

THE TATE GALLERY EFFORT: SOME OBSERVATIONS

The Pre-Raphaelites. The Tate Gallery (Tate Gallery/Penguin Books, 1984).

Pre-Raphaelite Papers. edited by Leslie Parris (Tate Gallery, 1984).

The 1984 catalogue titled *The Pre-Raphaelites* commemorates a very important exhibition at the Tate (arguably the most critical display of Pre-Raphaelite art in over thirty years) which included a dazzling—if overwhelming—total of 250 objects. The English were enthusiastically receptive to this effort, and although newspaper reviews in London were mixed, the continually huge crowds attested to the fact that even in the realm of the modern public imagination Victorian art has truly come of age. General visitors and specialists alike were astonished at the optical power of individual works, which often nearly vibrated off the walls with their raw coloristic intensity and dense symbolism and seemed to “bump into” the visual field of neighboring pictures. The last phase of the show proved rather anticlimactic, for the “second generation” of Pre-Raphaelitism requires its own separate exhibition; a problem which was not hinted at in the accompanying catalogue.

In fact, the catalogue, like the exhibition, showed some signs of haste in the way it was organized. To Victorian scholars in the museum field it appeared that the show was put together rather at the last minute, with deadlines for copy perilously close to the opening date. Perhaps this is why there is a certain problematic quality to the resulting publication, in spite of the fact that such capable scholars as Malcolm Warner and Judith Bronkhurst had been enlisted to write on Millais and Hunt, respectively.

The introductory essay sets the tone: somewhat conversational and aimed at the general visitor rather than the specialist. Both here and in the catalogue entries there is a distressing lack of scholarly documentation—references to books, articles, or other

catalogues from which key ideas are drawn or which interested readers could consult for additional information and deeper insight. Alan Bowness rightly distinguishes the different kinds of subject matter which the Pre-Raphaelite triumvirate (Hunt, Millais, and Rossetti) helped to revitalize—primarily in the areas of religious symbolism, personal symbols, modern or contemporary history subjects, landscape, and Arthurian themes. Yet these categories are not treated equally, and several are quite rapidly dismissed without further explanation. Bowness properly raises the issue of the importance of religious themes in the early output of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, yet he does not attempt to resolve this in any way or to direct the reader to other sources. (For example, although he mentions typological or prefigurative symbolism in this context, he does not cite George Landow's landmark publication anywhere in the essay.) He dismisses even more quickly the major question of out-of-door landscape innovations; he might at least have cited Allen Staley's *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape*: a serious analysis of this subject which draws on both Pre-Raphaelite and Ruskinian theories. Similarly, Arthurian themes are mentioned only in passing, although at least one excellent dissertation has been produced on this subject. No apologies or explanations are furnished for such *lacunae*, and only a well-informed reader or viewer would know of the countless interconnections between theme and personal life which characterized the members of the Brotherhood.

This somewhat haphazard approach continues in the catalogue entries, which for reasons of time or space lack a complete exhibition history, provenance documentation or bibliography for each object. The fact that this catalogue will undoubtedly be perceived as a definitive one for many of the paintings exhibited makes the lack of full documentation all the more regrettable. In one respect, however, the entries are useful, and