

Pre-Raphaelite Clothing and the New Woman

Pre-Raphaelite scholars have concerned themselves largely with Pre-Raphaelite paintings and Pre-Raphaelite poetry. Among other claims to fame can be counted Pre-Raphaelite clothing: revolutionary dress designs which, for the most part, have been neglected.

Contrary to what is commonly thought, two styles distinguish what is known as the "Pre-Raphaelite" dress. The woman on the left in Walter Crane's 1894 *Aglaiä* (Plate 1) illustrates the totally loose, flowing design worn beltless, without a corset and crinoline, while the second style—also worn without crinoline and corset, see woman on the right—shows the bodice and skirt separated by a belted waist. The full sleeve of the belted version became another hallmark of its design. Either gathered into a tighter sleeve at some point on the arm or full from the shoulder to the wrist, it was in any case set high on the shoulder and thus offered a new freedom of movement. Both dresses can be seen in paintings such as Thoman Armstrong's *The Test*, 1865 (Plate 2)¹ and *Haytime*, 1863 (Plate 3).

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the loose gown became known as the "artistic dress" and was associated with the "aesthetic movement." This dress was immortalized in William P. Frith's 1888 painting, *The Private View of the Royal Academy* (Plate 4). In his autobiography Frith comments:

*Seven years ago certain ladies delighted to display themselves at public gatherings in what are called aesthetic dresses; in some cases the dresses are pretty enough, in others they seem to rival each other in ugliness of form and oddity of colour. They were—and still are I believe—preachers of aestheticism in dress.*²

An olive green dress with yellow trimming and yellow sunflower tucked into the front shows the front view of the dress. Devoid of corset, crinoline and bustle, it is, however,

distinguished from the usual loose dress in that it clings close to the body, making for a long, attenuated look. Two back views of the loose dress are provided by the woman behind her talking to Robert Browning, and on the right hand by the woman next to Oscar Wilde. It is no accident that W.S. Gilbert is included in Frith's painting, since it was in 1881 that Gilbert and Sullivan presented their satiric opera, *Patience or Bunthorne's Bride* which ridiculed the aesthetic movement and its "artistic" people.³ In the opera Gilbert displayed the loose, flowing dress as it had come to look in the eighties. Contrary to the dresses worn by the ladies in Frith's painting, Gilbert and Sullivan's "twenty love-sick maidens" walked around the stage singing and dancing in "grecian" dresses that were sometimes belted under a very loose bodice.

Walter Satterlee continued to satirize the new dress style by depicting the aesthetic woman worshipping the lily, another floral symbol made popular by Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*. Unlike Gilbert and Sullivan's Grecian-attired maidens this young lady is dressed in a belted version of the loose fitting design worn in Frith's painting, complete with sunflower. This design was also satirized in the fashion plate from *Woman's World*, 1888 (Plate 5) and *Punch's* "Nincompoopiana" series of 1879.⁴ Such parodies were of course indicative of what these dresses meant to the Victorians. Freed of the clumsy crinoline and the tortuous corset, these loose fitting dresses became the hallmark of the liberated woman. Anti-feminist journals like *The Saturday Review* made exactly that point when they attacked the new "breed" of "lady lecturers" in 1872:

The very dress and appearance of the lady lecturer nine times out of ten mark her purpose. One glides on to the platform as a picturesque pre-Raffaellite "study"; her drapery hanging in long straight folds over her feet, her golden hair carded into