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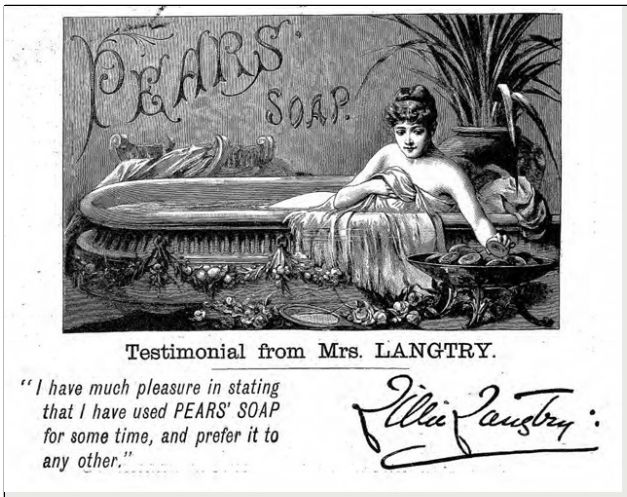
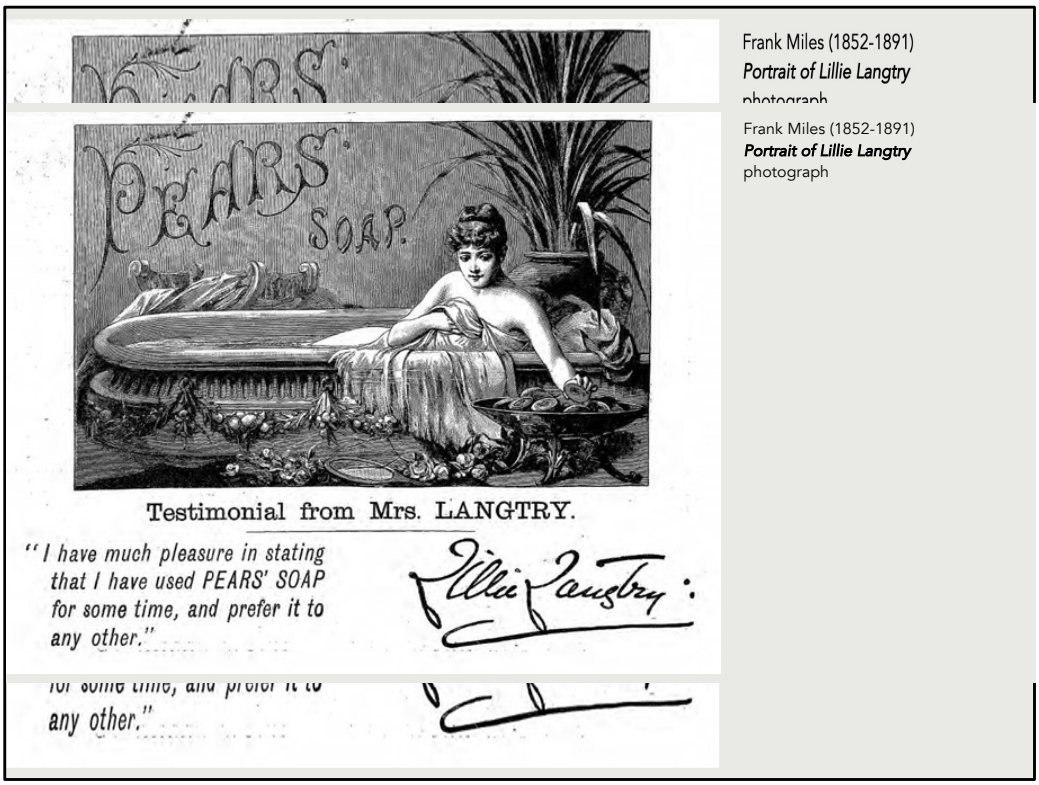


Frank Miles (1852-1891)
Portrait of Lillie Langtry

28-01 Aesthetic Movement to Degeneration Part 1

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE WWW.SHAFE.UK

This lecture traces the Aesthetic Movement from its philosophical foundations to its most ambitious paintings. We begin with the Venus de Milo and what Victorian culture understood beauty to mean, then follow that question through Pater, Swinburne, and Rossetti into the studios of Albert Moore, Frederic Leighton, and their contemporaries. Along the way we encounter the charges of degeneracy levelled against this art, and the fierce critical battles those charges provoked.



Frank Miles (1852-1891)
Portrait of Lillie Langtry
photograph

Frank Miles (1852-1891)
Portrait of Lillie Langtry
photograph

Frank Miles (1852-1891), Portrait of Lillie Langtry

That transition from the Aesthetic Movement's grand ambitions brings us to the question at its heart: what exactly did beauty mean in the Victorian period? The answer shifted dramatically across the century. In its early decades, the Venus de Medici, already known by 1559 and a fixture of the Grand Tour, stood as the definitive ideal of female beauty. Then in 1820, a French officer named Olivier Voutier encountered a farmer on the island of Milos who had unearthed fragments of a new statue. Within days Jules Dumont d'Urville recognised its significance, and France acquired what became the Venus de Milo. The French authorities, still stinging from having returned the Venus de Medici to Florence in 1815, promoted the new find as the superior work. When a plinth inscription revealed the sculptor was Alexandros of Antioch — not the celebrated Praxiteles — and the style proved Hellenistic rather than Classical, the plinth quietly disappeared. France needed a trophy, and beauty was declared accordingly. By the 1870s and 1880s, beauty had migrated from marble halls into drawing rooms, wardrobes, and shop windows. Lillie

Langtry, introduced to London's art circles by Frank Miles, became the period's most recognisable face — and eventually the first woman to endorse a commercial product, advertising Pears Soap.

Notes

Frank Miles (1852-1891), Portrait of Lillie Langtry (1853-1929, born Emilie Charlotte Le Breton), photograph

Venus de Medici, 1st century BCE marble copy of a bronze Greek original, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, first example of unrivalled beauty

Alexander of Milos, Venus de Milo, 130-100 BCE, Louvre, right, found by French, became prime example of beauty. Formerly thought to be by Praxiteles.

In the second half of the nineteenth century beauty became important. Not the fashionable beauty of the latest actress, such as Lillie Langtry (1853-1929), but the timeless beauty of the Venus de Medici or the Venus de Milo.

Art for Art's Sake

During the 1870s and 80s aestheticism became a fashion associated with new forms of interior design, new styles of dress, and exotic objects such as blue and white porcelain and peacock feathers. More narrowly it was associated with a small group of artists focused on beauty as the sole purpose and objective of art. We look at the excitement of the period and the social changes taking place.

Art for Art's sake or the Aesthetic Movement or Aestheticism and Aesthetes or the Cult of Beauty

Notes

The Classical Ideal

In the early part of the nineteenth century it was the Venus de Medici that was regarded as the ideal. The Venus de Milo was not discovered until 1820 and from then on was promoted by the French authorities as the greater treasure. They had been made to return the Venus de Medici to the Italians in 1815 after the Napoleonic Wars. The statue was dutifully praised by many artists and critics as the epitome of graceful female beauty although Pierre-Auguste

Renoir (1841-1919) described it as a ‘big gendarme’.

The Venus de Medici was discovered first and although we don’t know exactly when it was already known in 1559. Seeing the Medici Venus was a high point of the Grand Tour. When Napoleon conquered Italy there was an attempt to hide it in Palermo but it was found and taken to Paris. When Napoleon was defeated in 1815 it was one of the first works of art to be repatriated to Florence on 27 December that year. In 1820 a French officer (Olivier Voutier) was touring Milos and met a farmer (Yorgos Kentrotas) who had dug up part of a statue. The soon found the complete statue in two parts and ten days later another French officer (Jules Dumont d’Urville) realised its significance and arranged for the French ambassador to Turkey (Charles-Francois de Riffardeau, later duc de Riviere) to purchase it. Despite some problems which involved various chiefs being whipped and fined and the most senior Turkish representative was executed, it arrived in Paris and the fun began. The French announced the statue was by the most famous Greek sculptor Praxiteles (5th and 4yh centuries BCE) before examining it. When they did they found the plinth had an inscription which read, in Greek, ‘(Alex)andros son of Menides, citizen of Antioch on the Maeander made this (statue)...’. This was unfortunate in two ways – it was not by Praxiteles and it was Hellenistic (323-31BCE) not Classical. The city of Antioch did not exist in the Classical period which dated the statue to the Hellenistic period which was regarded in the nineteenth century as a period of decline for Greek art. So what do you think happened? The plinth mysteriously disappeared and has never reappeared. We only know of its existence because two detailed drawings were made before it disappeared. From that point onwards the French who had lost the Venus de Medici successfully promoted the Venus de Milo as the most beautiful Classical Greek sculpture in existence.

Doryphorus

Many believe that the Doryphoros by Polykleitos is perhaps the perfect visual expression of the Greeks’ search for harmony and beauty, which is rendered in the perfectly proportioned sculpted male nude.

The Doryphoros (‘Spear-Bearer’) of Polykleitos is one of the best known Greek sculptures of the Classical Era in Western Art, depicting a solidly-built, well-muscled standing athlete, originally bearing a spear balanced on his left shoulder. Rendered somewhat above life-size proportions, the lost bronze original of the work would have been cast circa 440 BCE, but it is today

known only from later (mainly Roman period) marble copies

Lillie Langtry (1853-1929)

Lillie Langtry's father was a vicar who eloped with Emilie Martin, a well known beauty. They had seven children, all boys except for Lillie who was privately tutored as her governess was unable to manage her. The Le Breton family was related to Richard le Breton one of the knights who murdered Thomas Becket in 1170. At 20 Lillie married a wealthy 30-year-old Irish landowner and was introduced to the art circle in London by the artist Frank Miles. She also sat for Millais, Burne-Jones and Frith. She was known for her relationships with noblemen, including the Prince of Wales, the Earl of Shrewsbury, and Prince Louis of Battenberg. She was the subject of widespread public and media interest. In 1881, in need of money, at the suggestion of her close friend Oscar Wilde, Lillie embarked upon a stage career and became famous in both Britain and America.

Pear's Soap

Thomas J. Barratt, Managing Director of Pears Soap Company in the last 19th century has been hailed as 'the father of modern advertising'. He used targeted slogans, images and phrases spending an enormous £80,000 per year. He associated the Pears brand with high culture and quality. Most famously, he used the painting Bubbles by John Everett Millais as an advertisement by adding a bar of Pears soap into the foreground. Barratt continued this theme with a series of adverts of well groomed middle-class children, associating Pears with domestic comfort and aspirations of modern cleanliness. Barratt established Pears Annual in 1891 and in 1897 added the Pears Cyclopedia a one-volume encyclopedia. From the early 20th century Pears was famous for the annual 'Miss Pears' competition in which parents entered their children into the high-profile hunt for a young brand ambassador to be used on packaging and in consumer promotions. He recruited scientists and the celebrities of the day to publicly endorse the product. Lillie Langtry, a British music hall singer and stage actress with a famous ivory complexion, received income as the first woman to endorse a commercial product, advertising Pears Soap. Barratt introduced many of the crucial ideas that lie behind successful advertising and these were widely circulated in his day. He constantly stressed the importance of a strong and exclusive brand image for Pears and of emphasizing the product's availability

through saturation campaigns. He also understood the importance of constantly re-evaluating the market for changing tastes and mores, stating in 1907 that ‘tastes change, fashions change, and the advertiser has to change with them. An idea that was effective a generation ago would fall flat, stale, and unprofitable if presented to the public today. Not that the idea of today is always better than the older idea, but it is different – it hits the present taste.’

For Victorians, beauty was not a vague feeling but a serious intellectual and artistic concern, anchored to specific ideals inherited from antiquity. The Venus de Milo, acquired by France in 1820, became the period's dominant standard of feminine beauty — though not without controversy. As Wikipedia records, the French state actively promoted the sculpture as compensation for losing the Medici Venus to Italy in 1815, following Napoleon Bonaparte's earlier looting campaign. Critics and artists dutifully praised the de Milo as the epitome of graceful beauty, yet Pierre-Auguste Renoir was among its detractors, dismissing it as a "big gendarme." The statue also sat awkwardly against contemporary fashion ideals, as a famous *Punch* cartoon made plain. Explanations for Victorian aestheticism tend toward the reductive. Art historians have reached for two familiar frameworks: aestheticism as spiritual substitute in an age of eroding religious faith, or as an expression of late Victorian commodity culture. Neither account is fully satisfying on its own. The slogan "art for art's sake" entered English simultaneously in 1868, in Walter Pater's review of William Morris's

poetry and in Algernon Charles Swinburne's study of William Blake. Pater's later Studies in the History of the Renaissance, published in 1873, became the movement's defining text.

Notes

Beauty

What do we mean by beauty?

Beauty was an important, even a central concern for Victorian artists. What do we mean by beauty? One definition is that beauty is a characteristic of a person, animal, place, object, or idea that provides a perceptual experience of pleasure or satisfaction. We talk, for example, about a beautiful landscape. However, the prime example of beauty was classical beauty represented by the Venus Medici. Later in the century this switched to the Venus Miletos or Venus de Milo. There were many artists that attempted to recreate the beauty of the classical world through the use of classical dress.

During the nineteenth century the Venus de Milo was regarded as an example of beauty. But,

'The great fame of the Aphrodite of Milos during the nineteenth century was not simply the result of its admitted beauty, but also owed much to a major propaganda effort by the French authorities. In 1815, France had returned the Medici Venus to the Italians after it had been looted from Italy by Napoleon Bonaparte. The Medici Venus, regarded as one of the finest Classical sculptures in existence, caused the French to promote the Venus de Milo as a greater treasure than that which they recently had lost. The de Milo statue was praised dutifully by many artists and critics as the epitome of graceful female beauty. However, Pierre-Auguste Renoir was among its detractors, labelling it a "big gendarme".'(Wikipedia)

Beauty and Fashion

Also it did not confirm with the then conventional ideas of beauty, see Punch cartoon.

Other Aspects

Art historians have often argued for simplistic answers such as aestheticism providing a spiritual substitute for religion in an age when faith was being

questioned or it has been seen as an expression of the commodity culture of the late Victorian period (because of its emphasis on the production of objects and the fashionable association of the aesthetic symbols).

The slogan ‘art for art’s sake’ is associated in the history of English art and letters with Walter Pater and his followers in the Aesthetic Movement, which was self-consciously in rebellion against Victorian moralism. It first appeared in English in two works published simultaneously in 1868: Pater's review of William Morris's poetry in the Westminster Review and in William Blake by Algernon Charles Swinburne. A modified form of Pater's review appeared in his Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873), one of the most influential texts of the Aesthetic Movement.

A Latin version of ‘art for art’s sake’, ‘Ars gratia artis’, is used as a motto by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and appears in the circle around the roaring head of Leo the Lion in its motion picture logo.

The Beauty of Landscapes

Komar and Melamid (Russian artists) did a survey round the world of the most preferred type of painting which they found was a landscape with water and paths. However, their results are very suspect and the findings, although amusing, do not add a great deal to a understanding of what we mean by beauty.

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898)
Siegfried, Act II
c. 1892-3
Pen, ink and wash on paper
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), Siegfried, Act II, c. 1892-3, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The Aesthetic Movement — known also as **Art for Art's Sake** or Aestheticism — emerged in the **1870s and 1880s** as a deliberate rejection of the idea that art must carry moral or didactic purpose. Where **John Ruskin** insisted that beauty was moral in character and that art must serve a higher social function, the Aesthetic Movement declared beauty sufficient justification in itself. The philosophical groundwork was laid earlier: **Alexander Baumgarten** defined aesthetics in 1735, **Victor Cousin** lectured on the concept at the Sorbonne in 1818, and **Théophile Gautier** adopted "l'art pour l'art" as a working slogan in 1833. In England, the phrase gained currency through **Walter Pater's** 1868 Westminster Review essay and Algernon Charles Swinburne's study of William Blake that same year. **James McNeill Whistler** stated the position plainly: art should stand independent of devotion, pity, or patriotism, and answer only to the eye. Because the work refers to nothing beyond itself — what theorists call autotelic — fine art and decorative design naturally converged. The opening of the

Grosvenor Gallery in 1877 gave the movement its most glamorous platform, cementing Aestheticism as the defining artistic sensibility of its decade.

Notes

What is the Aesthetic Movement?

The Aesthetic Movement (also known as 'Art for Art's Sake', or Aestheticism or the Cult of Beauty) was not a group of artists like the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood but more a shared view of the role of art in society. No longer should artists try to instruct by painting moral lessons but it was their job to produce beautiful things. Their beauty was their sole justification. It was also know as the 'art for art's sake' movement. It became very fashionable during the 1870s and 80s and was satirized by the use of stereotypes such as fey men, masculine women, the love of blue china vases and peacock feathers. It was an important art movement but it is one that few have heard of. One of its leading proponents, Albert Moore, is hardly known and his work, when seen, is often dismissed as sexist and trite. It was a rejection of painting as way to convey a moral message or any narrative meaning. This left the aim of artists as the creation of beauty. Artists' aim was to create beautiful objects with no narrative or moral meaning.

Théophile Gautier (1811–1872), who was the first to adopt the phrase as a slogan. Gautier was not, however, the first to write those words: they appear in the works of Victor Cousin, Benjamin Constant, and Edgar Allan Poe.

It was in defiance of John Ruskin and later socialist realism painters who thought the value of art was to serve a moral or didactic purpose.

The phrase first appeared in England in two works of 1868 – Walter Pater's review of William Morris's poetry in the Westminster Review and in William Blake by Algernon Charles Swinburne.

Aestheticism

The literary roots of aestheticism can be traced back to the term 'aesthetics', defined by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in 1735 and to French Romanticism. Its French origins are generally traced to Victor Cousin's 1818 Sorbonne lecture series but the first use of the term "l'art pour l'art" ('art for art's sake') was by Pierre Gautier in 1833.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge introduced the word aesthetic in 1821 but it was still relatively unknown in 1846. John Ruskin objected to the term as it implied

beauty is in some way sensual. Ruskin regarded beauty as moral not sensual or intellectual and coined the term Theoretic. Ruskin also thought that art must serve a moral purpose.

The Modern Rejection of Beauty

'Art for art's sake' was rejected by Marxist art historians in the 1970s as they thought art always had a political role. They rejected the idealist aesthetics of beauty and art for art's sake was considered reactionary (i.e. a return to a previous state) in art and political terms. Ironically, one hundred years previously the terms were considered politically radical as they rejected the need for a moral purpose.

The term was associated with art's autonomy and freedom from any ideology. It was believed that art does not need to justify itself by making a moral point or telling a story , its sole aim is the creation of beauty, which itself is determined by the artist.

James McNeill Whistler wrote,

'Art should be independent of all claptrap —should stand alone [...] and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism and the like.' The term aesthetics became widely used in the 1860s and 70s and signalled a new way of looking at art.

Aestheticism and Decorative Art

Such art is complete in itself (known as autotelic) as it does not refer to an external story. For this reason fine art merges with decorative art and design (think about decorative art such as wallpaper design to avoid any confusion with utility and functionality).

In the 1860s it was associated with a collaboration between fine art and design by Whistler and the architect E. W. Godwin (1833-1886) who was influenced by Ruskin and the Gothic, then Japanese art and Whistler. Godwin influenced the Arts and Crafts Movement.

In the 1870s it was associated with Whistler, Leighton, Albert Moore and Burne-Jones and the combination of colour, harmony and mood.

The opening of the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877 gave it a glamourous showcase and the attack by John Ruskin on Whistler's work also gave it publicity.

Aesthetic painting and decoration became fashionable among the wealthy and intellectuals.

It was associated with 'The House Beautiful' and interior decoration and artists such as William Morris, Walter Crane, Christopher Dresser and most famously by Oscar Wilde.

Aestheticism and Decadence

In the 1880s and 90s it was satirized by Gilbert and Sullivan's opera Patience and by George du Maurier in Punch.

It entered its final Decadent stage and the work of Aubrey Beardsley.

Note that Decadent art (a word known from the 16th century meaning a decay in standards and morals and applied to the Aesthetic Movement by hostile critics), Degenerate art (a term that was related to Darwin's theory of evolution and used by Max Nordau in his 1892 book Degeneracy) and Fin-de-Siecle art and art of the Naughty Nineties are often used interchangeably but can be distinguished. The French expression the Belle Époque is from 1871 to 1814 and refers to a 'golden age' of optimism, peace and new scientific discoveries. Within this optimism in England there was a strong feeling that the good times could not last and that society must guard against falling standards. Physical and mental fitness were linked and became part of the cultural reaction.

Notes

Albert Moore (1841-1893)

In the late 1860s Albert Moore was one of the first artists to paint without a subject. His paintings were decorative and subtly coloured. The poet Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909, nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature every year from 1903 to 1907 and 1909) said such paintings are the 'worship of things formally beautiful ... their reason for being is simply to be'.

Christopher Dresser (1834-1904)

Known as the 'father of industrial design' as he designed for the mass market. His ceramics and glass are often derived from organic forms but his metal objects are fully abstract. In the catalogue it was described as 'English Japanese'. The surfaces were often left plain and the designs were angular

rather than organic. His designs were often considered so ahead of their time they were not put into production.

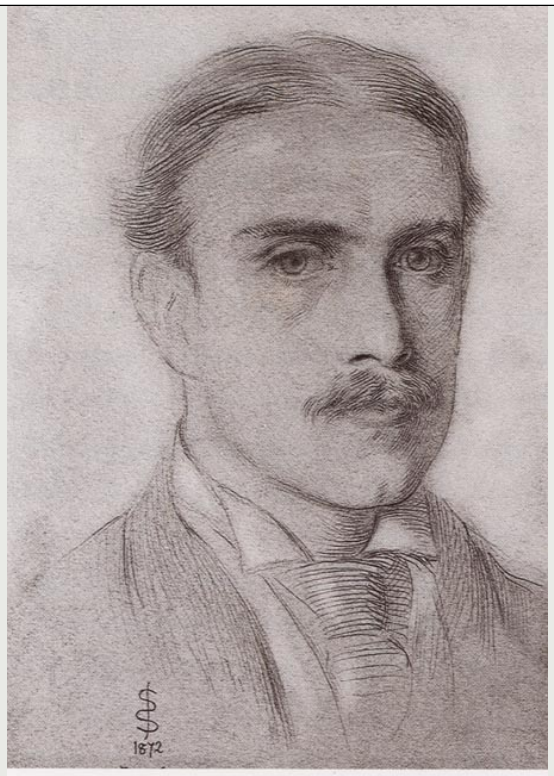
Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898, died aged 25 of TB)

This drawing is an illustration relating to Act II of Richard Wagner's opera Siegfried. It was published in the first issue of the art magazine The Studio in April 1893. It is very finely detailed and has echoes of Andrea Mantegna and other Renaissance artists and Edward Burne-Jones. Burne-Jones was an important mentor and hung it in his drawing room alongside prints by Albrecht Dürer.

Historical Background to Art for Art's Sake

George Sand in 1872 thought L'art pour l'art was an empty phrase as the artist had a duty to find a message and convey it to as many people as possible. Sand's real name was Amantine-Lucile-Aurore Dupin, known as 'Aurore', and she married 'Baron' Casimir Dudevant. She was known as a feminist, for her affairs with artists and for wearing men's clothes for their convenience and for the access they gave to men-only establishments.

Walter Benjamin discusses the slogan in his seminal 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and describes it as part of the 'theology of art'. The final realisation of 'art for art's sake' he thinks is the gratification of the sense of perception changed by technology and he uses the link with fascism and Futurism (Filippo Tommaso Marinetti) as an example.



Simeon Solomon (1840-1905)
Walter Pater
1872
Pencil on paper
Peter Nahum Ltd, Leicester Galleries

Simeon Solomon (1840-1905), Walter Pater, 1872, Peter Nahum Ltd, Leicester Galleries

Walter Pater, born in 1839, lost both parents in childhood and won a scholarship to Queen's College, Oxford in 1858, where immersion in Flaubert, Gautier, Baudelaire, and Hegel shaped a mind that would redefine how Britain thought about art. Teaching modern German philosophy at **Brasenose College**, he visited Florence, Pisa, and Ravenna in 1865, producing early essays on **Winckelmann**, Leonardo, Botticelli, and Michelangelo that became the foundation of the **Aesthetic Movement**. His prose on the Mona Lisa — describing her as older than the rocks among which she sits, a vampire who has died many times and learned the secrets of the grave — set a new standard for art writing as creative act. His declaration that all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music, and his call to burn always with a hard, gem-like flame, were celebrated and condemned in equal measure. A rumoured romance with the undergraduate **William Hardinge** shadowed his Oxford career. His novel **Marius the Epicurean**, published in 1885, brought him wider fame, and his influence reached

Roger Fry, Kenneth Clark, Proust, Joyce, Yeats, and Eliot. He died in 1894, aged fifty-four. His Brasenose contemporary Simeon Solomon, a Pre-Raphaelite painter of rare sensitivity, saw his career destroyed by an 1873 arrest for sodomy; he died in poverty in 1905.

Notes

Walter Pater (1839-1894)

Essayist, literary and art critic and fiction writer. His father was a physician but died when he was young and he was tutored by his headmaster. His mother died when he was 14 and he gained a scholarship to Queen's College, Oxford in 1858.

He read Flaubert, Gautier, Baudelaire and Swinburne and learnt German and read Hegel. He did not pursue ordination despite an early interest. He stayed in Oxford and was offered a job at Brasenose teaching modern German philosophy. In 1865 he visited Florence, Pisa and Ravenna. He wrote early essays on Winckelmann (1867), William Morris (1868), Leonardo da Vinci (1869), Botticelli (1870) and Michelangelo (1871). On the Mona Lisa he wrote,

'She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.'
The Renaissance

He also wrote,

'All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music'.

And,

'… get as many pulsations as possible into the given time … To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.'

He was condemned by many as a 'rococo Epicurean'. In 1874 he failed to obtain a proctorship he had been promised and letters have recently been found that indicate a 'romance' with a nineteen-year-old undergraduate, an outspoken homosexual called William Hardinge, who later became a novelist.

Pater's work focused on male beauty, friendship and love and he was later

satirised as a typical effete English aesthete. Later, with the popular Marius the Epicurean (1885) he became a minor literary celebrity and moved to London with his sisters. In 1893 his book Plato and Platonism was published and he returned to Oxford as a popular lecturer. He died in 1894 of rheumatic fever (streptococcal infection) aged 54.

His ideas formed the principles of the Aesthetic Movement. Although he criticized Wilde's distortion of Epicureanism he was praised by Wilde and influenced the art critics Roger Fry and Kenneth Clark as well as Marcel Proust, James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.

Simeon Solomon (1840-1905)

Pre-Raphaelite painter. Born into a well-known Jewish family and his brother Abraham and his sister Rebecca were both artists. At the Royal Academy School he met Rossetti and the other Pre-Raphaelites as well as Swinburne and Burne-Jones. He exhibited at the Royal Academy from 1858 to 1872. He often painted literary subjects and scenes from Jewish life.

In 1873, aged 33, his career ended when he was arrested for attempting to commit sodomy in a public urinal near Oxford Street. Sodomy was punishable by death but the last two executed for the offence was in 1835. Solomon was fined £100 and arrested again the following year in Paris and spent three months in prison. In 1884 he entered the workhouse but he was an alcoholic and died in 1905 from complications.

William Bell Scott (1811-1890)
Algernon Charles Swinburne
1860
Balliol College, Oxford

William Bell Scott (1811-1890), Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1860, Balliol College, Oxford

Building on what we have just explored, let us turn now to two figures whose lives and ambitions were deeply intertwined with the Pre-Raphaelite circle. **Algernon Charles Swinburne**, born in 1837, was among the most electrifying and controversial poets of the Victorian age. Raised on the Isle of Wight and shaped by long holidays in **Northumberland**, which he considered his native county, he moved through Eton and **Balliol College, Oxford**, where he encountered **Dante Gabriel Rossetti** and William Morris. His rustication in 1859 for publicly supporting the attempted assassination of Napoleon the Third signals the defiant energy that defined his early career. Victorians positioned him as the natural successor to Tennyson and Browning, yet Oscar Wilde dismissed him as a braggart in matters of vice. By 1879, chronic illness and alcoholism forced him into the care of friends in Putney, where respectability replaced rebellion — a transition many felt silenced the poet even as it saved the man. **William Bell Scott**, born in Edinburgh in 1811, built his reputation across two cities.

Appointed master of the Government School of Design in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1844, he spent two decades there, painting eight large canvases of border history for Wallington Hall. His close friendship with Rossetti and his long connection to Swinburne place him at the productive heart of this network.

Notes

Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909)

English poet, playwright, novelist and critic. Nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature every year from 1903 to 1907 and again in 1909. He was five foot four inches and had bright red hair. He was an alcoholic and a masochist and highly excitable. In 1879, aged 42, he became ill and was looked after by friends for the rest of his life in Putney. In Putney he became respectable and his friend is said to have saved his life and killed the poet.

His father became an Admiral and he grew up on the Isle of Wight and attended Eton College before going to Balliol College, Oxford. He was rusticated in 1859 for publically supporting the attempted assassination of Napoleon III. He spent his holidays in Northumberland with his grandfather who was a baronet and considered Northumberland his native county. He would later stay with William Bell Scott. At Oxford he met Rossetti and William Morris.

He is a decadent poet but Oscar Wilde maintained that he was a 'braggart in matters of vice' and claimed to be a homosexual without being in the slightest degree homosexual.

He was considered by Victorians to be the successor to Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) and Robert Browning (1812-1889).

William Bell Scott (1811-1890)

Born in Edinburgh, father an engraver and his brother was a painter. In 1844,he was appointed as master of the Government School of Design Newcastle-on-Tyne and he worked there for twenty years. Painted eight large pictures of the border history for Wallington Hall, Northumberland. He was visited by all the Rossetti's in Newcastle and by Swinburne. Swinburne wrote two poems to Scott. In 1870 he bought a house in London and was a close friend of Rossetti but an enemy of John Ruskin. He wrote poetry influenced by Rossetti and edited many books of artistic and literary criticism.

John Everett Millais (1829-1896)
Autumn Leaves
1856
Manchester Art Gallery

John Everett Millais (1829-1896), Autumn Leaves, 1856, Manchester Art Gallery

Having explored how narrative so often drives Victorian painting, we now encounter a deliberate move away from storytelling altogether. **John Everett Millais** painted **Autumn Leaves** in **1856** holding an intention he stated plainly: to create a picture full of beauty and without subject. He described the scene as drawn from memory of similar evenings, and said he wanted it to invoke the deepest religious reflection — yet deliberately stripped away any fixed story to achieve that effect. The setting sun, a figure with a scythe, and beautiful young girls burning fallen leaves together suggest death and renewal: the old disposed of, replaced by the new. The fallen leaves carry their own weight as symbols of mortality, and the mood is one of sustained nostalgia without resolving into anecdote. This places Autumn Leaves among what critics call **autotelic** works — paintings complete in themselves, requiring no external narrative to justify their existence. **Walter Pater** would later crystallise this position in **1877** with his assertion that all art constantly aspires to the condition of music. For

Millais, the emotional resonance of colour, light, and composition was sufficient — indeed, primary. The painting asks not what is happening, but what is felt.

Notes

Art for Art's Sake

Millais described the painting as recreated from his memory of similar evenings and intended to invoke 'the deepest religious reflection'. The fallen leaves remind us of death and the mood of the painting is one of nostalgia but the precise narrative details take us away from Millais's intention, which he said was to paint 'a picture full of beauty and without subject'. Millais's scene of the setting sun, a figure with a scythe and the beautiful young girls burning leaves suggests death and renewal; the old must be disposed of and replaced by the new.

Autotelic paintings, i.e. complete in themselves.

However, works of art

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882)
Bocca Baciata
1859
Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), Bocca Baciata, 1859, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Arriving now at one of the most debated paintings of the Victorian era, **Bocca Baciata**, painted by **Rossetti** in **1859**, is widely identified as the founding work of the **Aesthetic Movement** — a painting that makes no moral argument and instead places female beauty at its centre. Commissioned by **George Boyce** as a portrait of **Fanny Cornforth**, the work broke sharply from contemporary books of beauty. Rossetti compressed the pictorial space so the figure presses close to the picture plane, and applied thick, sensual Venetian oils to render fuller lips, broad shoulders, unrestrained hair, and exotic jewellery. **Arthur Hughes** responded that the image was so lovely Boyce would kiss the lips away before anyone else could see it. Yet the painting resists purely aesthetic readings. The marigold carried conventional associations with grief and humiliation; the apple invoked the Biblical fall and female transgression. The sitter's vacant, slightly sullen expression suggests agency rather than passivity, which disturbed **Holman Hunt**, who condemned the work for advocating animal passion

as art's aim. These symbols collectively position the figure within three contested Victorian categories: the femme fatale, the fallen woman, and the domestic ideal codified by Coventry Patmore in 1854. Rossetti inhabits all three frameworks while refusing to resolve them.

Notes

Bocca Baciata

This painting by Rossetti of 1859 is usually described as the first painting of the Aesthetic Movement as it is not a portrait, makes no moral point and represents female beauty.

Rossetti adds a number of symbols, such as the marigolds and the apple, which suggests we need to interpret the painting like a coded message. Conventionally a marigold, in the language of flowers, signified grief, pain, and chagrin, that is, vexation resulting in humiliation or disappointment. In Christian symbolism, an apple represents temptation

Rossetti broke new ground with Bocca Baciata as the painting marked a distinct change in his style, and it does not fall into any established genre. It was generally admired but Holman Hunt described the painting as advocating 'the animal passion to be the aim of art'.

Although the interpretation of the painting in aesthetic terms sees it as a simple representation of beauty it is clear that it has multiple social, cultural, political interpretations.

In terms of the role of women it raises question about,

Femme fatale – dangerous woman who will seduce and ensnare her lovers. A common figure in the European Middle Ages inherited from the Biblical Eve. The trope became popular during the Romantic period and was used by the Pre-Raphaelites. It became fashionable in the late nineteenth century and was reinvented by Oscar Wilde as Salome who used her 'Dance of the Seven Veils' (invented by Wilde) to demand the head of John the Baptist. It is, of course, a phantasy, the projection of illicit male desires. The term was used in France with this meaning in 1800 or earlier but not in England until the late nineteenth century.

Fallen woman - In a moral sense: That has lost purity or innocence; ruined. a fallen woman : one who has surrendered her chastity (OED). The idea relates back to Eve and Milton's Paradise Lost (1667), Lord Byron and William Blake. It is also often linked to Hunt's the Awakening Conscience, Charles Dickens's

David Copperfield (Peggotty and Emily) and Rossetti's Found. The term was used by Josephine Butler when writing about the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864.

'Angel in the House', wife and mother and carer. The term is a narrative poem by Coventry Patmore first published in 1854. It only became popular in the late nineteenth century. It idealised his wife Emily whom he believed to be the perfect woman. The roles for a respectable woman were wife and then mother or unmarried carer of her ageing father.

Rossetti broke most of the conventions associated with female representation in contemporary 'books of beauty' by painting the woman in Bocca Baciata with fuller, more voluptuous lips, a less pinched face, unrestrained hair and exotic jewellery, in a more compressed space so we feel physically closer to the head and body, which are pressed close to the picture plane. Also significant were his use of thick oils and sensual Venetian colours.

Rossetti had been commissioned by George Boyce to paint a portrait of Fanny Cornforth and the heavy, idiosyncratic features reinforce the fact that a particular person was being depicted. Its sensuousness can be judged from Arthur Hughes's comment: 'so awfully lovely. Boyce has bought it, and will I suspect kiss the dear thing's lips away before you can come over to see it.'

Rossetti's image has a full face and chin that do not conform to any of the standard types of beauty, and she has a long neck, which, although it was an established attribute of beauty, is so long and wide that it could almost be considered distorted. Rossetti was not painting a conventional 'perfect beauty' but a particular person. However, the title also refers us to a story by Boccaccio suggesting the woman was being used to represent the central character who was described as the most beautiful woman in the world.

She does not meet our eye, and her pose, though conventional, is made disturbing by her expression, which is vacant and charged with a slight sullenness, like a model who has sat for too long. This suggests volition and agency rather than passivity and so it conflicts with the view of the model as an impassive object. Other aspects of agency and female independence are present in the way Rossetti's has represented his model. For example, compared to women in books of beauty, her nose is not slim and pinched and her forehead is narrow, both signs at the time of a lack of refinement. The

shoulders are broad, giving the appearance of physical strength rather than of a delicate and over-refined drawing-room beauty. With her flowing red hair, exotic and excessive jewellery and robust features she could be seen as coarse and sexually experienced. The conventions at the time would therefore label her as a fallen woman.

Although conventional Christian symbolism equates the apple with temptation the term ‘apple’ was not mentioned in the Bible and the fruit in the Garden of Eden was from ‘the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’. Theologians disagree about whether the term ‘knowledge’ should be interpreted narrowly or broadly but the Bible goes on to say that Eve decided to eat the fruit to make herself wise. Adam needed no convincing and ate the fruit he was given, which suggests the serpent chose Eve as she was the hardest to convince and her decision could be seen as the first example of female sexual power in the Christian tradition.

In the Biblical account, God was unaware of Adam and Eve’s transgression as he was elsewhere in the garden, but when he found out he constructed a complex curse, which included women, in future, experiencing pain during childbirth and obeying men. The acquisition of knowledge was concerned with the recognition of each other’s nakedness and this implies that it became associated with sexual desire, which sexual selection equates with beauty. This loss of innocence was represented as the expulsion from a perfect garden and this has been interpreted in Darwinian terms as the evolutionary moment that humans developed a sense of right and wrong.

This image is one of those that would have been criticized by Thomas Maitland when he wrote 'The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr D. G. Rossetti’ in the magazine Contemporary Review (October, 1871).

References

See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bocca_Baciata

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882)
Bocca Baciata
1859
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), Bocca Baciata, 1859, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Dante Gabriel Rossetti described his ideal subjects as self-possessed, passionate, and charismatic women — and from **Bocca Baciata in 1859** onwards, his art embodied exactly that. Trained briefly at the Royal Academy before studying under **Ford Madox Brown**, Rossetti co-founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with **William Holman Hunt** and others, then pivoted decisively in the 1860s toward monumental close-up portraits of women rendered in flat space with dense, saturated colour. His models were also the central relationships of his life. **Elizabeth Siddal**, discovered in a milliner's shop in 1849, became his exclusive model and eventual wife. **Beata Beatrix**, completed shortly after her death from a laudanum overdose in 1862, fuses her likeness with Dante's Beatrice Portinari at the moment of death — the white dove representing love, the poppy her end. Rossetti had translated **La Vita Nuova** into English at seventeen. **Fanny Cornforth** modelled the sensuous Bocca Baciata, now considered a founding work of the **Aesthetic Movement**, which Walter Hamilton first named in

print in 1882. Alexa Wilding and Jane Morris followed, the latter modelling the imposing Astarte Syriaca of 1877, in which Rossetti frames female sexuality as a force that commands and overwhelms — a recurring claim across his entire body of work.

Notes

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Bocca Baciata, 1859, Museum of Fine Art, Boston

Beata Beatrix, c. 1864-70, Tate Britain

Venus Verticordia, 1864-8, Russell-Cotes Art Gallery, Bournemouth

The Beloved ('The Bride'), 1865-66, Tate Britain

Monna Vanna, 1866, Tate Britain

Astarte Syriaca, 1876-77, Manchester City Art Gallery

Starting with Bocca Baciata Rossetti produced a series of beautiful and sensual women, his 'stunners'.

'Self-possessed, articulate, passionate and charismatic', he attended King's College School in the Strand followed by Henry Sass's Drawing Academy (1841-45) when he enrolled at the Royal Academy School. He left and studied under Ford Madox Brown who he maintained a relationship with the rest of his life. He sought out William Holman Hunt after seeing the Eve of St. Agnes.

He met Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris through their poetry magazine the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine. They both admired Rossetti.

Rossetti painted dense medieval paintings during the 1850s but switched in the 1860s and 1870s to powerful close-up images of women in a flat space and using thick colours.

Women and models were Fanny Cornforth, Elizabeth Siddal, Jane Burden (Morris), Alexa Wilding. He became a founding partner in Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. in 1861.

Siddal modelled for Walter Deverell (who found her working in a milliners shop in 1849), Holman Hunt, Millais (including Ophelia) and Rossetti. When modelling she kept working part-time, an unusual and powerful position for a woman at the time.

Rossetti met Elizabeth Siddal in 1849, was his exclusive model by 1851

(thousands of paintings including most famously Beata Beatrix), Ruskin sponsored her in 1855, Rossetti married her in 1860 although his family did not approve, in 1861 she became pregnant but the baby was stillborn, she became pregnant again and overdosed on laudanum in 1862, there is a rumour that he burned a suicide note. Rossetti exhumed her in 1869 by which time he was convinced he was going blind and couldn't paint. He was persuaded by Charles Augustus Howell, an art dealer and alleged blackmailer. Howell was found dead in Chelsea in 1890 with his throat slit and a sovereign in his mouth, a ritual killing for those guilty of slander. This was hushed up and his death put down to TB.

Bocca Baciata

Modelled by Fanny Cornforth. Sometimes regarded as the first painting of the Aesthetic Movement. A painting that emphasizes the visual and sensual qualities of art over the moral or narrative possibilities. It flourished in the 1870s and 80s and is exemplified by J. M. Whistler, Albert Moore and Frederic Leighton. The critic Walter Hamilton was the first to name it in 1882 when he published the book The Aesthetic Movement in England. The term Aesthetic was used and satirized in the Gilbert and Sullivan opera Patience (1881). The term Aesthetic was invented by the German philosopher Baumgarten in 1750.

Beata Beatrix

Modelled by Elizabeth Siddal and completed a year after her death.

It depicts Beatrice Portinari from Dante Alighieri's (pronounced 'Ali-geri') poem La Vita Nuova at the moment of her death. Rossetti had translated the poem into English in 1845 when he was 17.

The white dove represents his love for Siddal and the poppy her death from laudanum.

The are a number of replicas, one in Chicago, a watercolour, a chalk drawing and another oil painting finished by his lifelong friend Ford Madox brown after his death in 1882 (Birmingham Art Gallery).

Venus Verticordia

It was repainted with Alexa Wilding's face in 1868. It was originally modelled

by Rossetti's nearly six foot tall cook.

The Beloved

It was modelled by Marie Ford

It may have been inspired by the black woman in Manet's Olympia, which he saw in Manet's studio in November 1864.

It was inspired by the Song of Solomon

It was commissioned in 1863 by George Rae for £300, but took three years to finish. Rossetti letters to Rae are one long saga of excuses.

Monna Vanna ('vain woman')

Monna Vanna ('vain woman') is taken from Dante's La Vita Nuova (thirteenth century, literally 'the new life') in which the name 'Vanna' appears for the first time.

Modelled by Alexa Wilding

He considered it one of his best works, writing that it was 'probably the most effective as a room decoration that I have ever painted' reinforcing the view that Rossetti painted for money but his real love was poetry.

It was originally called Venus Veneta and was intended to be the Venetian ideal of female beauty. He later retouched the painting and changed the title to Belcolore ('beautiful colour') but it has retained it's the title Monna Vanna.

Astarte Syriaca

Modelled by Jane Morris, and her daughter May (left attendant). Rossetti was having an adulterous affair with Jane and she stayed with him at Aldwick Lodge from November to march 1875-6, except for Christmas. The two male figures imply that Jane or women have the power to ensnare men. Astarte was a Semitic goddess or fertility, sexuality and war. Astarte appears in Assyrian, Babylonian, Syrian, Hebrew and Etruscan legends. The Greeks and Romans sometimes equated Aphrodite (Venus) with Astarte.

Disraeli too office as head of the first Conservative government since 1846 and published the popular novel Tancred in which the beautiful Queen Astarte rules the ancient people living around Antioch in Syria. Astarte was often seen as the Syrian Venus.

Asherah or Astarte denounced the Old Testament prophets. Rossetti again invokes the divine power of women which can be seen as a denunciation of patriarchal Victorian Britain.

It is possible all these paintings represents Rossetti's fear of women and it would be interesting to fin out more about his relationship with his mother.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882)
Venus Verticordia
1864-1868
Russell-Cotes Art Gallery, Bournemouth

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), Venus Verticordia, 1864-1868, Russell-Cotes Art Gallery, Bournemouth

Venere Verticordia sits at the centre of **Rossetti**'s shift toward sumptuous Venetian colour and densely decorative surface — a shift that ended his friendship with **Ruskin**. Ruskin wrote to Rossetti that the painting's flowers showed "enormous power" yet revealed "conditions of non-sentiment which underlie all you are doing now," meaning that Rossetti's female figures, from **Bocca Baciata** through to **Astarte Syriaca**, project worldliness, indifference, and a paradoxical spiritual authority. The title translates as "turner of hearts," though whether toward desire or chastity remains deliberately unresolved. The face was repainted in **1868** using **Alexa Wilding**, who modelled for more of Rossetti's finished works than Elizabeth Siddal or Jane Morris combined. Wilding, a Surrey-born dressmaker when Rossetti found her, died in 1884 having become a property holder — a remarkable trajectory. The painting's erotic charge drew the attack of **Robert Buchanan**, whose article **"The Fleshly School of Poetry"** appeared in the Contemporary Review in **1871**, condemning Rossetti, Swinburne,

and Morris for privileging body over soul. Rossetti's rebuttal, "The Stealthy School of Criticism," and Swinburne's "Under the Microscope" both appeared the following year, making this controversy one of Victorian culture's sharpest debates about art, flesh, and morality.

Notes

Rossetti and 'The Fleshly School of Poetry'

This painting is sometimes mentioned as marking a turning point in Rossetti's use of sumptuous Venetian colours and an increase in decorative accessories. These changes in his style were unacceptable to Ruskin and disagreements about this painting led to them breaking up.

It was repainted with Alexa Wilding's face in 1868.

Ruskin was disturbed by the flowers and wrote,

They were wonderful to me in their realism, awful – I can use no other word – in their coarseness: showing enormous power, showing certain conditions of non-sentiment which underlie all you are doing now'.

What he meant by this was that Rossetti's female figures in for example, Bocca Baciata, The Blue Bower, Fair Rosamond, The Beloved, and Monna Vanna to a late work like Astarte Syriaca are all of powerful female figures, great worldliness and indifference and paradoxically spiritual presence. One art historian describes this figure

'The Venus of this picture is no Aphrodite, fresh and white and jubilant from the foam of Idalian seas, nor is she Love incarnate or human passion; but she is a queen of Love who loves not herself, a desire that is unsatiable and remorseless, absolute, supreme. . . . She is the Lust of the Flesh that perisheth not, though around her loves and lives and dreams are evermore becoming as nought"

The title means 'turner of hearts' but even this is ambiguous. Does it mean turn to chastity?

Robert Buchanan criticized his poetry as he had not seen his paintings but by implication his criticism applies to the paintings. Buchanan wrote an article called 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' (The Contemporary Review, October 1871) in which he criticized Rossetti, William Morris and Charles Swinburne for

being too sensual and praising the body rather than the soul. The article was expanded into a pamphlet in 1872, but he subsequently withdrew from the criticisms it contained, and it is chiefly remembered by the replies it evoked from Rossetti in a letter to the Athenaeum (December 16, 1871), entitled The Stealthy School of Criticism, and from Swinburne in Under the Microscope (1872).

Notes

The model for this painting was Alexa Wilding (born Alice, c. 1845-8 to 1884). She sat for more of Rossetti finished works than Elizabeth Siddal, Jane Morris and Fanny Cornforth. She came from a working class family and was born in Surrey and when Rossetti met her she was a dressmaker and wanted to become an actress. Wilding never married and on the 1881 census is listed with two children but they are thought to be those of his uncle and aunt who died at the same time. By this time she was a landlady and property holder, a considerable achievement.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882)
The Beloved
1865-1866
Tate Britain, London

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), The Beloved, 1865-1866, Tate Britain, London

This painting draws its entire symbolic programme from scripture. **Rossetti** inscribed the frame with verses from the Song of Solomon and Psalms, framing the subject not merely as a bride but as a sacred figure awaiting union. The **Peruvian headdress** and gown cut from **Japanese kimono fabric** are far from decorative accident — they signal Rossetti's deliberate orientalism, coding the bride as exotic and spiritually elevated within the Victorian imagination. **George Rae** commissioned the work in **1863** for three hundred pounds, though Rossetti did not complete it until the winter of **1865 to 1866**. The main figure was modelled by **Marie Ford**, whose physical presence Rossetti specifically sought out. **Ellen Smith** sat for the bridesmaid on the left. The small attendant boy at the lower edge deserves close attention. Rossetti recruited him from outside a hotel, choosing him explicitly to provide a chromatic contrast with the bride's pale skin. He replaced an earlier biracial girl Rossetti had originally used — a substitution that reveals how deliberately the composition was constructed around

racial contrast as a pictorial device rather than as any incidental detail. The painting's beauty and its troubling calculations cannot be separated.

Notes

Inspired by the Song of Solomon from the Bible.

Her headdress is Peruvian and her dress is made from Japanese kimono fabric.

Rossetti inscribed the frame:

My beloved is mine and I am his. (The Song of Solomon 2:16).

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine. (The Song of Solomon 1:2).

She shall be brought unto the King in raiment of needlework: the virgins her companions that follow her shall be brought unto thee. (Psalms45:14)

It was commissioned in 1863 by George Rae for £300 but was not finished until the winter of 1865-6.

The model was Marie Ford whose beauty Rossetti admired. The virgin bridesmaid on the left was modelled by Ellen Smith, the young boy was found outside a hotel and was added for his colour to act as a contrast with the bride’s skin. The boy replaced a young biracial girl that Rossetti first used.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882)
Proserpine
1873-77
Tate Britain, London

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), Proserpine, 1873-77, Tate Britain, London

Dante Gabriel Rossetti spent seven years across eight separate canvases working through this subject, and what you see here is the seventh version. The **eighth and final version, completed in 1882**, now hangs in Birmingham Art Gallery. He painted these works during a period of acute mental instability and obsessive longing for **Jane Morris**, and that biographical pressure is inseparable from the image itself. Rossetti described his **Proserpine** as glancing furtively toward a sudden gleam of light from the upper world, immersed in thought, the **pomegranate** half-raised in her hand. The **ivy branch** behind her, he wrote, symbolises clinging memory. An **incense burner** marks her status as a goddess, but the atmosphere is one of captivity rather than divinity. The myth driving the image is Roman by way of **Ovid**: **Pluto** abducts Proserpine and tricks her into eating pomegranate seeds, binding her to the underworld for six months of every year. Her mother **Ceres** withholds the harvest in grief, and the earth turns barren. Rossetti paired the painting with his own sonnet, inscribed top right,

which ends: *Woe me for thee, unhappy Proserpine.* The myth of enforced return and frustrated longing suited his purposes exactly.

Notes

Rossetti worked for seven years on eight separate canvases before he finished the painting. This is the seventh version. The eighth and final version of 1882 is in Birmingham Art Gallery. He painted it a time when his mental health was precarious and his love for Jane Morris obsessive.

A drawing of Proserpine in coloured chalks fetched £3,274,500 at auction in London in 2013.

Notes

Rossetti wrote:

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 sight 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

He was a poet and his accompanying sonnet (top right) is of longing:

Afar away the light that brings cold cheer
Unto this wall, – one instant and no more
Admitted at my distant palace-door
Afar the flowers of Enna from this drear
Dire fruit, which, tasted once, must thrall me here.
Afar those skies from this Tartarean grey
That chills me: and afar how far away,
The nights that shall become the days that were.
Afar from mine own self I seem, and wing
Strange ways in thought, and listen for a sign:
And still some heart unto some soul doth pine,
(Whose sounds mine inner sense in fain to bring,

Continually together murmuring) —
‘Woe me for thee, unhappy Proserpine'.

Proserpine

Proserpine or Proserpina was a Roman goddess whose cult and myths were based on the Greek Persephone and her mother Demeter. She was abducted by the gods of the underworld and her mother Cere frantically searched for her. In the Greek version she was abducted by Hades or Pluto. Hades was a dark, unsympathetic figure but in the Pluto version they formed a divine couple the ruled the underworld together.

In the Roman version Ovid describes how Venus, in order to bring love to Pluto, sent her son Amor also known as Cupid to hit Pluto with one of his arrows. Proserpina was in Sicily, at the Pergusa Lake near Enna, where she was playing with some nymphs and collecting flowers, when Pluto came out from the volcano Etna with four black horses. He abducted her in order to marry her and live with her in the underworld of which he was the ruler.

Her mother Ceres, also known as Demeter, the goddess of agriculture or of the Earth, went looking for her in vain to every corner of the earth, but was not able to find anything but a small belt that was floating upon a little lake (made with the tears of the nymphs). In her desperation Ceres angrily stopped the growth of fruits and vegetables, bestowing a malediction on Sicily. Ceres refused to go back to Mount Olympus and started walking on the Earth, making a desert at every step.

Worried, Jupiter sent Mercury to order Pluto (Jupiter's brother) to free Proserpina. Pluto obeyed, but before letting her go he made her eat six pomegranate seeds, because those who have eaten the food of the dead could not return to the world of the living. This meant that she would have to live six months of each year with him, and stay the rest with her mother. This story was undoubtedly meant to illustrate the changing of the seasons: when Ceres welcomes her daughter back in the spring the earth blossoms, and when Proserpina must be returned to her husband it withers.

In another version of the story, Proserpina ate only four pomegranate seeds, and she did so of her own accord. When Jupiter ordered her return, Pluto struck a deal with Jupiter, saying that since she had stolen his pomegranate seeds, she must stay with him four months of the year in return. For this reason, in spring when Ceres receives her daughter back, the crops blossom, and in summer they flourish.

In the autumn Ceres changes the leaves to shades of brown and orange (her favourite colours) as a gift to Proserpina before she has to return to the underworld. During the time that Proserpina resides with Pluto, the world goes through winter, a time when the earth is barren.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882)
The Blessed Damozel
1875-1878
Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University, Cambridge

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), The Blessed Damozel, 1875-1878, Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University, Cambridge

Dante Gabriel Rossetti painted **The Blessed Damozel** between **1875 and 1878**, now held at the Fogg Museum of Art at Harvard University, basing it on his own poem first published in **1850** in **The Germ**, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's short-lived journal. A replica sold to the collector Frederick Leyland in 1879 hangs today in the Lady Lever Art Gallery. Four stanzas of the poem are inscribed directly onto the frame, binding word and image into a single devotional object. The damozel leans from heaven's gold bar, seven stars in her yellow hair, three lilies in her hand, gazing earthward toward her still-living lover — Rossetti's recurring meditation on longing across the boundary of death. The painting became a target for the social critic and physician **Max Nordau**, born Simon Maximilian Südfeld in 1849. His **1892** book **Degeneration** argued that art shapes a society's moral ideals, and that aesthetically transgressive work therefore corrupts the whole social fabric. Drawing on **Cesare Lombroso's** theories of inherited pathology, Nordau cited the **Pre-Raphaelites** as the original degenerate artists,

diagnosing Rossetti's imagery as symptomatic of mental illness. The irony is sharp: Nordau, a co-founder of the World Zionist Organisation, condemned rising anti-Semitism as itself a product of degeneration, yet his framework was later appropriated by the very movements he opposed.

Notes

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, The Blessed Damozel, 1875-8, Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University

A replica was sold to Frederick Leyland in 1879 and is now in the Lady Lever Art Gallery

Based on one of his best known poems published in the Germ.

The four stanzas are inscribed on the frame,

The blessed damozel leaned outFrom the gold bar of Heaven;Her eyes were deeper than the depthOf waters stilled at even;She had three lilies in her hand,And the stars in her hair were seven.

Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,No wrought flowers did adorn,But a white rose of Mary's gift,For service meetly worn;Her hair that lay along her backWas yellow like ripe corn.

Herseemed she scarce had been a dayOne of God's choristers;The wonder was not yet quite goneFrom that still look of hers;Albeit, to them she left, her dayHad counted as ten years.

(To one, it is ten years of years.. . . Yet now, and in this place,Surely she leaned o'er me—her hairFell all about my face. . . .Nothing: the autumn fall of leaves.The whole year sets apace.)

Degeneration, Max Nordau

Appeared in English two months before Oscar Wilde was found guilty for homosexual acts.

Influenced by Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) who thought criminality was inherited.

He said an age derives its ideals of morality and beauty from art. If they are

absurd or anti-social or amoral they corrupt the whole of society.

In France, 'a contempt for the traditional views of custom and morality.' He sees it as a sort of decadence, a world-weariness, and the wilful rejection of the moral boundaries governing the world.

Condemns rising anti—Semitism of the late 19th century as a product of degeneration although, ironically, it was the Nazi Party that took up the concept of degeneration.

He saw degeneration as a mental illness and cited the first degenerate artists as the Pre-Raphaelites.

Max Simon Nordau

Born Simon Maximilian Südfeld; July 29, 1849 – January 23, 1923, was a Zionist leader, physician, author, and social critic.

He was a co-founder of the World Zionist Organization together with Theodor Herzl, and president or vice president of several Zionist congresses.

The poem The Blessed Damozel was started in 1847 and first published in 1850 in The Germ. It was perhaps his most important work.

The poem was criticized in Degeneracy (1892) by Max Nordau as exhibiting mental illness.

Albert Moore (1841-1893)
Trunk of an Ash Tree with Ivy
1857
Watercolour

Albert Moore (1841-1893), Trunk of an Ash Tree with Ivy, 1857

Albert Joseph Moore was born in York in 1841, the thirteenth son of the portrait painter **William Moore**, and showed exceptional ability from childhood, winning a medal from the Department of Science and Art before his twelfth birthday. This watercolour, painted when he was sixteen, reflects the influence of **John Ruskin** and the **Pre-Raphaelites**, with the ash tree a subject Ruskin himself recommended as a study in natural form. Moore entered the **Royal Academy Schools** in 1858, and by the following year was travelling in France with the architect **William Eden Nesfield**. Through the 1860s he designed tiles, wallpaper, and stained glass for **Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co.**, while simultaneously deepening his study of antique sculpture, above all the **Elgin Marbles**. That immersion shaped his mature style: single female figures in neo-classical drapery, rendered through finely calibrated colour harmonies rather than narrative content. His close friendship with **Whistler** proved mutually formative during this period. Moore's commitment to purely decorative beauty placed him at the centre of the **Aesthetic Movement**, yet despite this distinction, he was never

elected even an Associate of the Royal Academy.

Notes

Moore painted this watercolour when he was 16 and it shows the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites and the ash tree is a subject recommended by John Ruskin.

Moore was born and first trained in York followed by the Royal Academy School in 1858 when he was 17.

Albert Joseph Moore (1841-1893)

Moore was born in York the 13th son and 14th child of the well known portrait painter William Moore. Albert Moore was trained in art at school in York and was awarded a medal from the Department of Science and Art at Kensington before his twelfth birthday. He went to London to enter the Royal Academy School in 1858 aged 17. His early works shows the influence of Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites but he loved Classical sculpture and the Elgin marbles in particular. In 1859 he was in France with the architect William Eden Nesfield. The 1860s saw Moore designing tiles, wallpaper and stained glass for Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., and working as an ecclesiastic and domestic mural painter. During this period his works began to take on a markedly neo-classical character, Moore making an extensive study of antique sculpture, particularly the Elgin marbles in the British Museum. His concern for decorative, color harmonies became apparent in his paintings of the mid 1860s onwards. His works, typically single female figures with formalized proportions, neo-classical drapery and floral accessories, established a major strand of the Aesthetic Movement. He was a good friend of Whistler and is thought to have influenced Whistler's work in the late 1860s.

Moore was shy, introverted and a painter's painter. He was of an independent disposition, and relied solely on his own judgment in matters both social and artistic. His somewhat outspoken views proved a bar to his admission into the ranks of the Royal Academy, for which he was many years a candidate, and where his works were long a chief source of attraction. Moore, one of the greatest and most original Victorian artists was not even elected an Associate. Though suffering from a painful and incurable illness, Moore worked up to the last, completing by sheer courage and determination an important picture just before his death.

In the late 1860s many artists were influenced by Japanese art and began to product pictures without a specific subject. They were decorative and subtly coloured and typically showed women in classical dress. The Victorian poet Swinburne said such paintings are the 'worship of things formally beautiful ... their reason for being is simply to be'.

There were many books written about beauty at the time and it was argued that it proved Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theory of natural selection was wrong or at least insufficient to account for all aspects of the natural world. It was not until 1871 that Darwin published Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex that he answered these critics with an explanation of how beauty arose. However, the explanation takes us to far from our subject, which is specifically the rise of the Aesthetic Movement, also called the 'Art for Art's Sake' Movement.

Albert Moore (1841–1893)
Azaleas
1868
Dublin City Gallery, Dublin

Albert Moore (1841–1893), Azaleas, 1868, Dublin City Gallery, Dublin

Transitioning now to Moore's mature practice, **Azaleas**, exhibited in the mid-1860s, established the template he would follow for the rest of his career. The work shows a single classically clad figure beside an azalea bush in a Chinese vase, holding a porcelain bowl — deliberately subjectless, emphatically so. Moore's preparation was methodical. He made multiple nude and draped studies, then constructed what **Robyn Asleson** describes as a system of line arrangement, charting parallels across the composition to, in her words, "accommodate the human body to an abstract, geometric armature generated internally by the composition itself." A nude cartoon was transferred to canvas, then overlaid with a full-scale drapery cartoon, producing the illusion of transparency in the finished cloth. Despite this rigour, **Azaleas** reads as spontaneous. Moore achieved this by treating each brushstroke as a final, unrepeatable mark — advice he later gave his students directly. Eastern influence is legible throughout: the **carp bowl**, the asymmetric geometry of the azalea pot, and yellow butterflies unifying figure and background all invoke **Japanese aesthetics**. **Algernon Charles**

Swinburne praised the painting as pure art-for-art's sake, declaring its only meaning was beauty. Moore had synthesised Greek classicism with Japanese formal principles into something distinctly Victorian.

Notes

See John Nagler, 'The Victorian Web', and Asleson's Albert Moore, the text has been edited,

Once Moore started painting in this style it changed little throughout his life. Azaleas was the first of many deliberately subjectless pictures, showing a single, classically clad figure, standing by an azalea bush in a Chinese vase, holding a porcelain bowl. The life-size work was to be the prototype of numerous female figures. Preparation for the Azaleas was extensive and his abstract methodology was complicated.

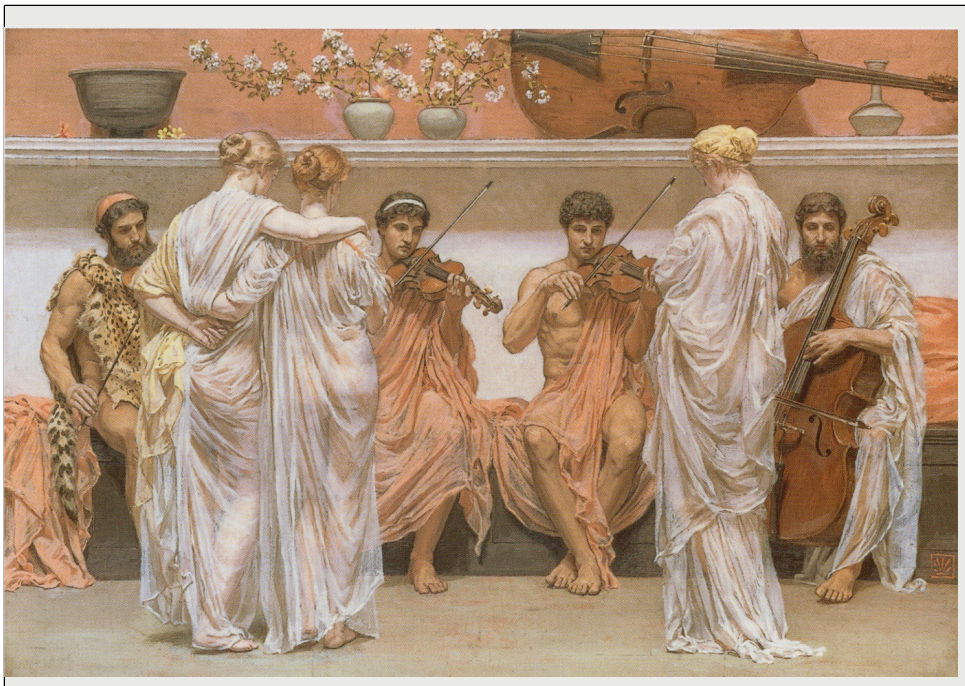
First, in a generic resemblance to the academic methods favoured on the Continent, Moore made numerous small studies of the draped and nude figure.

Second he drew a cartoon that included a "system of line arrangement" by determining "the directions of the more prominent lines of the composition" and charting "a series of parallels to them throughout the drawing". The objective, explains Robert Asleson, was "to accommodate the human body to an abstract, geometric armature, now generated internally by the composition itself, rather than imposed externally by surrounding architectural elements". Moore oriented the figure in relation to these lines, adjusting the placement of the head in half a dozen alternative places before finally settling on what seemed to be the correct orientation.

Thirdly, he transferred the nude cartoon to the final canvas. The outline was fleshed out in oil colours then laden with a full scale drapery cartoon, thus enhancing the appearance of transparency. In spite of the meticulous preparations for Azaleas, it has a remarkably fresh and spontaneous look. Moore accomplished this feat by attempting to make each stroke perfect and avoiding two passes of the brush where one would suffice. "Spend an hour if necessary thinking over a touch," he later advised his students, "but put it on in an instant as soon as you have made up you mind about it". The long brush strokes of the robe gently contrast with the energetic brushwork of the azalea. In fact, the technique emulated the fresco, with which he had experimented with a few years earlier.

Although the woman's figure, pose, and drapery bear obvious classical Grecian inspiration, other aspects of the painting reveal Eastern influences. The carp bowl held in the woman's arms and the asymmetric geometric pattern of the azalea pot are reminiscent of Japanese art. Another Japanese element, the yellow butterflies flitting about, help integrate the woman's yellow dress into the predominately white background. The light colours are deliberately Whistlerish, and seem, to paraphrase Whistler, as if there were embroidered on the canvas, appearing here and there in the same way a thread appears in embroidery. In true Japanese fashion, repetition not contrast distinguishes Azaleas.

Although some critics received Azaleas with minimal enthusiasm, they grudging admitted the beauty of Moore's picture. Curious and devoid of any narrative, one critic still found it "brimful of undeniable talent — of genius almost — but daringly eccentric in design and execution". But it was the Pre-Raphaelites who proclaimed Azaleas one of the key pictures of the year. Arch-aesthetic Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) praised Azaleas as an instance of pure art-for-art's sake: "The melody of color, the symphony of form is complete: one more beautiful thing is achieved, one more delight is born into the world; and its meaning is beauty; and its reason for being is to be". Moore thus reconciled the arts of Japan and Greece, and the aesthetic and classical, in a new Victorian combination.



Albert Moore (1841-1893)
A Quartet, a Painter's Tribute to Music, AD 1868
1868
Private collection

Albert Moore (1841-1893), A Quartet, a Painter's Tribute to Music, AD 1868, 1868, Private collection

When this painting was exhibited at the **Royal Academy** in **1869**, it fired, in **Robyn Asleson**'s words, so many young brains with enthusiasm, inspired so many sonnets, and furnished so many aesthetic drawing rooms. The anomaly of modern musical instruments in an ancient setting puzzled many viewers, yet **Albert Moore** was entirely indifferent to historical accuracy. **Dante Gabriel Rossetti** made this point sharply in defence of Moore's earlier work: whether or not azaleas were known to Grecian ladies are questions of sublime indifference to Mr Moore. The same principle governs this painting entirely. Moore's goal was to produce graceful, decorative compositions without a conventional subject, treating painting as an analogue to music itself. To achieve this, he drew on two formative influences: **Greek sculpture** and **Japanese art**, combining their formal rigour with a subdued colour palette. His process was equally disciplined. He worked through a preliminary sketch, a full-size cartoon, and a transfer method using torn sections of tracing paper.

Crucially, he painted the nude figure first, then laid the drapery over it, ensuring the body beneath retained anatomical truth. This commitment to the nude as a formal rather than narrative device placed Moore at the centre of the Aesthetic Movement.

Notes

The painting makes little sense to modern viewers but in 1869 it inspired young artists. It is not a recreation of a classical scene because of the anomaly of modern instruments. It is a harmonious, decorative design without a subject, like a piece of music itself. Moore revived formal qualities of beauty inspired by the human body and nature.

Of the last painting Rossetti dismissed critics who tried to evaluate its merits base on historical accuracy. They were missing the point. "Whether or not azaleas were known to Grecian ladies, whether or not they came from America," wrote Rossetti, "are questions not difficult of solution, but of sublime indifference to Mr. Moore". The same applies to the musical instruments in this painting.

He was influenced by Greek sculpture and Japanese art.

He had a complex multi-stage process he used to create his work that consisted of a sketch, a full-size cartoon that was transferred and a method of tearing out sections of tracing paper as he added the colours. He first painted the nude figure and then painted the drapery over the top in order to produce an accurate nude form.

The painting of the nude figure became a central project for artists associated with the Aesthetic Movement from the 1860s onwards.

Although this painting makes little sense to the modern viewer when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1869, the painting ‘fired so many young brains with enthusiasm, which inspired so many sonnets, and furnished so many aesthetic drawing rooms’ (Robin Asleson, Albert Moore, 2000). For Moore, producing genuinely authentic ancient settings was of little importance; rather his goal was to produce graceful, elegant paintings without a subject. Known as the quintessential aesthetic painter, Alfred Moore's works sublimate everything to composition and a subdued color palette.

Moore sought to revive the formal qualities responsible for the beauty which the Greeks had drawn from nature and the human body. Moore was greatly

influenced by Greek sculpture and Japanese art. In his biography on Moore, Robyn Asleson comments on Moore's extensive preparatory work.

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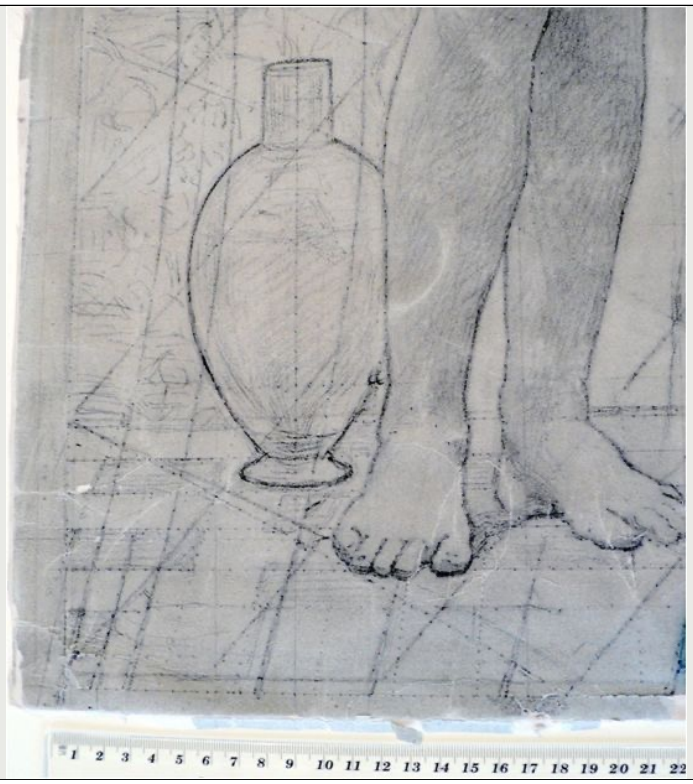


Albert Moore (1841-1893)
Birds of the Air
c. 1878
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Albert Moore (1841-1893), Birds of the Air, c. 1878, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Transitioning now to Moore's working method, we see the bridge between initial idea and finished painting. After producing small preparatory sketches, Moore created a full-scale **cartoon** — the large drawing on the right — which would guide the final composition. Following standard Renaissance and post-Renaissance practice, he drew the figures nude before clothing them, ensuring anatomically convincing results beneath the drapery. Look at the **grid of parallel lines** overlaid on the drawing. Moore used these not through a fixed formula but by eye, aligning curves in ways that generate visual harmony — the arc of the vase echoes the profile of the face, which in turn carries through to the upper right arm. When I examined these drawings firsthand at the **Victoria and Albert Museum**, the surface revealed something intriguing: small holes puncture both the grid lines and the contours of the body. The standard explanation is **pouncing** — pressing charcoal dust through perforations to transfer a design onto canvas — yet there is no trace of charcoal residue here. More puzzling

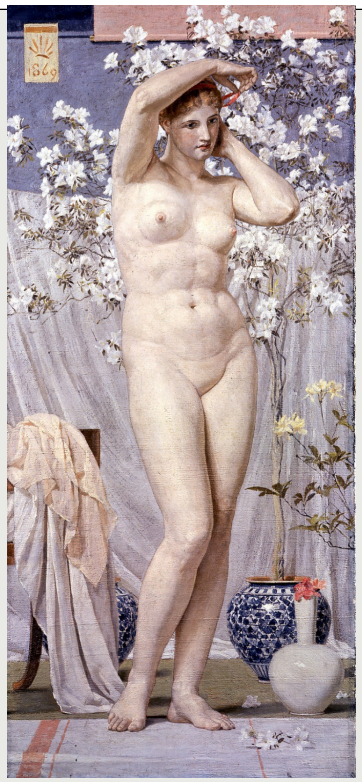
still, many holes fall where no obvious transfer of line was needed, and on several drawings the holes scatter across features with no discernible logic. Albert Moore's transfer method remains, for now, genuinely unresolved.

Notes

This shows part of Moore's complex process. After drawing small sketches he would produce a full-size cartoon shown on the right. Incidentally, most artists would draw nude figures and then clothe them as the final figure was then more accurate and life-like.

Note the parallel lines of the grid that he used to align the elements of the drawing. There is no simple formula to the aligning but note how the curve of the vase aligns with the curve of the profile which aligns with the upper right arm.

I went to the V&A to examine these drawings closely and took this photograph. You can see how the grid and the outline of the body are marked with small holes. It is assumed that these were used to copy the drawing onto the canvas, perhaps by pouncing although there is no evidence of charcoal dust. There are also many holes where there is no apparent reason to transfer the line. On some drawings there are holes scattered apparently randomly over features as well as following the lines.



Albert Moore (1841-1893)
A Venus
c. 1869
York City Art Gallery, York

Albert Moore (1841-1893), A Venus, c. 1869, York City Art Gallery, York

Rossetti's struggle with beauty as spiritual-sensual balance leads us directly to a different solution, one found in texture rather than symbolism. **Albert Moore** approached the problem of the nude by rendering skin with a marble-like quality, invoking classical sculpture and its associations with learning and antiquity. His **A Venus of 1869** allowed the weave of the canvas itself to show through the paint, flattening the figure into something closer to decoration than flesh. The strategy divided opinion sharply. **Sidney Colvin** reviewed it with enthusiasm, while **Atkinson** condemned it as neither marble, paint, nor flesh, but stucco. The critic **Reverend Richard St John Tyrwhitt**, champion of what he termed chaste nudities, identified Moore's method precisely: the coarse canvas ensured the figure read as the picture of a woman rather than as a woman herself. This distinction mattered enormously. At a breakfast party at **Leighton's** house, artists split into two camps: **Moore, Leighton, Poynter**, and **Prinsep** treated flesh as purely decorative, while **Rossetti** and Colvin insisted it should be rendered true to life. By 1871, **Robert Buchanan** had made the

stakes explicit, arguing in the *Contemporary Review* that fleshiness and immorality were one and the same.

Notes

I said earlier about the problem Rossetti had finding an acceptable way to represent beauty as a balance between the spiritual and the sensual.

This is Albert Moore who used another technique for de-sexualising the nude which was to change the texture of the skin. A marble-like skin was associated with classical sculptures and therefore learning and antiquity.

Albert Moore allowed the canvas to show in his A Venus (1869). However, he went too far for some critics who described it as masculine, but it was enthusiastically reviewed by Colvin.

It was a difficult balancing act for the artist; Atkinson described the painting as a 'repellent picture of "Venus," borrowed apparently from the Venus of Milo. Such nudities are quite unobjectionable, because absolutely disagreeable. The figure is neither marble, paint, nor flesh, but stucco'.

Reverend Richard St John Tyrwhitt, champion of what he called 'chaste nudities' made a point that applies to all these techniques, 'We hazard the conjecture that he painted it on such coarse canvas on purpose that the nude figure may look like the picture of a woman, rather than like a woman.'

Notes

At a breakfast party at Leighton's house the subject of painting flesh was discussed. The artists presented divided into two groups, Leighton, Moore, Poynter and Prinsep argued it was merely decorative and Rossetti, Boyce and Colvin argued it should be rendered as characteristically true to life. Colvin fleshiness was a virtue and he argued Moore was forsaking nature in exchanged for refined artificiality and he said Moore's A Venus 'whether this purely decorative system is adequate for the painting of human flesh.'

In 1871, Robert Buchanan argued in 'The Fleshly School of painting' (Contemporary Review) that 'fleshliness' should be equated with immorality.

If female physical beauty did evolve from male mating preferences it could correspond to traits associated with reproductive success. This is known as

the signal theory of beauty. We respond to certain signals that suggest reproductive success. One of these is the waist to hip ratio. In men it is 80-90% and in women 70%. If we examine film stars such as Audrey Hepburn, Marilyn Munroe, Playboy bunnies and Miss Americas the ratio is from 68% to 72%. And this ratio best predicates what people of all ages, genders and races find attractive.

This is A Venus by Alfred Moore. So what is the waist to hip ratio? It is a surprisingly high 75%, approaching the male body form.

Moore and other artists were negotiating a maze of desire and impropriety by painting the nude in such a way that it looked like pigment on canvas and so emphasized the decorative beauty of the image while minimizing the danger of it being associated with sexual desire. The artist and the viewer therefore had to negotiate symbolic associations, such as a classical setting, that enabled the two aspects to be socially segregated.

Barbie (current model) has a waist to hip ratio of 66%, pre-1997 it was 54.5%

Venus de Medici is 38”-32”-42” so has a waist to hip ratio of 72%

Lily Langtry was 37”-18”-39”, so was 46% (57% later in life)

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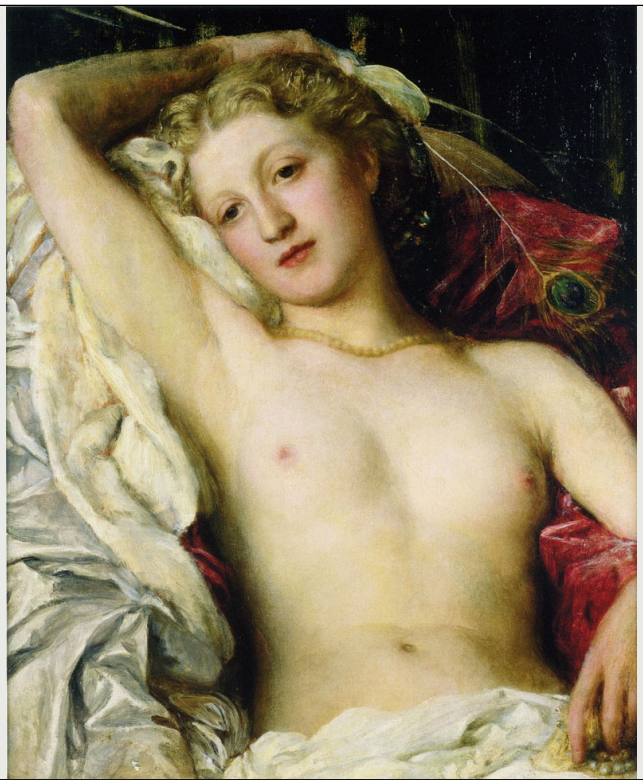


George Frederic Watts (1817-1904)
A Study with Peacock Feathers
1862
Private collection

George Frederic Watts (1817-1904), A Study with Peacock Feathers, 1862, Private collection

George Frederic Watts's *A Study with Peacock Feathers*, painted in 1862, sits at an uncomfortable intersection of aesthetics, science, and Victorian propriety. The peacock feather, a defining icon of the Aesthetic Movement, carried genuine intellectual weight: critics of Darwin repeatedly cited the peacock's tail as evidence against natural selection, making the bird a symbol charged with debates about beauty itself. Watts's semi-nude figure draws directly on that charged symbolism. Writing in *The Athenaeum* in 1865, the reviewer praised the work's extraordinary merit, singling out what he called the bust's virginal character, the subject's chaste features, and her girlish purity. We must recognise that for Victorian audiences, those words signalled innocence rather than provocation — pre-pubescent girlhood read as the opposite of sexual suggestion. That reading only held, however, when a nude met a strict set of unwritten conventions. To be acceptable, a female nude had to be classical, mythological, or biblical in framing; impermeable and motionless, resembling marble rather

than flesh; passive, idealised, and averted in gaze. The body itself had to be generalised — no identifying marks, no trace of the working-class model beneath. Not every critic granted Watts that exemption, and a pointed public debate followed.

Notes

This semi-nude figure, George Frederic Watts's A Study with Peacock Feathers, 1862, poses a bigger problem.

The peacock feather was a major icon of the Aesthetic Movement and I believe it was related to the scientific study of beauty as the peacock was one of the primary example s Darwin's critics used against his theory of natural selection.

It was described by The Athenaeum (1865, 'Winter Exhibition', Royal Academy) as a work of extraordinary merit and beauty, the critic wrote about 'the superb treatment of the bust, its virginal character' and the 'chaste features of the woman'. He also praised her 'girlish purity'.

We must recognise that in the Victorian period, a pre-pubescent girl was pure and virginal and therefore not suggestive.

Female nudes were acceptable during the Victorian period if they loosely followed certain unwritten guidelines, a convention for painting an acceptable nude. It had to be:

Classical, mythological, historical or biblical (suggested by the surroundings or symbolism)

Impermeable (hard and unyielding, like marble as we saw with Albert Moore's painting)

Motionless (like a statue)

Passive, not exciting carnal desire or emotion

Doesn't meet your gaze (so demure and pure)

Generalized (not a specific woman)

Idealised (no marks or moles, the bodies of careworn working class models were altered to look perfect and unblemished)

In summary, a female nude was acceptable if there was a classical element and it could be seen as pure.

Not all critics agreed and a debate raged in the press.

Alexandre Cabanel (1823-1889)
The Birth of Venus
1863
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Alexandre Cabanel (1823-1889), The Birth of Venus, 1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Alexandre Cabanel's *The Birth of Venus*, shown at the **Paris Salon of 1863**, arrived in a year so saturated with nude paintings that critics dubbed it the Year of the Venuses. **Napoleon III** purchased it immediately, cementing Cabanel's official favour, and the same year Cabanel was appointed professor at the **École des Beaux-Arts**. When the painting travelled to the French Gallery on Pall Mall in **1869**, the response in Britain was sharply different. *The Times* censured it on the 7th of April, writing that it treated the nude less for the gallery than the boudoir, overstepping the fine line which separates the sensuous from the sensual, though in its most dainty and delicate form. That distinction mattered enormously: British nudes were rarely labelled sensual, a term critics reserved for French paintings, loading it with associations of moral looseness. Cabanel's Venus was widely celebrated in Paris, yet that same continental admiration made British reviewers more suspicious, not less. The tension between official approval and moral anxiety would intensify dramatically when **Édouard**

Manet unveiled *Olympia* — a work that made Cabanel's Venus look positively decorous by comparison.

Notes

This was shown in Paris Salon in 1863, known as the 'Year of the Venuses' because of the number of nudes on show. It was purchased by Napoleon III. It was shown in the French Gallery, Pall Mall, in 1869 and was censured by The Times.

Very few British nudes were labelled as sensual, a term that was reserved for French paintings, such as Cabanel's Venus which was censured by The Times on 7 April, 1869,

'It is the nude treated less for the gallery than the boudoir, and seems to us to overstep the fine line which separates the sensuous from the sensual, though it is sensualism in its most dainty and delicate form'.

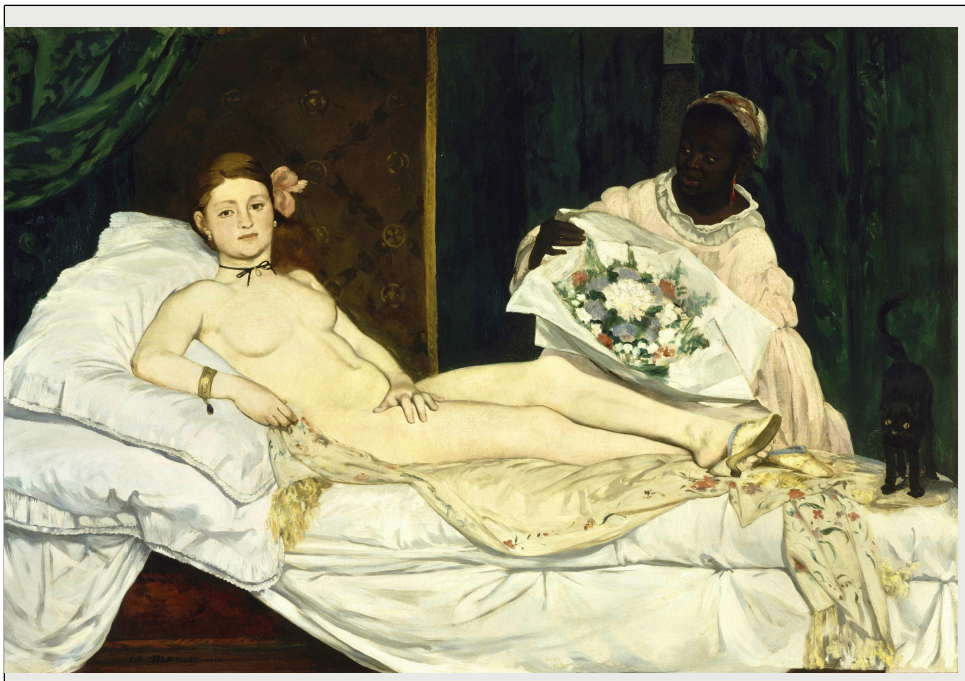
However, it was widely admired in Paris and Cabanel was made a professor of the École des Beaux-Arts the same year.

What was to cause a scandal in Paris was Manet's Olympia…

Notes

The Times critic went on to say, 'Mr Cabanel's Parisian Aphrodite makes no aim at that robust and chastened beauty of form and that grandeur of colour that lifts the Venuses of Titian and his Venetian contemporaries into a region from which impure suggestion is banished, except for the impure.'

The Society of Women Artists 153rd Exhibition at the Mall Gallery removed a painting by Leena McCall, Portrait of Ms Ruby May, Standing that showed pubic hair in July 2014. It was described as 'too pornographic and disgusting'. Perhaps more controversially she was smoking a pipe. The breasts of the woman in the painting were covered but it ass replaced by a nude.



Édouard Manet (1832–1883)
Olympia
1863
130.5 x 190 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Édouard Manet (1832–1883), Olympia, 1863, 130.5 x 190 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Manet's Olympia, shown at the **Paris Salon of 1865**, provoked one of the most ferocious critical responses of the nineteenth century. Modelled closely on **Titian's Venus of Urbino** of **1538**, it nonetheless shattered every convention that made the earlier nude acceptable. Where Titian's figure reclines in a dream of classical distance, Manet's Olympia — painted from the model **Victorine Meurent** — meets the viewer's gaze directly, flatly, without apology. Critics reached for animal comparisons: a female gorilla, a monkey on a bed, a grotesque in india rubber. The name Olympia was Parisian slang for a prostitute. The canvas scale, over 130 centimetres tall and nearly 190 wide, belonged by convention to history painting, not to a scene this naked in its modernity. **Charles Baudelaire** considered thinness more indecent than fullness, and Olympia's lean body unsettled the period's expectations of womanly abundance. Yet **G. F. Watts** painted similarly slight figures in London and faced no such fury — his social respectability shielded him. Beauty, then, is not a fixed quality but a

judgement shaped by convention, by the reputation of the artist, and by the social anxieties of the viewer.

Notes

You could go too far even in Paris where Manet was censured for his Olympia in 1865.

Although it was modelled after Titian's Venus of Urbino (1538) it created a scandal. The majority of critics attacked the painting with unmitigated disgust…: "What is this odalisque with the yellow belly, ignoble model dredged up from who knows where?" [And] "The painter's attitude is of inconceivable vulgarity", that 'female gorilla', 'a grotesque in India rubber … a monkey on a bed'.

A real woman looks out of the painting and there is no attempt to suggest a historical or mythological event. The name Olympia was associated with prostitutes. It is a large canvas (130.5x190cm) that is normally associated with history painting. Finally, Olympia is fairly thin by the artistic standards of the time and her relatively undeveloped body is more girlish than womanly. Charles Baudelaire thought thinness more indecent than fatness. But this reminds us of Watts, so why was that accepted by the more conservative London art world.

The answer, I think is Watt's respectability and reputation.

Beauty depends on social conventions that determines whether it is seen as spiritual or sensual but, as Darwin said, bodily beauty has evolved through sexual selection and so is inherently sensual.

Let us consider the other link between Darwin and art – the idea of progress, and the opposite degeneration.

Notes

The models were Victorine Meurent and Laure.

Frederic Leighton (1830-1896)
Self-portrait
1880
Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Frederic Leighton (1830-1896), Self-portrait, 1880, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Frederic Leighton trained across Berlin, Florence, and Paris through the late 1850s, meeting **Ingres**, **Delacroix**, **Corot**, and **Millet** before returning to England as a thoroughly cosmopolitan figure. That cosmopolitanism defined him throughout his career — and attracted suspicion. His first biographer, **Emilie Barrington**, noted in 1906 that his gesture and appearance were "not emphatically English," and **George du Maurier** openly speculated about foreign or Jewish ancestry. Yet Leighton rose to the summit of the British art establishment. He became President of the **Royal Academy in 1878** and held the role until his death, receiving a knighthood and later a baronetcy. This portrait was made at the moment of that ascent. He wears his Oxford Doctor of Civil Law robes and the gold medal of the Royal Academy presidency — no brushes, no palette. Behind him sits a fragment of the **Parthenon frieze**, signalling his conviction that **Hellenistic classicism** represented ideal, archetypal beauty. The suffused, shadowless light and subtle colouring align him with the **Aesthetic Movement** rather

than Pre-Raphaelite intensity. Leighton held that art should inspire and enlighten, not moralize — positioning himself between the opposing poles of Whistler and Ruskin.

Notes

Leighton was born in Scarborough and went to school in London but his artistic training was on the continent in Berlin, Florence and Paris (1855-1859). He could speak French, German, Italian and Spanish and travelled to North Africa and the Middle East. In Paris he met Ingres, Delacroix, Corot and Millet and so when he returned to England it was as a cosmopolitan artist with a wealth of experience.

He associated with the pre-Raphaelites and from 1864 with the Royal Academy when he was made an Associate. He became its President in 1878 to his death in 1896 (18 years), knighted in 1878 and made a baronet in 1886. This was painted when he had just become President and shows him as a sophisticated and cosmopolitan artist. He is dressed as a Doctor of Oxford University (conferred in Civil Law in 1879) and is wearing the gold medal of the President of the Royal Academy. There are no tools of the artist but behind him is a part of the Parthenon frieze (part of the 'Elgin marbles' collection that was acquired by Lord Elgin between 1801 and 1805). The more subtle colouring is typical of the Aesthetic Movement compared to the stark, bright colours of the Pre-Raphaelites. There are no harsh shadows and highlights but a suffused light spreads a glow of calm reason across the surface.

His beard accentuates his masculinity although the beard had mixed associations. He was noted for his noble appearance, superhuman energy and exquisite artistic talent. He supported students with energy and fought every one's cause better than they could fight their own. He never married and rumours abound about an illegitimate child with a model or his supposed homosexuality but we may never know as he left no diaries or letters.

Leighton was to some extent an outsider and his cosmopolitan manners caused many to question his Englishness. Leighton's first biographer, Emilie Barrington, wrote in 1906 'his rapid utterance, his picturesque gesture, his very appearance were not emphatically English. Certain Englishmen who knew Leighton felt out of sympathy with him for this reason and had difficulty in recognising him as one of themselves'. George du Maurier was 'convinced that in Leighton existed indications of foreign or Jewish blood but was quite

unable to discover any facts in support of this theory and was troubled on this point'.

His house in Holland Park was designed by George Aitchison (1825-1910) and over thirty years it became a temple to aestheticism and it is now a museum and a listed building.

He was the first painter to be made a peer but has the dubious honour of being the shortest lived peerage. He was made a Baron Leighton on 24 January 1896 and he died the next day of angina.

He is buried in the crypt under St. Pauls cathedral with Sir Joshua Reynolds and Turner.

He felt that Hellenistic Greek classicism represented ideal, archetypical beauty. He did not attempt to recreate an historically accurate past but emphasized the aesthetic over the didactic. He did not believe it was the purpose of art to convey moral values but he thought it should inspire and enlighten. In other words he created a balance between the extremes of Whistler and Ruskin.

He idealised the past and presented a ‘Golden Age’ of ancient Greece that reflected back and enhanced the glory of the British Empire.

Frederic Leighton (1830-1896)
Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna
1853–1855, 231.8 x 520.7 cm
The National Gallery, London

Frederic Leighton (1830-1896), Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna, 1853–1855, 231.8 x 520.7 cm, The National Gallery, London

Frederic Leighton's painting of 1855 depicts a procession through the streets of Florence, drawn directly from **Giorgio Vasari's** account in his Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects — the text that established art history as a discipline. Vasari describes the **Rucellai Madonna** being carried from **Cimabue's** house to Santa Maria Novella, the city erupting in celebration. Leighton shows Cimabue crowned with laurels, his young pupil **Giotto** beside him, and Charles of Anjou on horseback to the right. Among the crowd stands **Dante**, then a young Florentine poet whose family were staunch Guelphs, supporters of the Papacy in its long struggle against the Holy Roman Emperor. Dante was already devoted to Beatrice Portinari, the woman he had loved since childhood and whose death in 1290 turned him towards the spiritual vision that would produce the Divine Comedy. Leighton painted the work in Rome while still in his early twenties, and when it was shown at the **Royal Academy in 1855**, Queen Victoria purchased it on opening day for six hundred guineas, with Prince

Albert's enthusiastic encouragement. It announced Leighton as a major force in British painting immediately.

Notes

National Gallery website,

‘Cimabue's celebrated 'Madonna' is carried in procession through the streets of Florence; in front of the 'Madonna', and crowned with laurels, walks Cimabue with his pupil Giotto; behind are Arnolfo de Lapo, Gaddo Gaddi, Andrea Tafi, Nicola Pisano, Buffalmacco, Simone Memmi. In the right corner is Dante.

This was Leighton's first major work, painted in Rome. It was shown at the Academy in 1855. It was an immediate success, and Queen Victoria bought it for 600 guineas on opening day. She recorded in her diary: 'There was a very big picture by a man called Leighton. It is a beautiful painting, quite reminding one of a Paul Veronese, so bright and full of light. Albert was enchanted with it - so much so that he made me buy it.'

The subject is from Vasari's account of how the 'Rucellai Madonna' was carried from the house of the 13th century painter Cimabue to the church of S. Maria Novella in Florence. Vasari also mentions Charles of Anjou, King of Naples, and Leighton has shown him on horseback on the right of the composition.’

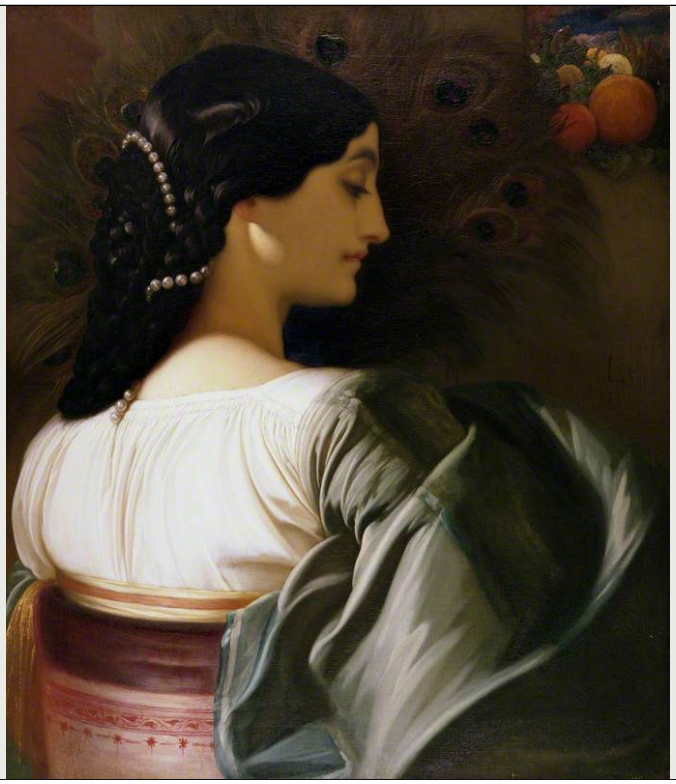
Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574)

Italian painter and architect who wrote Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, considered the foundation of art-historical writing.

He was very successful in his lifetime and built a fortune.

Dante degli Alighieri (c. 1265-1321), MAJOR Italian poet and author of the Divine Comedy. Dante, Petrach and Boccaccio are considered ‘the three fountains’ and Dante the ‘father of the Italian language’. Dante’s family supported the Guelph who supported the Papacy and opposed the Ghibellines who supported the Holy Roman Emperor. He was promised in marriage to Gemma di Manetto Donati, but by this time Dante had fallen in love with Beatrice Portinari (known also as Bice), whom he first met when he was only nine. He frequently saw her after age 18 and set an example of

‘courtly love’. When she died in 1290 he dedicated himself to religious studies.



Frederick Leighton (1830-1896)
An Italian Lady
1859
Royal Collection

Frederick Leighton (1830-1896), An Italian Lady, 1859, Royal Collection

Within the Aesthetic Movement, **Frederic Leighton** stands apart for the cool psychological tension he achieves through studied dispassion rather than sentiment. When Leighton arrived in Rome during the winter of 1858 to 1859, he encountered **Nanna Risi**, an Italian model already sitting for at least nine artists across the city. He painted her four times, and one of those works entered the **Royal Collection** through a remarkable sequence of events: the Prince of Wales visited Leighton's studio and wished to purchase it, but the painting was already promised to George de Monbrison. Monbrison graciously relinquished it, and Leighton compensated him with a copy now held at the **Leighton House Museum** in Kensington. Leighton's European training gave him a technical command rarely found among his English contemporaries, and when the painting reached the **Royal Academy**, one critic described Nanna as coldly beautiful — a phrase that cuts to the heart of it. The contrast between Nanna's intense, smouldering presence and Leighton's emotional detachment generates that taut, poised atmosphere the painting is known for. **Anselm Feuerbach**, by

contrast, fell deeply in love with her and painted her more than twenty times between 1861 and 1865, before their relationship collapsed when she left him for a wealthy Englishman.

Notes

Another artist of the Aesthetic Movement, also painted a beautiful women that is not a portrait. The model is known as Nanna and this painting has an interesting history.

Nanna Risi

This is a portrait or painting of the Italian model Nanna (or Anna) Rici. In 1858 when Leighton met her in Rome she was a well known model and she sat for at least nine artists.

Leighton painted four pictures of her and the German artist Anselm Feuerbach (1829-1880) painted her dozens of times. As far as we know Leighton was not emotional attached to her which gives the paintings an air of coldness. Leighton's European artistic training gave him a technical proficiency not generally found in English painters. His first painting to be displayed in London was bought by the Queen which established his reputation.

Leighton met Nanna during the winter of 1858-9 and painted four pictures including this one in the Royal Collection. The Prince of Wales had stopped at Leighton's studio in Rome and wanted to buy the painting. However, it had already been promised to George de Monbrison but he agreed to give it up to enable the Prince to buy it. Monbrison was so disappointed that Leighton painted a copy which is now in the Leighton Museum in Kensington.

Nanna was tall, heavy set with a temperamental and melancholy disposition. The contrast between her smouldering looks and the artists dispassionate interest accounts for the poised, tense atmosphere. When exhibited at the Royal Academy is received favourable reviews. One critic described her as 'coldly beautiful'.

Anselm Feuerbach did love Nanna but she was married to a cobbler in Trastevere. She left her husband and child for him in 1861 and during the next five years he painted her at least twenty times. He gave her jewellery and insisted his friends treat her as an equal but the cost strained him financially. In May 1865 she ran away with a rich Englishman but soon returned.

However, Feuerbach would not be reconciled with her and when he met her again three years later he had a new model whereas Nanna had come down in the world.

References

See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederic_Leighton,_1st_Baron_Leighton

Frederic Leighton (1830-1896)
Daedalus and Icarus
c. 1869
Private collection

Frederic Leighton (1830-1896), Daedalus and Icarus, c. 1869, Private collection

Frederic Leighton's *Daedalus and Icarus*, painted in 1869, draws on **Ovid's Metamorphoses** to stage one of antiquity's most charged narratives. Daedalus, the cunning inventor who built the labyrinth for King Minos, fashions wings so that he and his son can escape Crete; Icarus, drawn by desire for the heavens, flies too close to the sun, and falls. As **President of the Royal Academy**, Leighton believed English art had to measure itself against Greek classical sculpture, and this painting is his argument made visible. Daedalus is dark-skinned and hunched, absorbed in craft. Icarus stands tall, fair, and radiant, his raised arm echoing the **Augustus of Prima Porta** and, behind it, **Polykleitos's** fifth-century Doryphoros. Icarus gazes inward, transfixed by his own beauty, unaware of what that beauty will cost him. The **Art Journal in 1869** found the result cold — "plastic" and "as sharply cut as marble." Yet that severity was precisely Leighton's point. In his Presidential lectures he argued that art's highest function was not moral instruction but the awakening of sensation that could be

communicated through sight alone. The painting holds hubris and innocence in perfect, unsettling balance.

Notes

This shows one of Leighton's most popular subjects, the classical world and mythology.

Daedalus and Icarus is taken from Ovid's Metamorphosis (VIII) and it shows Daedalus, the great inventor, and his son Icarus who ends up flying too close to the sun.

Leighton was President of the Royal Academy and was interested in elevating English art by basing it on Greek classical art. Leighton uses the story to represent the male nude with full academic treatment. Icarus is absorbed in his own beauty and his pose reflects the statue behind. The colour scheme is dramatic and effective but critics found the overall effect to be 'plastic' and 'as sharply cut as marble' yet the classic beauty was rare in English art (Art Journal, 1869).

Notes

Roman poet Ovid's Metamorphoses. Daedalus created a labyrinth to enable King Minos to hide the shameful Minotaur—the offspring of his wife, Pasiphaë's copulation with a bull which she had been made to love as a punishment by the gods. See Ovid, Metamorphoses, trans. by Anthony S. Kline (University of Virginia)

Daedalus had fled to Crete after killing his nephew Perdix (Talos) because he was so jealous of his nephew's invention of the saw and compasses. In another version Perdix/Talos was saved by Athena and turned into a partridge (Perdix) to save his life.

Minos would not allow Daedalus to leave the island and reveal the secret of the maze, so in order to escape Daedalus invented wings for himself and his son. He warned his son not to fly too high or too low but after they had both flown a long distance Icarus, 'drawn by desire for the heavens', flew too close to the sun, the wax used to hold the feathers to his wings melted and he plunged into the sea and drowned. Icarus's 'desire for the heavens' can be seen as hubris or spiritual longing and Leighton shows him as a hero, with a beautiful and powerful body but with an attitude of innocence and naivety.

Daedalus is literally a ‘cunning worker’ who, like Renaissance man, can be seen as a combination of artist and scientist. He is dark-skinned and hunched over while he works on strapping wings onto his beautiful fair-skinned son Icarus. The Greek Daidalos (Δ**αἰδαλος**) means ‘cunning worker’.

Leighton presents us with an artificial scene that he has skilfully manipulated to balance the figures and the statue with the landscape. The Times described the drapery as ‘the one conspicuous defect’ and ‘deficient in beauty of line, dignity of intention, and truth to nature’. The Examiner pointed out that the drapery appears to hang in the sky as there is no wind to support it; 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy: Third Article', The Times, Saturday, 15 May 1869, p. 12.

The outer edge of the cape mimics a skull.

Icarus is tall, muscular, fair-skinned, and his raised arm suggests the statue of Augustus of Prima Porta although other statues have been suggested as the source. have a similar appearance with short hair, fine features, a straight nose and prominent chin. The statue of Augustus recalls the fifth-century BCE statue of the Spear Bearer or Doryphorus by the sculptor Polykleitos.

Daedalus can be understood in modern terms as a combination of artist and scientist. According to Diodorus, he was the first sculptor to separate the legs, extend the arms and open the eyes and he could therefore be said to be the inventor of sculpture.

The painting could be illustrating the vanity of beauty or the hubris of science or the dangers associated with the scientific endeavour.

In his Presidential lecture Leighton said that it is not the job of art to make any moral points. Art, he said, has a strength that has no rival, which is to awaken sensations ‘directly emotional, and indirectly intellectual which can be communicated only through the sense of sight’.

Frederic Leighton (1830-1896)
Flaming June
c.1895
Museo de Arte de Ponce, Puerto Rico

Frederic Leighton (1830-1896), Flaming June, c.1895, Museo de Arte de Ponce, Puerto Rico

Flaming June, painted in 1895, the year before **Frederic Leighton** died, is widely regarded as the pinnacle of his career. The poisonous oleander branch in the upper right corner draws a deliberate line between sleep and death, connecting the figure to the sleeping nymphs of the classical world whilst shadowing the work with mortality. Leighton made five preparatory studies for the pose, four of them nude. The single draped study is the least convincing of the group, and that contrast illustrates precisely why academic training demanded the nude underdrawing before clothing was added — drapery only reads as natural when the body beneath is fully understood. The angle of the figure's right arm proved the most persistent difficulty across all the studies. The composition invites comparison with **Gustav Klimt**, though the connection is one of visual rhyme rather than direct influence. Where Klimt typically anchors a reclining figure in explicit myth, Leighton offers no particular narrative. This is simply a woman asleep in a pseudo-classical setting, and that openness is the point.

The painting left Britain unnoticed and by 1963 sat forgotten in an Amsterdam gallery. Luis Ferré bought it for a thousand dollars and brought it to the Museo de Arte de Ponce in Puerto Rico, where it remains.

Notes

Considered to be his magnum opus. It evokes the sleeping nymphs of the classical world and the idea of sleep itself. The poisonous oleander branch in the top right signifies the fragile link between sleep and death and this was painted the year before he died.

The figure's pose gave Leighton a great deal of trouble. There are five studies of which the least successful was draped and the others nude. The draped figure looks the least lifelike showing why artists first draw the nude figure and then add clothing. One problem was making the angle of her right arm look natural.

There are similarities with the much later Klimt but Leighton does not suggest any particular mythological narrative to justify the figure. It is just a sleeping woman in a pseudo-classical setting.

Notes

In 1963, Luis A. Ferré, a Puerto Rican industrialist and politician, was on a trip around Europe, buying paintings and sculptures for the Museo de Arte de Ponce in Puerto Rico, which he had founded. In Amsterdam, he found Flaming June abandoned in a corner. The owner said no one was interested in the painting because it was considered too old-fashioned for the time and offered it for $1,000 (£357, £6,657 today; it had failed to sell at auction for $140, £50). Ferré thought it was expensive, they entered into an agreement that Ferré would wire the money for the painting and the man gave his word of not selling it to anyone else. Ferré spent a sleepless night, worried that the gallery owner would not keep his promise and called him in the morning, assuring him that the money would be wired and asking him to keep his promise – which he did, even though other people had already gone to the gallery and liked the painting. Flaming June was taken to the Museo de Arte de Ponce and was prominently displayed. With the renewal of interest in Victorian art, in later years it was also loaned to important expositions around the world. Flaming June was on display at the Museo del Prado in Madrid in

2008 and the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart in Germany in 2009.

A less well known work by Leighton (Bacchante) sold at Christie's in 2012 for £1.16 million.

Danaë's father, King Acrisius, was told Danaë (pronounced 'dan-eye') son would kill him and so he locked her in a bronze tower or cave but Zeus came to her in the form of golden rain (usually shown as golden coins) and she gave birth to Perseus. The king cast them into the sea but Poseidon calmed the waves and they were washed up in another kingdom whose king raised Perseus but then promised not to marry Danaë only if Perseus would bring the head of the Gorgon Medusa which he did using Athena's shield, Hermes's winged sandals and Hade's helmet of invisibility. He brought back the head, then rescued Andromeda and visited the athletic games where he accidentally killed his old father with his javelin (or discus).

Frederic Leighton (1830–1896)
A Girl Feeding Peacocks
c. 1862/3
188 x 160 cm
Private collection

Frederic Leighton (1830–1896), A Girl Feeding Peacocks, c. 1862/3, 188 x 160 cm, Private collection

Closing with Leighton's image, we see how fully the peacock had become the **Aesthetic Movement's** emblematic creature — paired insistently with sunflowers, blue china, and lilies as shorthand for refined sensibility. **Frederic Leighton** fuses female beauty with the peacock's iridescent splendour not as decoration but as argument: beauty justifies itself, requiring no moral or narrative purpose. That claim sat uneasily with **John Ruskin**, whose writings had shaped a generation's visual taste. By **1878**, Ruskin was experiencing acute mental episodes in which the peacock appeared not as a symbol of elegance but as the Devil incarnate. In his own account, he heard what he called the voice of the Demon — that is, the peacock — give forth a loud croak of triumph. The bird that Aestheticism revered, Ruskin's fractured mind condemned. **Laurence Shafe**, writing in the volume edited by **Barbara Larson** and **Sabine Flach** on **Darwin** and theories of aesthetic history, traces how evolutionary thinking reshaped these debates around natural beauty. The peacock's tail, magnificent

precisely because it is costly and purposeless, became the period's perfect emblem. Next week we follow that emblem as Aestheticism crossed from gallery walls into fashion itself.

Notes

The peacock and peacock feathers became one of the symbols of the new aesthetic along with sunflowers, blue china and lilies. Here Leighton has combined female beauty with the symbol of beauty – the peacock. Next week we will explore the way in which the new aesthetic spread to become a fashion statement.

Notes

In 1878 Ruskin was suffering bouts of madness and had hallucinations that included the Devil in the form of a peacock, "I thought I was in a farmyard and that I was impelled by the tyrant Devil to do some fearful wrong, which I strove with all my might and main to resist. But my passionate efforts were to no avail; and every time I did the wrong I heard the voice of the Demon—that is, the peacock—give forth a loud croak of triumph."

Reference

Laurence Shafe, 'Why is the Peacock's Tail so Beautiful?', ed. Barbara Larson, Sabine Flach, Darwin and Theories of Aesthetics and Cultural History

Giulio Romano (1499-1546)
Portrait of a Woman
Royal Collection, Windsor

Giulio Romano (1499-1546), Portrait of a Woman, Royal Collection, Windsor

The woman in the doorway has long been identified as **Isabella d'Este**, but the case is weaker than tradition suggests. Titian painted her twice, and a **Leonardo** drawing confirms her features: round face, low forehead, short neck. The figure here matches none of those. Isabella also would have been fifty when **Giulio Romano** arrived in Mantua, and though the dress pattern is frequently cited as her signature, it was a widespread fashion across northern Italian courts. **Margherita Paleologa**, who married Isabella's son **Federico Gonzaga**, the first Duke of Mantua, is the stronger candidate. Contemporary descriptions give her a long white face and a prominent nose inherited from her father, which aligns more closely with this figure. On that reading, the painting functions as a wedding portrait, with Margherita entering the room whilst the seated figure becomes Isabella d'Este herself, attended by her other daughter-in-law **Isabella of Capua** and a nun. The maid drawing back the curtain adds another layer. That gesture echoes early funerary monuments, most notably the tomb of **Cardinal**

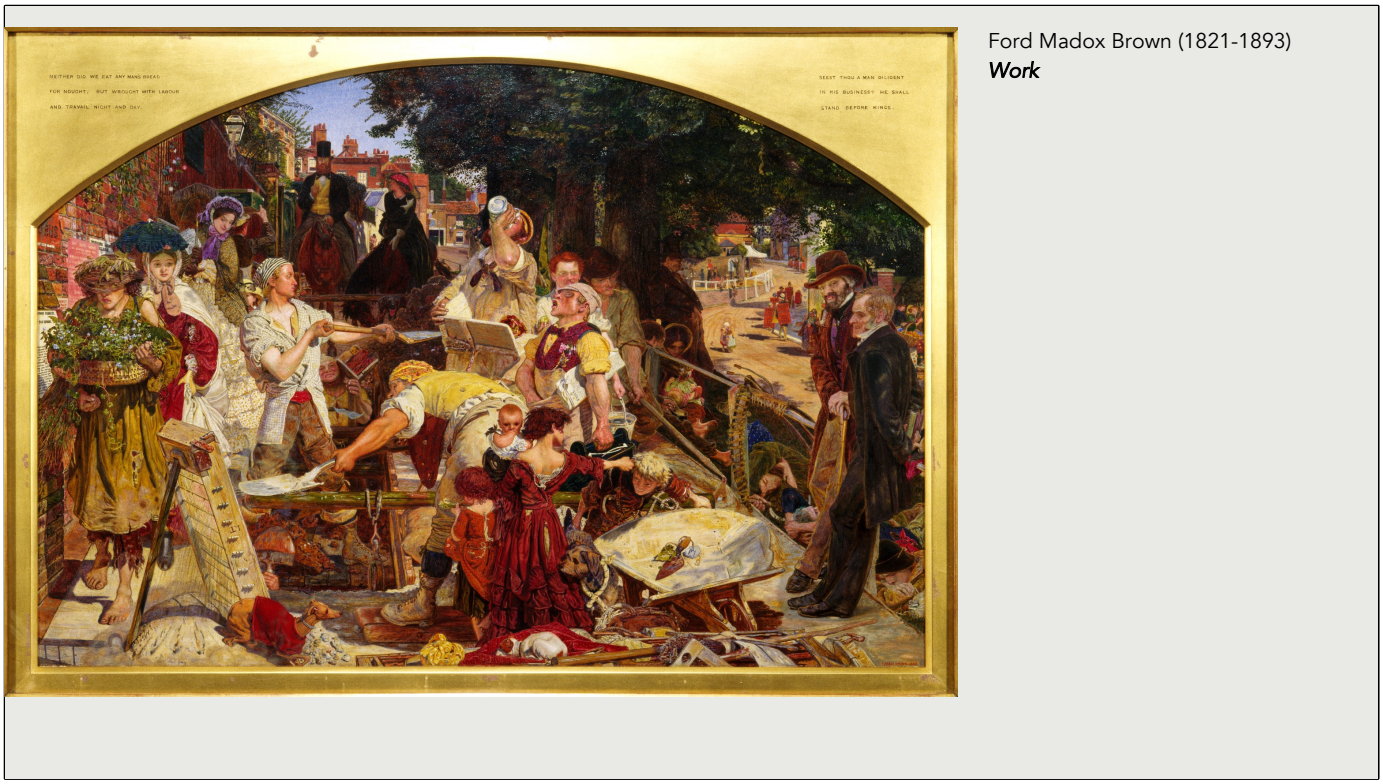
de Braye, who died in 1282, where a curtain is similarly pulled aside to reveal the deceased. The painting may therefore hold both celebratory and commemorative meaning simultaneously.

Notes

Question 1 from Last Week: Who is the Woman in the Doorway?

Traditionally the woman is identified as Isabella d'Este but she was reluctant to have her image reproduced. There are two by Titian and a drawing by Leonardo which show her with a round face, low forehead and short neck. Also, she would have been fifty when Romano arrived in Mantua. The dress pattern is often associated with Isabella d'Este but it was a widespread fashion.

Another possible identification is that she is Margherita Paleologo who married Isabella d'Este's son Federico Gonzaga, the first Duke of Mantua who was described as having a long white face and a nose like her father. It has been suggested it is a wedding portrait and the woman coming in the door is Isabella d'Este attended by her other daughter-in-law Isabella of Capua and a nun. The maid pulling back the curtain suggests early funerary monuments (such as that of Cardinal de Braye who died in 1282).



Ford Madox Brown (1821-1893)
Work

Ford Madox Brown (1821-1893), Work

Returning to the poster on the wall, it offers three interlocking clues: a **bull terrier pup**, a **billy-cock hat**, and **fustian**, the olive-green to burnt-umber corduroy worn by working men. The obvious suspect leaning against the tree satisfies none of these together — the real candidate is the chickweed seller standing directly before the poster, his face turned away from two nearby police officers, one stopping the orange seller, another approaching on horseback along the elm-lined lane. **Ford Madox Brown** later confirmed that in his original design the chickweed seller was explicitly a dog seller, and he noted that without the man's gentle disposition he might have been a burglar — a remark framed, almost certainly, to mislead. Brown's own account holds that the chickweed seller has just passed the pup to the labourer beside him. A further clue on the poster reads **"…ot one eye"**, pointing to a dog with a marked eye. This detail aligns with **Bill Sikes's dog Bull's Eye** from **Dickens's Oliver Twist of 1838**, whose early illustrated versions show the earlier, broader bull terrier head shape — precisely the form Brown paints here, before breeders reshaped the skull during

the 1860s. Sikes himself wore a billy-cock and fustian. The visual evidence locks together.

Notes

The poster on the wall provides three clues, it mentions a 'bull terrier' and the thief dressed in a 'billy-cock' and 'Fustian'. Brown later explained that it is a 'bull terrier pup'. The owner of the puppy is likely to be nearby and 'Fustian' is the colour of working men's corduroy, an olive green to burnt umber. A Billy-cock was a type of hat worn by the lower classes also called a wide-awake hat or Quaker-style hat. The person that satisfies all the requirements is not the obvious candidate leaning against the tree on the right but the chickweed seller by the poster.

Why is he hiding his face? There are two police officers, one of the road stopping the orange seller and the other on horseback coming down the lane next to the elm trees.

Brown suggested later that the chickweed seller has just sold the valuable bull terrier pup to the labourer. In the original design for work the chickweed seller was a dog seller. Brown also wrote that if it were not for the chickweed seller's 'gentle disposition … he might have been a burglar'. This could be a clue and phrased to put us off the scent.

The bull terrier was bred to have a different head during the 1860s but this is the earlier head shape that Bill Sykes dog 'Bull's Eye' has in early illustrated versions of Dickens's Oliver Twist (1838). The is another clue on the poster '…ot one eye'. This may mean the dog has a mark on one eye and this suggests Bill Sykes's dog and Bill Sykes also had a billy-cock hat and fustian coat.

Ford Madox Brown
(1821-1893)
Work

28-01 Aesthetic Movement to Degeneration Part 1

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE WWW.SHAFE.UK

This talk traced the Victorian obsession with beauty from the contested acquisition of the Venus de Milo through the Aesthetic Movement's defining slogan, art for art's sake. We examined how Pater, Rossetti, Swinburne, Moore, and Leighton each negotiated the tension between sensual and spiritual, decorative and moral. Whistler's independence, Buchanan's attacks, and Nordau's theory of degeneration all remind us that beauty was never neutral — it was always a battleground.

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