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Victorian Radicals: From the Pre-Raphaelites to the Arts and Crafts Movement

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[Intro Text Panel]

Victorian Radicals: From the Pre-Raphaelites to the Arts & Crafts Movement

Three generations of rebellious British artists and designers revolutionized 19th-century visual arts by engaging with and challenging the new industrial world around them. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, William Morris and his associates, and the champions of the Arts & Crafts Movement offered a radical vision of art and society inspired by pre-Renaissance culture. They chose the name “Pre-Raphaelite” to refer to the art historical period of time before the Italian High Renaissance artist Raphael became prominent. Drawn from the preeminent collection of the city of Birmingham, United Kingdom, *Victorian Radicals* brings together an unparalleled selection of paintings, works on paper, and decorative arts to illuminate this dynamic period of British art.

This exhibition presents the full spectrum of avant-garde practices during the Victorian period. In painting, key works by leading Pre-Raphaelite figures Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais are featured alongside artists of the second wave, including Edward Burne-Jones and Simeon Solomon, and the later generation of artists they inspired. These paintings rejected the traditional pictorial standards taught at schools like London’s Royal Academy of Arts—standards that favored ancient classical art, European art traditions, and historical or religious subject matter. Instead, the Pre-Raphaelites admired the simplicity and clarity of medieval European painting before Raphael (1483–1520). Often painted from life, the Pre-Raphaelite works depict stories taken from literature and contemporary life using great detail and vibrant colors.

The richness of material culture in England from 1840 to 1910 is represented through examples of design and decorative art, including stained glass by Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ceramics by William De Morgan, embroidery by Mary Jane Newill, and textiles and printed books by William Morris. Together, the works in *Victorian Radicals* convey the vital concerns of the time—the relationship between art and nature, questions of class and gender, the value of the handmade versus machine production, and the search for beauty in an age of industry—issues that remain relevant to this day.

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[Thematic Text Panel for Intro/Section 1]

The Birmingham Collection

The city of Birmingham in the English Midlands has been a major industrial center for over 300 years. In the middle of the 19th century, the city established a public library and an exhibition gallery. In 1885, it opened a new museum to provide cultural opportunities for the city's residents and to serve as a design resource for its manufacturing industries. Today, it continues to offer nationally significant programs in art education.

Today, Birmingham's collection encompasses global art, history, archaeology, and anthropology. However, from the outset, there was a drive to represent modern British painting. Major works by Pre-Raphaelite artists Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais and by their colleague Ford Madox Brown were among the earliest of the collection's acquisitions. Birmingham now holds the most comprehensive collection of Pre-Raphaelite art in the world, making it uniquely positioned to tell the story of the Pre-Raphaelites and other foundational artistic movements of the British modern era.

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[Section 1 Text Panel]

The First Industrial Nation

The 1830s and 1840s were years of profound change in Britain. Rapid industrialization, urbanization, mass production, and colonial expansion brought wealth to the nation. At the same time, urban poverty, exploitation, and agricultural depression, ignored by the political and social establishment, generated growing social unease.

Britain's technological and industrial prowess was unmatched, leading the way in mass production. The introduction of steam power and new technologies such as electroplating rapidly increased the pace and capacity of manufacturing, but the resulting products were often overly elaborate and ostentatious. Design reformers such as John Ruskin voiced concern over the poor quality of British design and the overwhelming dominance of machine production. Ruskin and other reformers attempted to counter this trend by mounting public exhibitions of art and manufacture and by founding schools of design to inspire and educate the nation's artisans and industrialists.

The British visual arts establishment during this period centered on London's Royal Academy of Arts. The institution's educational program—based on classical ideals and theory—had remained fundamentally unchanged since its founding in 1768. The Academy's annual summer exhibition was the pinnacle of the nation's art calendar. It favored the genre of "history painting," and the depiction of Biblical, mythological, or historical scenes.

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The Great Exhibition, London, 1851

“Great Britain offers a hospitable invitation to all the nations of the world, to collect and display the choicest fruits of their industry in her Capital.”

—Introduction to the *Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition, London, 1851*

On the May 1, 1851, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert opened the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations. Held in the iron and glass exhibition hall known as the Crystal Palace in London’s Hyde Park, it was the first international exhibition of manufactured goods in the world and was crucial to the development of art, design, industry, and tourism in Britain.

Visited by more than six million people over a period of six months, the exhibition was the great achievement of the design reformer and bureaucrat Henry Cole. Cole wanted to celebrate the finest British industrial products and to directly compare these goods with the best of international design.

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[Section 2 Text Panel]

The Pre-Raphaelite Avant-Garde

Young artists Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in London in 1848. United against the style of painting taught at schools like the Royal Academy (seen in the previous gallery), the Pre-Raphaelites were admirers of the simplicity and clarity of medieval European painting before Raphael (1483–1520).

Despite the group's name, which seems to look backward, the Pre-Raphaelites took a fresh and radical approach. Even when treating literary subjects from the past, they wanted their paintings to feel believable and contemporary: pictures of real events with real people. Driven by this ideal of honesty, they often used friends as models, posing them to express convincing emotion rather than theatrical gestures, and painted the settings from nature. They also engaged with current issues, offering fierce critiques of the era's social ills.

Besides their innovative approach to subject matter, the group adopted a novel style. Their use of jewel-like colors was consciously modern, enabled by new synthetic dyes whose range of pigments—particularly intense pinks, greens and purples—had not been available to earlier generations of artists. These hues gave the Pre-Raphaelites' paintings an immediacy that was shocking to contemporary critics and audiences.

In design, a new sensibility began to emerge in the 1850s and 1860s. Sculptural design and elaborate decoration gave way to a more refined style. Medieval simplicity inspired designers to match form more closely to function and material. The crisp and historically accurate Gothic Revival designs of architect-designers A. W. N. Pugin, William Butterfield, and their followers illustrate this shift in the decorative arts.

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[Section 3 Text Panel]

Secular Ministry

In 1857, Dante Gabriel Rossetti led a team of painters in decorating the walls of the University of Oxford's Union Society building with murals about King Arthur and the Quest for the Holy Grail. This project drew together a younger generation of artists, including William Morris and Birmingham-born Edward Burne-Jones. Inspired by the culture, ideals, and storytelling of the Middle Ages and the brilliance of medieval color and romance, this second wave of Pre-Raphaelites challenged the precision and realism of the first generation.

In the 1860s, Rossetti's eccentric home in London became a magnet for other young artists, including Burne-Jones, Frederick Sandys, and Simeon Solomon. The writer and critic John Ruskin and his championing of the Gothic style's virtues continued to influence painting, architecture, and the decorative arts. Ruskin applauded the decorative arts produced by William Morris's company—Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.—which drew from the past to create a new dynamic energy in English design.

Morris and the men and women who collaborated with him—including Burne-Jones, Rossetti, Madox Brown, Kate and Lucy Faulkner, Georgiana Burne-Jones, and Jane Morris—made exceptional work in embroidery, textiles, tiles, and stained glass.

The phrase “Secular Ministry” was coined by Andrea Wolk Rager in her unpublished PhD dissertation, completed at Yale University in 2009. It refers to the years beginning around 1855 during which Burne-Jones and Morris abandoned their early intentions to join the church and instead dedicated themselves to remaking the world through social rather than spiritual means.

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[Thematic Text Panel for Section 3]

Morris & Company

In 1861, 27-year-old William Morris founded the decorating firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. Promoting itself as a company of “Fine Art Workmen,” the Firm (as it was known in Morris’s circle) was officially made up of Morris; the painters Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown, and Edward Burne-Jones; the engineers and designers Charles Faulkner and Peter Paul Marshall; and the architect Philip Webb. It was as much an association of friends as a formal business. Joining these partners as designers and makers were Morris’s wife, Jane; Jane’s sister Bessie Burden; Kate and Lucy Faulkner; Georgiana Burne-Jones; and William De Morgan.

Inspired by medieval interiors, much of the Firm’s early output was pictorial and narrative. The firm produced embroidered textiles, tile panels, wallpapers, ecclesiastical decoration, wall painting, and, above all, stained glass. When Morris became known as an excellent designer of flat patterning, he restructured the Firm and increased production of printed and woven textiles, tapestries, stained glass, and furnishings. Morris & Co. crafted a style that remained an essential part of British interior decoration long after the company’s closure in 1941.

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[Thematic Text Panel for Section 4]

Utopias for a New Century

In the later 19th century, a generation of radical designers emerged for whom the concept of the “unity of all the arts” was a guiding principle. Known as the Arts and Crafts Movement, these artists and makers regarded architecture, painting, sculpture, and the decorative arts as equals. Honesty in design and the preeminence of handmade work were paramount. Newly influential regional art schools practitioners to work across a range of media, develop their skills in a variety of techniques, and embody the roles of both designer and maker.

Meanwhile, William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites continued to have an enormous influence on the emergence of progressive artists in the 1880s and 1890s, not least in Birmingham. Local painters were inspired by Edward Burne-Jones, who lent his support to the campaign to found a new art school and museum in Birmingham in the 1880s and whose example helped shape the work of the city’s young artists.

As the 20th century began, guilds modeled after medieval craft guilds were established throughout Britain as centers of both technical and social practice. Their members looked forward to the creation of a new, communal society. These guilds’ influence reached beyond Britain to the United States, Europe, and Japan, and their legacy can be seen in the rise of socialism, universal suffrage, education, and health care reform in the decades that followed.

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Arts and Crafts in Birmingham

Birmingham was a leading center for the Arts and Crafts Movement. Workers drew inspiration from pioneering national figures like William Morris and strength from the city's wealth of small workshops and jewelry-making and metalwork traditions. By the early 20th century, Birmingham's Municipal School of Art and its associated School of Jewellery and Silversmithing was arguably the most influential force in the promotion of advanced artistic practice in Britain. Students had unprecedented opportunities for developing practical skills, thanks to guidance by major artists—who took on roles as teachers, advisers, and advocates— and to the introduction of hands-on “art laboratories.”

Women artists made a particular impact by working across a range of disciplines, winning national art prizes, and promoting the city's name through national and international exhibitions. Some of the most notable include the painter Kate Bunce and her metalworking sister, Myra; the stained-glass designer Florence Camm; the enameller Fanny Bunn; and the embroiderer and designer Mary Newill.

The city's painters were also part of a progressive movement that was inspired by the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly Edward Burne-Jones, who was instrumental in founding the new municipal art school and museum. One of the most influential Birmingham artists, Joseph Southall, revived the early medieval technique of tempera—in which pigments are held in an egg-yolk-based medium—to create works of linear precision and a singing brilliance of color. Southall's example fostered a distinctive school of Birmingham painting.

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