

# JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS AND THE “PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD”: THE FIRST AVANT-GARDE MOVEMENT IN ART

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**Abstract:** In order to show the way in which the first avant-garde trend was founded in art, my aim is to outline one of the greatest masterpieces that the Pre-Raphaelite movement provided the humanity culture with, particularly through its representative painter John Everett Millais (1829-1896). The famous and much-discussed painting by Millais, *Christ in his parents' house* (1850) is a unique biblical scene: The Holy Family in the carpentry workshop of Saint Joseph (Fig.1). The painting was extremely controversial because, at its first exhibition, it generated many negative interpretations in various magazines, most notably being that of the writer Charles Dickens. Criticism, however, anticipates and prepares the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's obscure notoriety, bringing major contributions as regards the debate about realism in art.

**Keywords:** Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Hermeneutic Movement, *Mystagogical* Analysis, Iconographic Representations, Critic Art

My aim consists in a detailed description of the painting, in order to proceed to a straightforward analysis of the hermeneutic horizon of the pre-Raphaelite movement style. In our analysis we start from the fact that, in general, the direction of Millais's interpretation of artistic work relies on a slope of meaning, a gradual transition from purely physical meaning of objects represented in a picture, the meanings their hidden spiritual meanings in terms of deep Christian faith. Therefore, the artist illustrates the young (adolescent) Jesus, helping Joseph in his workshop entitled to commit a particular task, probably specific to the carpenter. Joseph works at a door that is lying on the table in his carpentry workshop. Both the table and the door have deep spiritual meanings. *Mystagogical* analysis of the two objects can lead us to the door thinking soul and Eucharistic table. Soul opens the door to the

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heart, where the kingdom of heaven dwells, but this is possible only through the “work” and its “just good” her on the table of the Eucharistic sacrifice “workshop” faith.

In the center of the panel adolescent there is Jesus’ posture next to His Holy Mother, kneeling beside him, as if she tried to show Him her lowliness of heart, or rather, to receive a kiss on the cheek from her son. Mary’s humility is suggested by the position of the hands, but also by her obscure and introverted look, expressing either a certain reverence to her son, or a mother’s sense of dedication, and protection at the same time. Her eyes, though very inwardly - and almost all eyes being closed - is moving to the left hand tenderly Jesus. This seems just a little accident suffered by exposure slightly negligent to a nail in the door where Joseph works. Obviously, the wound in his left hand is a sign prefiguring the crucifixion stigma. It is open to viewers in order to show that He is the Savior of mankind who will accept the sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Also, position your other hand, gently directed towards the heart, suggests peace, reconciliation with himself, accepting the sacrifice, kindness, humility, love, hope, the Christian fundamental virtues. The position of both hands, which is often used in sacred iconographic representations, Buddhist and Christian, Hindu and even in representation of Vishnu or Krishna, is the position of the initiate in a certain mystery. Here we are dealing with the mystery of the Eucharistic sacrifice for the sins of humanity crowned with call for peace, whether inner, mystical, as shown in meditative posture of Mary, peace be interpersonal, as we can see from the position of Joseph tender rushed like to examine injured hand tenderly and gently. Same position, this time combining the active aspect of living internalization moment, we find in St. Ann, which seems to remove or move the pin with pliers. The nail could cause injury Jesus therefore its removal with pliers, a symbolic key could mean removing sins, evil thoughts and words from the heart door, thought or mouth.

On the left side of the painting there is young John the Baptist, who brings water in a vessel, probably to wash Jesus’ wounded hand. This episode anticipates the later baptism of Jesus. The austere clothing of John the Baptist, his humble, shy, devoted, submissive position speaks for itself about the lifestyle of the young prophet. The white robe of Jesus, however, suggests purity, innocence, tenderness and humility. Also, the covering of the head of Mary and his mother Saint Ann is all white, which brings to mind a specific cultural

tradition, sacramental type, based on the belief in God and inherited over generations.

Still in the left panel, the workshop is open to the outside, somewhere at the edge of the working table, is an assistant St. Joseph, representing a potential future Apostle, concerning the awe, fear and bewilderment at what is happening. Slightly bent position, suggesting maximum concentration on work, seems distracted by the story of Jesus injury, which can lead us to think of stealing the Apostles (St. Peter, in particular) for maintenance from daily chores and family life needs to undertake a new mission, which is to preach Christianity in the world. In the background of the painting are the objects that are meant to complement and enrich topic narrative of painting with new symbolic meanings.

That is why we can notice a white dove which sits on the stairs of a scale. This scale is in fact the one dreamed by James, on which “were ascending and descending the angels of God”. Given that the dove can be noticed above teen Jesus, it stands for a symbolic representation of the Holy Trinity together with Jesus and the main carpenter, Joseph. Millais uses probably painting of Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia I* (Fig.2), as a source of inspiration, especially the works of Quattrocento. As he suggests, it seems that an important influence on the painting had John Rogers Herbert, with his well-known painting entitled Savior in the eyes of his parents in Nazareth (*Our Savior to His Parents at Nazareth*, Fig.3).

Finally, fold the sheep in the background, from the door into the workshop, is the next lot of Christians: martyrs, righteous or simple believers, which generally means Church of Christ - speaker flock. Also, we can see somewhere in the edge of the field, turn a well, Jacob's probably a symbol of the source of life and wisdom, the reconciliation of the beginning of faith. Symmetry of blue sky, white clouds impregnated, luminous and green earth has its abode in sheep (world awaiting mankind redemption) suggests an interdependence between the terrestrial and celestial plan, which reminds of the Lord's Prayer Bible verse: “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, as in heaven and on earth”. The painting was controversial since its first exhibition in 1850. In particular, the complaints were related to how unrealistic representation of the characters, as well as the landscape. For example, talk about unrealistic representation of Joseph's carpentry workshop, focusing on the discrepancy between the sawdust on the floor and semicircular arrangement of the Holy Family.

This representation would be a dramatic contrast with the portrait familiar to us, of Jesus and the apostles. Jesus clothes reminiscent of Roman toga, which contrasts with the ethnicity of Jesus. Since it is white and not red, as the Roman emperors, toga is a clear indication of its origin divine-royal, as the King of the whole world, not just Jews. In view of British historians of painting, the Pre-Raphaelite movement regarded as one of the most influential and poetic movements of the Victorian age, although it had been the target of violent attacks from some prominent representatives of the culture that time. One of the most prominent writers of the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Dickens, vehemently rejected the work of Millais. In his magazine, *Household Words* (1850), Dickens described it as “petty, hateful, sickening and repulsive”. Dickens accuses Millais’ painting that made a blasphemer, as seen in representations of the Holy Family characters, especially Mary, some images of alcoholics and scandalmongers, considering his position Millais to medieval culture are deeply distorted and absurd. Effect but critical comments made famous Pre-Raphaelite movement creating a serious debate about the relationship between modernity and medievalism realism in art.

For example, although a supporter of Millais' writings in the press, in his lecture entitled “Pre-Raphaelitism” art critic John Ruskin is against malicious interpretations of the painting “Christ in his parents' home”. In his opinion, “symbolic realism to the Pre-Raphaelites will lead to a large movement in art history, typology which will be detailed observation”. However, theoretically, despite Ruskin, it was difficult to repudiate the art of Raphael and the Renaissance through modern initiative such as that of Millais, in a country like England of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the official recognized vision on painting in the Royal Academy was built on the grounds still unlimited respect for creation master of Urbino.

Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded in March 1848 under the patronage of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who along with colleagues at the Royal Academy, James Collinson (painter) William Holman Hunt (painter) John Everett Millais (painter) Dante Gabriel Rossetti (painter, poet) William Michael Rossetti (critics art), Frederic George Stephens (critic art) Thomas Woolner (sculptor, poet) etc. revolt against to the conventional art in general and epigones British art in particular. Up to a certain point, Ruskin and “Pre-Raphaelites” will play in different languages and art theory to overcome the temptation to escape the contingent and socially to avoid “false idealism” replacing it with "true

naturalism" and refusal to confuse tradition with formalism. Ruskin rejected mimesis in art, which is judged axiological a teleological perspective. It becomes an ethical aesthetic function, revealing in terms of philosophical ideas.

Carefully researching the main works of its founders, we see that Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was one of the most powerful groups in the European art history specific to the hectic interval between Romanticism and Impressionism. The moral interpretation of nature and the way in which art depends on the condition of the society were discussed in the Lionelle Venturi's vast treaty, *Modern Painters*. Pre-Raphaelites preferred especially sacred works of the painters of the past, especially *Quattrocento* because he wanted to return to medieval Christianity and rejection of the ancient and the Great Renaissance classicism. The group pre-Raphaelites achieved theirs magazine, *The Germ*, of which only four numbers out, which include theoretical articles, essays, stories, poems, engravings, all expressing the artistic ideal of the movement. A fundamental principle of their doctrine was praised truth and simplicity of medieval art (done by Ruskin). Intentionality Pre-Raphaelites believed that art should be oriented when divine revelation, rejecting false naturalism purely aesthetic, spiritual substrate lacking Renaissance painters.

The dissolution of pre-Raphaelite brotherhood did not lead to a definitive break between its representatives, but to a confirmation of their creative individuality. In 1857, Millais is awarded by the Academy of Liverpool for the painting entitled *Blind Girl* (Fig.4), and in 1863 he was elected to be a member of the Royal Academy, becoming the most famous painter of his time, thanks to the portraits he made for certain influent personalities of seven eight decades of the nineteenth century; afterwards he finds himself dedicated to works with social themes and sharpness of observation details, as specified introspective activity, whereby aesthetic consciousness can reveal the artist or critic art, narrative elements of a work. Narrative becomes a vehicle engaged perspective, veiled behind the plastic work.

Since the beginning, as we have seen, the Pre-Raphaelites painting technique subsumed primitivism, archaic themes, insistence on detail, too mimetic representation of the vegetation and was recognized by female figures of non-conventional beauty Victorian taste. Exemplary in this context, is Millais's *Mariana* panel (Fig.5). Allegations of strangeness, deformity, abnormality, which appeared in the press, to stigmatize pre-Raphaelite paintings will bring now the

public, those non-idealistic models that art critics will refuse on grounds of social status, canon aesthetic or taste. On the other hand, the Pre-Raphaelitism will be redirected to the fight against uniformity that industrialization will announce as becoming more aggressive.

It is remarkable that even the avant-garde movement in general, which began with a bold initiative of Pre-Raphaelites' movement, began not as a form of deconstruction of the tradition of radical revolt of canons and conventions established by artists in classical and renaissance period, as might believe to a summary analysis, but rather the vanguard, under the banner of cultural parents, including him here include John Everett Millais, wanted a return to the true meaning of the look of things, that avoids formalism monotonous and barren of spiritual, the risk to fall.

Likewise, Pre-Raphaelitism was the crossing point to impressionism and then to expressionism and even to the initial forms of cubism, abstractionism, surrealism, etc., artistic trends, which originally also counted on the ideal of overcoming the natural crisis, which manifests more and more acutely through the means of a decadent secularization, trivialization, spiritual blindness, mimicry and total lack of innovation. The Pre-Raphaelites ideal was not necessarily a new invention at all costs, the originality, the shocking in art, but, on the contrary, it tries to bring to the light the sacred meanings of objects and things that usually were considered banal, common, but which carried in fact a deep spiritual and intellectual meaning. Therefore, we could say that Pre-Raphaelitism is a kind of first step in bringing back to light of the sacred which lies within the "thing in itself", about which Immanuel Kant used to talk so passionately in his criticism.

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Appendix:



Fig.1 John Everett Millais, *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1849-1850)



Fig.2 Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia I* (1504)



Fig. 3 John Rogers Herbert, *Our Savior in the Eyes of His Parents in Nazareth* (1847)



Fig.4 John Everett Millais, *Blind Girl* (1856)



Fig.5 John Everett Millais, *Mariana*, 1851.