"You say you want a Revolution..."

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a utopian dream factory?
The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882)
William Michael Rossetti (1829–1919)
William Holman Hunt (1827–1910)
John Everett Millais (1829–1896)
+ James Collinson, Frederick G. Stephens, Thomas Woolner as official members

The Pre-Raphaelite Movement

- Alexandre Munro (1825–1871)
- Elizabeth Siddall (1829–1862)
- Frederick Sandys (1829–1904)
- John Spencer Stanhope (1829–1908)
- Henry Wallis (1830–1916)
- Arthur Hughes (1832–1915)

Pre-Raphaelitism => Aestheticism/Symbolism
Academic Standards

David Wilkie, *Chelsea Pensioners Reading Waterloo Dispatch* 1822, oil on canvas, 97 x 158 cm, Wellington Museum, London

Sir « Sloshua » Reynolds, *Selfportrait*, circa 1780, oil on panel, 127 x 102 cm, Royal Academy, London

Raphaël, *The Transfiguration*, 1515 – 1520 Oil on wood, 405 x 278 cm, Vatican Museum, Rome
The “Immortals”
Up left: John Everett Millais, *Isabella*, 1849
Oil on canvas, 103 x 143 cm
Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

Up right: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1848 – 1849
Oil on canvas, 83,2 x 63,5 cm, Tate Britain, London

Bottom: William Holman Hunt, *Rienzi Vowing to Obtain Justice for the Death of his Young Brother Slain in a Skirmish between the Colonna and the Orsini Factions*, 1849
Oil on canvas, 86,3 x 122 cm, private collection
“DETAILS ARE ALWAYS VULGAR”
(Oscar Wilde)

John Everett Millais, *The Carpenter’s Shop*
1850, Oil on canvas, 86.4 x 140 cm
Tate Britain, London

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ecce ancilla domini!*
1849 – 1850, oil on canvas, 73 x 42 cm, Tate Britain, London

Gustave Courbet, *A Burial at Ornans*
1849 – 1850, oil on canvas, 668 x 315 cm
Musée d’Orsay, Paris
The Pre-Raphaelite Programme

- To have genuine ideas to express
- To study Nature attentively, so as to know how to express them
- To sympathise with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parading and learned by rote
- And most indispensible of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues
John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851 – 1852
Oil on canvas, 76 X 112 cm, Tate Britain, London

Arthur Hughes, *April Love*, 1855 – 1856
Oil on canvas, 89 X 49,5 cm, Tate Britain, London
Up: William Holman Hunt, *Our English Coasts*, 1853, oil on canvas 43.2 x 58.4 cm, Tate Britain, London

Down: Ford Madox Brown, *Work* 1852-1865, oil on canvas, 137 x 198 cm, Manchester City Art Gallery
Prostitution, “the great social evil”

William Holman Hunt
*The Awakening Conscience*, 1853, oil on canvas, 56 x 76.2 cm
Tate Britain, London

John Spencer Stanhope,
*Thoughts of the Past*
1859, oil on canvas
51 x 86.4 cm
Tate Britain London

Dante Gabriel Rossetti
*Found*, 1854 - 1881
Oil on canvas, 91.4 x 80 cm
Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington
In a nutshell

- **A total, democratic form of art**, serving justice and authenticity. No hierarchy between the genres or techniques.
- Against classical aesthetics: rejecting archetypes and ideal forms of beauty.
- **Pictorial perfectionism**: seize Nature in its diversity, through the technical devices of the Early Christian Masters (singular iconography, bright colours, attention to detail).
- **Investing history painting to comment on current issues**

⇒ Did they achieve an artistic Revolution? Yes et no. Not if you consider modernity from the French perspective or the standards defined by contemporary art historiography. The PRB sought to defy the Academy but re-adapted biblical and literary canons (…so did the French Romantic school of painting!)

⇒ European equivalents: the Impressionists, icons of the European vanguard? Yes, on a technical point of view. Not in their choice of subject-matter, extremely bourgeois, white-male-middle-class, corresponding to their social status and pastimes. The Pre-Raphaelites are, in the end, more like the **Realists and the Naturalists**!

⇒ English-speaking viewers are more flexible: the Pre-Raphaelites are described as the **“Victorian avant-garde”**. An oxymoron that seems to embrace well all the contradictions of the movement.