories of networks that facilitated their production. A charming smock designed and hand embroidered by May Morris [see Figure 7], daughter of Jane and William, was made for the three-year old Joscelyne Gaskin, daughter of Birmingham School artists and designers Arthur and Georgie Gaskin, whose jewellery is on display in the adjoining room.

Questions of relevance always haunted this exhibition, but they became even more pressing after the global events that arose during and since its initial tour. The protests after George Floyd's death sparked anew the interrogation of collections' origins and the contexts in which they are displayed. The Covid pandemic shut down museums entirely, forcing a reckoning around the public value of art. Locally, the Birmingham City Council—which holds in trust on behalf of the public all of the works in the museum's collections—declared bankruptcy, prompting a group of government-appointed budget supervisors to ask publicly why the city did not simply sell its art collection. Backlash was thankfully swift.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hettie Judah, “Pre-Raphaelite Sisters Review,” *The Guardian* 16 October 2019

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Geraldine Kendall Adams, “Backlash over BBC Story on Value of Birmingham's Artworks,” *Museums Journal*, 10 September 2024; <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2024/09/backlash-over-bbc-story-on-value-of-birminghams-artworks/#>

All of these circumstances have changed the context in which we view *Victorian Radicals*, and have changed the exhibition itself. A new grouping of works added for the restaging in Birmingham poses questions about the relevance of Victorian art to the pressing issues of today. The gallery notes for Holman Hunt's *The Finding of the Savoir in the Temple* (1854-60) ask "What can we learn from uncovering the stories of real people from marginalised groups who modelled for 19<sup>th</sup>-century artworks?". DGR's chalk and pencil study of an unnamed young Black boy, an image which ultimately appears in his *The Beloved*, inspires the query, "Can contemporary voices give agency to marginalised figures in historical art?" Perhaps the most successful of these provocations places Ford Madox Brown's *The Last of England* (1852-55) [see Figure 8] in conversation with a reproduction of Donald Rodney's sketch *First of England* (1983) [see Figure 9]. Rodney, having seen the painting in Birmingham's Museum, drew his parents arriving in England on the Empire Windrush, a starkly humane rebuttal to Brown's English emigrants en route to Australia. In this instance, the framing question ("Can shifting our perspective help us see historical artworks differently?") is not simply asked, but answered. Rodney's piece shifts our perspective, and in doing so enacts the exhibition's aim of restoring the sense of the radical to familiar Victorian works.

Images:

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Image 1: Henry Wallis, 1918P43, *Chatterton (The Death of Chatterton)*, 1856. Oil on mahogany panel.

Image 2: Henry Wallis, 1936P506, *The Stone Breaker*, 1857. Oil on wood.

Image 3: Ford Madox Brown, 1956P9, *Pretty Baa-Lambs*, 1851-59. Oil on panel.

Image 4: Crossley & Sons, Carpet, 1998M37.12, *Old Master*, c. 1851. Woven wool.

Image 5: Mary Jane Newill, 1982M35 Embroidered bed cover, 1908. Linen embroidered with wool.

Image 6: Kate Elizabeth Bunce, 1897P17, *Musica (Melody)*, 1895-97. Oil on canvas.

Image 7: May Morris, Girl's Dress, 1906. Linen cotton embroidered in colored silks. Author's photograph.

Image 8 and 9: L: Ford Madox Brown, 1891P24, *The Last of England*, 1852-1855. Oil on wood panel. R: Donald Rodney, *First of England*, 1983. Pen and ink drawing. Tate. © The estate of Donald Rodney. Photo: © Tate. Used with permission.