

*Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Art and Design* edited by Tim Barringer, Jason Rosenfeld, and Alison Smith. New Haven: Yale UP, 2013. 256pp. + 200 colour illus. ISBN 9780300194449. \$60.

“The Dog Star rages” and the debate about the merit and significance of Pre-Raphaelitism grows hot and heavy. “Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde,” the major exhibition at the Tate Britain (September 2012-January 2013) and a second, slightly different version subtitled, “Victorian Art and Design” shown at the National Gallery in Washington (February-May 2013) drew huge crowds. While Victorianists cheered, newspaper art-critics – like their precursors of 1849 to 1851 – did not. Jonathan Jones in the *Guardian* (22 September 2012) appeared embarrassed about enjoying the exhibit, calling it “a steam-punk triumph” and describing it as “at once delightful and a bit silly,” because “silliness is inherent in Pre-Raphaelite art.” Even less graciously, Alastair Smart in the *Telegraph* (14 September 2012) admitted to loathing Pre-Raphaelitism, labelling it “a Marmite movement” and adding that, although the Tate show made one look at the painters “with new eyes,” it did not “make the pictures look any better.”

The assessment that really raised academic temperatures was Roberta Smith’s negative review in the *New York Times*: “Blazing A Trail for Hypnotic Hyper-Realism: ‘Pre-Raphaelites’ at National Gallery of Art” (28 March 2013). An essentially damning dismissal of Pre-Raphaelite art as kitsch – as a forerunner not of Modernism but of Norman Rockwell and Walt Disney – Smith attacked the thesis of the exhibition: the claim that the Pre-Raphaelites were avant-garde, and thus contributors to Modernism. Trumpeting the Francocentric prejudice of many twentieth-century art historians, she remarks that the show “provides a yardstick by which to gauge your own sophistication” (or lack of it) and suggests that viewers look at a Manet and a Cézanne in an adjacent gallery to see “real painting.”

The curators’ defence, splendidly set out in the magisterial catalogue (but argued less clearly in the exhibition itself), is that there is more than one way to be modern. Tim Barringer, Jason Rosenfeld, and Alison Smith suggest that there are other genealogies of Modernism than those that have privileged Impressionism and non-representational art. They argue that the Pre-Raphaelites, rebels against academic painting, created a radically new way of representing and viewing their world. Utilizing new technologies such as photography and new chemical pigments, engaging with new thought and scholarship (that of Christian Socialism and of the Higher Criticism of the Bible as well as Darwinian evolution), and articulating a distinctive political vision, they do constitute an avant-garde. Theirs are new subjects, new techniques, new patrons (the captains of industry), and even new audiences.