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Blood On His Hands: The "Inimitable Pains" of a Pre-Raphaelite Episode

Yet, in artistic criticism I have always considered the expression of individual sentiment more generally desirable than the cleverest exposition of accepted canons; for while we have many always ready to apply the generally-received tests to every fresh work of art, but few are found willing to risk the ordeal of putting forth new ones. I shall not, therefore, shrink from the latter course.

Thus, Henry Noel Humphreys (1807-1879) declared himself at an early stage of his book *Ten Centuries of Art*.¹ He promises that the book will be a discourse of freshness and individuality, which has required courage. Such readiness to pursue new ideas at the cost of initial critical hostility had come to be expected of artists as a prior condition for subsequent acclaim.

The Pre-Raphaelites, and Millais in particular, broadly fit this pattern, as has been widely recognised.² The manner in which Millais "risked the ordeal" of putting forward "individual sentiments" is clearly demonstrated in *Christ in the House of His Parents* (fig. 1; TG 1984, No. 20, exh. R.A. 1850). The response of the critics provides a striking example of the manner in which audiences bring preconceived beliefs and values to a work of art.

Millais's drawings for the painting were both exploratory and systematic, typifying his tenacity of purpose, thoroughgoing seriousness and visual honesty. Some were concerned with composition, whereas others investigated detail.³ This helps to explain the changes which took place between the initial ideas and the finished picture.⁴ The *P.R.B. Journal* kept by W. M. Rossetti (1829-1919) states that D. G. Rossetti saw a design for the

painting when visiting Millais on 1 November 1849. It was shown to W. M. Rossetti on 8 November, although he later noted on 7 December that Millais had completed another. Millais then began studying an actual carpenter's shop, and intended to start painting on 20 December. Nine days later Millais was at work, even intending to sleep in the shop in order to extend his hours of work. From the account of 12 January 1850 we learn that such uncomfortable dedication had been rewarded with a heavy cold that had already lasted several days.

Gradually, the figures were painted; the entry for 11 February refers to hands, feet, and legs, while that for 16 February noted the inclusion of the Virgin's head. At this time work was intense. The account of 21 February informs us that Millais was working on a white drapery and the heads of the Virgin and of Christ. W. M. Rossetti visited Millais to see the picture on 3 March. By then, he had completed St. John, the Virgin, the head of Christ, the legs of the assistant and St. Joseph, and the ground, although the chest of the assistant was still being painted (with William Millais, 1828-1899, the artist's brother, acting as model). When D. G. Rossetti saw the painting on 8 April, it was finished.⁵

By comparing the surviving studies with the painting, Mary Bennett noticed that the figure with a cloth had disappeared, while those of St. John and St. Anne had been introduced; additionally, a window had been moved, and a dove incorporated.⁶ The posture of Christ and his relationship with his mother had also been altered significantly. The devel-