

William Morris's Sigurd the Volsung and the Pre-Raphaelite Visual Aesthetic

Pre-Raphaelite poetry and painting share many technical and stylistic similarities, as might be expected when multi-talented artists like William Morris and Dante Rossetti seriously concern themselves with theory. Morris's retelling of the Germanic epic of Sigurd the Volsung, one of the neglected epics of nineteenth-century England, derives much of its power from exploiting the visual devices which mark the drawings and paintings of Morris himself and of other Pre-Raphaelite artists.

The most important stylistic devices employed are strict attention to detail and minutiae, the use of color and light to create mass as well as to serve symbolic functions, the concomitant creation of a heightened surface pattern, and the sequential presentation of fully developed tableaux which sacrifice the sense of movement in favor of a tapestry-like sequence of set pieces. The Pre-Raphaelites are obsessed with minute observation in their work, in direct violation of Reynolds' call to avoid the "accidental imperfections" of nature. In part because the Pre-Raphaelites deal with "spots of time" rather than with a timeless ideal, the details and imperfections of nature or man are of crucial importance to accurate representation. This devotion to absolute accuracy sometimes goes to absurd lengths, and often seems to rob paintings of a freshness which they need; certainly a good deal of the criticism which the Pre-Raphaelites suffered in their own time, and much of the neglect they suffer now, derives from the artists' failure to "see the whole" in paying attention to the parts.

Because the plane of reality with which Ruskin worked was the immediate level of appearance or physical presence, he applauded the Pre-Raphaelite pursuit of detailed artistic study of nature, and called the Brotherhood "the only living figure painters of this age."¹ He noted that "Pre-Raphaelitism has but one principle, that of absolute, uncompromising truth in all that it does, obtained by working everything, down to the most minute detail, from nature, and from nature only."² But there is an important difference between the work of the Pre-Raphaelites and simple,