

THE FIRST PRE-RAPHAELITE GROUP EXHIBITION

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In the late spring of 1857 the first group exhibition devoted to the work of the Pre-Raphaelites and their associates opened in two rooms on the first-floor of a private house at No. 4 Russell Place, Fitzroy Square, London.¹ This was not the first time that members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle had attempted to organize an independent exhibition and thus free themselves from dependence on showing at the Royal Academy. Ford Madox Brown recorded in his diary for 21 May 1855 a meeting held to discuss just such a venture (Brown 138). Those also present at the meeting included Michael Halliday, Arthur Hughes, R.B. Martineau, Alexander Munro, D.G. Rossetti, W.M. Rossetti, William Cave Thomas, and Thomas Woolner. The idea for an independent exhibition came to naught at that time. In 1857, however, Pre-Raphaelite paintings that had been submitted to the Royal Academy summer exhibition that opened in early May were either rejected or badly hung, thus providing an impetus to try again (Cherry 237). In an undated letter from Ford Madox Brown to William Davis, now at Princeton University Library, Brown writes: “Everyone is disgusted and abusing [the hanging committee] but as to what is done about it, I firmly believe that their conduct this year will be in great measure the cause of success of a little private exhibition we are getting up” (Newman and Watkinson 106). Ford Madox Hueffer, skirting the fine line between the Pre-Raphaelites’ private and public motives, has stated: “The exhibition, from its private nature, was not – nor indeed was it intended to be – a rival to that of the Royal Academy. Nevertheless, the idea of some exhibition directly and ostensibly in opposition to that of the Academy was vigorously discussed at nearly every meeting of the Pre-Raphaelites” (Hueffer 144).

The Russell Place “Pre-Raphaelite Exhibition,” largely organized by Ford Madox Brown, was a semi-private affair. Admission was free, but was by invitation only, in order to avoid contravening the ban imposed by the Royal