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THE ORIGINAL ARTISANAL HIPSTERS

BY FLORA ARMETTA

The Pre-Raphaelites—that dreamy, incestuous, awkward group of Victorian artists, writers, and aesthetes—are back. Whether you’re already familiar with them or haven’t yet had the pleasure of an introduction, a new exhibition



(<http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2014/preraphaelite-legacy>) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a good way to see what they were up to—some of it, at least. Following on the heels of two recent travelling (<http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/album/16488>) shows (<https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/preraphaelites.shtm>) that focussed on their ideas and work, and in conjunction with the auction this week of a large painting (<http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/blogs/all-blogs/european-discoveries/2014/04/pre-raphaelite-legacy-rossetti-pandora.html>) by the founding Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the Met’s smaller offering helps suggest that Rossetti and his sometime circle of friends, lovers, and associates have returned to center stage. But why now, exactly?

Plenty of viewers and critics may still resist their pull altogether (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/29/arts/design/pre-raphaelites-at-national-gallery-of-art.html?_r=0). As the show’s organizers, Constance McPhee and Alison Hokanson, have pointed out, people who are interested in the Pre-Raphaelites tend to be sheepish about it, confessing to a soft spot for this kind of work in the same way that they might own up to sneaking a Twinkie once in a while. It’s an apt comparison—some of the paintings do have an intense sweetness that can read as unsophisticated, the stuff of posters and greeting cards.

The original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which existed under that name from 1848 to 1853, had a relatively well-defined membership and clearly stated aims. They advocated a return to what they saw as the moral and visual purity of medieval art, from before the time of Raphael (hence the name). The works by this cohort are what usually causes the most eye-rolling, and, admittedly, some of their art is an acquired taste. The Brotherhood, however, quickly devolved, and a second wave, as it were, developed in the mid-eighteen-

fifties, when William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, who'd become friends at Oxford, took up Rossetti's acquaintance in the hope of pursuing art. An extraordinary burst of artistic activity followed, and it's this later group's work and ideals, as they grew in the course of the century, that most fully resonate with our own contemporary interests. The thirty objects on view at the Met come mainly from these three artists, and a close look finds parallels—both aesthetic and philosophical—between their culture and ours.

We can start with Morris's near obsession with the idea of craft. Like the ever-growing number of twenty-first-century tastemakers and designers who value traditional methods and materials, Morris strove to bring the mark of authenticity to everything he made. He advocated a return to pre-industrial ways of living and creating. Any maker, D.I.Y.-er, or producer of craft beer, craft pickles, or craft anything owes a debt to his design firm, Morris & Co., where he and his collaborators emphasized the slow-to-emerge beauty of the handmade object to such an extent that, as also often happens now, the resulting products tended to be affordable only for the wealthy. This was a source of discomfort to Morris, who, unlike many of his contemporaries, was aware of the disparity between the lives of actual workers and artisans and the luxurious experiences their work helped to create.

Morris eventually became a leading figure of the Arts and Crafts Movement, which helped to erase Renaissance-influenced perceptions that valued the so-called "higher" art forms over the "lower" work of traditional craftsmen. This, too, is an inherited attitude that we don't think twice about. At the Met, this change in aesthetic taste is represented by the work of Burne-Jones (Morris's lifelong friend, and a frequent contributor to his firm), which includes the high arts of painting, drawing, and sculpture design alongside lower forms such as stained glass and tapestry. The tapestry examples here are a revelation. So often badly reproduced, or hung high in dimly lit rooms where it's easy to pass them by, they are given fuller play by the show's intimate setting, and they're gorgeous.

And, if you still question whether Morris, Burne-Jones, and their fellow-artists have shaped our times, just look (<http://www.architetto-contemporaneo.it/dossier/william-morris-padre-del-movimento-moderno>) at (<http://gather-ye-rosebuds-while-ye-may.blogspot.com/2010/03/happy-birthday-to-our-dear-william.html>) them (<http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-3VDnDIETj9g/UZPxuJzbpoI/AAAAAAAAHds/0EvBRNaI>) The loose, full beards these artists wore, in marked contrast to the more trimmed and cleanly shaped facial hair popular in their day, suggest the carefully cultivated natural beards of today. Still, if you feel called to judge the Pre-Raphaelites one way or the other, then judge them by their work. It's Burne-Jones's painting "Love Song"—hauntingly mysterious, with a vaguely romantic undercurrent of anxiety—that may stay with you after you leave the Met exhibition. The compellingly androgynous figures, the absence of narrative, the deliberate contrast between hyperrealistic detail (those sharp-looking

flowers in the foreground) and a random lack thereof (what is happening with the feet of the armored figure on the left?)—all of these have a feeling of now-ness that is fascinating, and hard to shake.

“The Pre-Raphaelite Legacy: British Art and Design” runs through October 26th. It’s located almost directly behind the Met’s spectacular medieval galleries, allowing ample opportunities for comparison between topnotch examples of the kinds of medieval objects that inspired the Pre-Raphaelites and the results of that inspiration. Also at the Met, “William Morris: Textiles and Wallpaper” runs through July 20th.

Sir Edward Burne-Jones’s “The Love Song” (1868-77). Credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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