Arts and Leisure: Exhibit displays Pre-Raphaelites medieval art

by Robert Pincus

There isn't a smokestack or grimy street to be found anywhere in the art of the Pre-Raphaelites, even if the England of their time had plenty of both. It may have been the most industrialized nation on Earth in the mid-19th century, but in the paintings of this group of artists, the landscapes are picturesque, thick with flowers and quaint architecture, people sport medieval clothing, and striking women with slender necks, long locks and flowing garb populate luxuriously furnished interiors.

BIG DREAMS - Like other Pre-Raphaelite painters, Frederick Sandys gave Mary Magdalene a sensual look. CNS Photo courtesy of Delaware Art Museum. STRIKING WOMAN - Big hair was prominent in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's many paintings of striking women, including 'Water Willow' (1871). CNS Photo courtesy of Delaware Art Museum. Such is the world as seen by the Pre-Raphaelites, which materialized in 1848 when seven British artists and writers formed what they called a brotherhood - P.R.B. for short. In their notion of a collective vision and purpose that cut across art forms, they foreshadowed the shape of 20th century avant-garde movements such as futurism or surrealism, though with one important difference: Their rebellion against conventions looked backward instead of forward.

They espoused a yearning for medieval times, an age before Raphael and other High Renaissance artists started to make figures and scenes look so classical and refined. Their subjects were culled from Arthurian legends, Chaucer and Dante, and occasionally from the Bible. As they saw it, those days and sources evoked a greater spiritual purity and moral clarity than the Renaissance or Victorian England had to offer.

Much of the surviving work is in British museums and private collections. England takes some pride in this homegrown phenomenon, though the artists' reputation elsewhere is mixed.

But there is one American museum that has an abundance of Pre-Raphaelite work, the Delaware Art Museum. And Art Services International, a touring organization for exhibitions, has assembled the biggest American show of this group's work in recent memory: "Waking Dreams: The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites from the Delaware Art Museum." The exhibition is now at its final venue, the San Diego Museum of Art in Balboa Park.

Even if you've never seen a Pre-Raphaelite painting, the art might look familiar to you. Its look has seeped into art nouveau, psychedelic posters, book illustrations, greeting cards and Hollywood's historical epics. And some of its decorative impulses - the artists painted furniture and designed wallpaper, among other things - were the catalyst for the Arts and Crafts movement that swept across America as well as England in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Women outnumber men by far in this work. They become biblical characters, as is the case in one of the best paintings in the show: Frederick Sandys' "Mary Magdalene" (1859). If his Mary looked Victorian more than ancient, that was clearly all right with him. Like his kindred Pre-Raphaelites, he didn't seem to mind if his paintings resembled a sophisticated costume drama.

Women pose as goddesses, too, as in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's striking image of "Mnemosyne" (1875-1881), the ancient Greek personification of memory. He portrays her as a stately figure with a virtual helmet of red hair and staring "meaningfully" into the distance. The model here is Jane Morris, wife of his friend and collaborator, William Morris. But we never quite buy the notion that she is a goddess; just a beautiful woman posing as a goddess.

Some of this emphasis is linked to the Victorian focus on women and children as symbols of innocence. Some of it is simply tied to a virtual obsession with painting beautiful women, which was the case for Rossetti and some of his followers beginning around 1859. And it didn't hurt that Rossetti found out these pictures appealed to collections.

Rossetti was a proto-Bohemian and a relentless womanizer who had affairs with nearly all of his models and married one of them: Elizabeth (Lizzie) Siddal, who died a couple of years after they wed from an opium overdose. She was a painter as well as a writer, and there is a tepid picture by her, "Holy Family," in the exhibition.

Rossetti even carried on with Morris' wife, which, surprisingly, didn't seem to end the friendship between the two men.

A poet as well as a painter, Rossetti was one of three pivotal figures in the invention of Pre-Raphaelitism. The others were John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt. Rossetti stuck to the dreamy, backward-looking strain of imagery until his death in 1882, while Millais and Hunt led the way toward a sharper, realistic style that really had little to do with medieval or Italian art of the early Renaissance. (Sandys was a follower of Hunt and Millais.)

Still, they were two strains of the same phenomena. All of these artists and their followers were looking to transcend the industrial present of England, which they saw as dehumanizing, and offer an inspiring alternative. In this respect, they took their cue from the leading art and cultural critic of their day, John Ruskin.

LITERARY SUBJECTS ABOUND

Rossetti preferred the likes of Dante's heroine from "The Divine Comedy," and pictured a beatific-looking Beatrice at the moment when she is about to die and be transported to heaven. The thickly atmospheric version on view is a replica done by Charles Fairfax Murray, a younger member of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. Keats was another favorite, in part because he used medieval settings in his poems, and with crystalline clarity, Hunt painted a scene from Keats' "Isabella; or the Pot of Basil." Rossetti and Hunt are so earnestly poetic that they flirt with campiness.

Some literary pictures on view are just plain wooden, like Ford Madox Brown's "Romeo and Juliet" (1869-70). His Romeo embraces Juliet on her balcony, but the attention-grabbing feature of the painting is the hero's weirdly distorted arm.

The Pre-Raphaelites' most influential advocate in England, Ruskin was popular in America, too, but his influence didn't translate into prolific collecting of their work in the United States. Samuel Bancroft, a cotton and textile magnate in Delaware, was an iconoclastic personality and probably took some pride in collecting the work of the Pre-Raphaelites when others didn't.

His collection became the core of the holdings in this area at the Delaware Art Museum. The museum has added to it, particularly in the decorative arts, which have a prominent role in this exhibition. Examples include elegant jewelry as well as some stunning glassware and ceramics.

In this area, Morris, part of the second wave of Pre-Raphaelite artists, was a large influence. Like Ruskin, he believed that the promotion of handmade objects would counter the dehumanizing effects of industrialization, and he championed this notion to workers. To this day, examples of Morris' handiwork abound in English settings.

Among the functional objects on view are a pair of chairs from the late 1850s, designed by Morris and hand-painted by Morris and Rossetti. Their deliberately rough-hewn look goes along with the imagery of "The Arming of a Knight" on their surfaces. They resided in Red House, a home in Kent (now in the National Trust) that became his artistic laboratory.

This holistic concept of art is a fascinating dimension of the Pre-Raphaelite vision. The founders and their followers may have made more stilted images than absorbing ones, but the reach of their ambitions was utopian. It's hard not to be fascinated by their project even when this or that work makes you wince.

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