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# The Eternal Circle: Pre-Raphaelitism, Formalism, and Post-Modernism

It is a twist of fate that the reputation of Pre-Raphaelite painting suffered because of the success of the modern movement it helped to launch. Pictures such as Rossetti's *The Tune of Seven Towers* (Tate 280) and Millais's *The Bridesmaid* (Tate 92) contain the seeds of a reductionist art in their overall surface patterning and interlocking color.[1] But in refusing to respond to the even more stylized silhouettes of Whistler, or to the sun-drenched brushwork of the Impressionists, the Pre-Raphaelites alienated themselves from the international avant garde.

Rossetti's reluctance to embrace modernism puzzled Roger Fry, the critic who introduced French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism to the English public. Fry ruminated in 1916: "The strange thing is that Rossetti, who got so far, should not have taken just the next step which would have given him complete freedom."[2] Freedom to Fry was a formalist unity of design that he deemed essential to all "pure art." It was present, he claimed, in "the boldest and most surprising motives" of *The Tune of Seven Towers*, in "the staff of the banner and the bell-rope which cut across the figures, or the unexpected repetitions of forms in the belfries." Despite all this, Fry did not consider the 1857 watercolor a success because of Rossetti's "over-emphasis on psychological expression" which mitigated against the intellectual purity of his design. Fry was, of course, referring to the illustrative element integral to Pre-Raphaelite art which prevented its practitioners from totally capitulating to the formal pleasures of line, color, and brushwork.

While sentiment and anecdote were anathema to modernists, Post-Modernists today prize art's ability to register a complex array of responses on the emotional barometer. Disillusioned with the austerity and emptiness of the modernist enterprise, many artists are once again emphasizing style and meaning. Examples abound in Julian Schnabel's neo-expressionist canvases, and in the deconstructive ideas of feminist painters which challenge the patriarchal assumptions responsible for the modernist hegemony.[3] That these are but two of the variety of styles currently practiced by artists has led critics to create a new "ism"—"Pluralism"—to describe the art of the 1980s.[4] Underlying the phenomenon's inherent diversity is a recognizably unified lament calling for an art with more communicative substance, with more meaning, and with more feeling than that offered by Cubism and Abstract Expressionism, the styles which have come to represent high modernism.

Scholars from various disciplines have joined forces with art critics in initiating a discourse on the void created by the exhausted values of modernism—what Jean-François Lyotard terms "the degree zero of contemporary general culture."[5] Several strategies have been proposed, including Lyotard's own continuing commitment to high modernist experimentation.[6] Other thinkers, such as Frederic Jameson, advocate a bonding between the aesthetic and social in opposition to the isolationist tenets of modernism. Jameson sheds light on the reasons for the interest of many Post-Modern painters in past art when he states: "Our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has