

PRE-RAPHAELITISM RECONSIDERED

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Rowland Elzea: Pre-Raphaelite Patronage

It is a recognized fact that the early patrons of the Pre-Raphaelites were the newly wealthy business men of the North and Midlands of England and that aristocratic patronage of the group did not begin to any considerable degree until the 1870s when the popularity of the aesthetic style required decorative paintings as part of the interior decorative scheme. However, one wonders what motivated these hard headed and somewhat naive businessmen to purchase the controversial and rather difficult early works by the Pre-Raphaelites. It is also well known that the Pre-Raphaelite artists, with the exception of Millais and Morris, came from lower middle class backgrounds and that they were striving to attain the standard of living that befitted an artist and intellectual -- that of a gentleman. The average income for a family of 6 in 1855 was about 109 pounds.¹ The sale of Rienzi in 1849 by Holman Hunt earned him that amount in a single transaction. Millais earned an average of 150 pounds per oil painting sold between 1847 and 1850. This rose to 285 pounds between 1850 and 1855, 400 between 1855 and 1860, 1,000 between 1860 and '65 and 2,600 between 1865 and 1870, while the average family income rose 17% from 109 to 186 pounds between 1855 and 1885. The average price per painting for Millais may be substantially higher in his later years when portrait commissions for which the price received is not known are considered. The incomes of Hunt and Rossetti rose similarly over the same period, although not as rapidly nor did they reach the same heights as Millais.²

By 1848 the traffic in forgeries of old masters and the misattribution of second-rate continental paintings, of which 15,000 were imported in 1845, had been exposed by The Art Union and the already considerable tendency of the newly wealthy to buy the work of living artists was accelerated by the guarantee of genuineness this offered.³ This tendency was aided by art journalism. The Art Union, founded in 1839, was solely concerned with art matters, but many of the popular magazines as well as the newspapers carried reviews and articles regularly and were very influential. Most critics wrote anonymously. However, Ruskin's name was well known as the author of Modern Painters and The Seven Lamps of Architecture and his word carried great weight