**Historical Period.**

**C3 Rebellion and revival: the British and French Avant-Garde (1848‒99)**

***Pre-Raphaelite Rebellion: Brotherly Love,* Carol Jacobi.**

**Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelite Vision, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2008, p35-37**

The Pre-Raphaelite movement was a young man’s adventure- reckless, rebellious and anti-establishment. Its story has come down to us in the weighty biographies and hagiographies published at the end of the nineteenth century, which told the tale from the perspectives of old men or other family members many decades after the events. Vivid recollections were interwoven with the formality and myths which have since distorted and dominated the Brotherhood’s image. A different picture emerges from the documents of the time- quirky, intelligent critical writings or rambling correspondence after tobacco-fuelled gatherings, or scrawled while waiting for models, poems, sketches and paintings that still provoke. These documents challenge claims that any one member originated the Brotherhood or that its primary inspiration was John Ruskin’s writings on “truth to nature”. Stylistic innovation was generated by a shared interest in vision that was part of a timely and sophisticated inquiry into the nature of subjectivity. It was this that brought the group together- artists, poets and critics alike debated the predicament of the individual in modern circumstances and the role of art in a material age. Contemporary, literary and religious themes alike responded to the pressing issues of the day.

In 1848 William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais brought together seven artists and writers under the title of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The ensuing burst of creativity and celebrity launched the careers of the members, and by 1853 they had all moved on to solo endeavours. Yet in five sensational years the group had changed nineteenth-century art, revolutionising the process of seeing, aesthetic theory and artistic technique while creating a new audacious kind of artist that would provide inspiration to younger artists for the next several decades.

*Revolution.*

The event that brought the Brotherhood together is usually understood to be the exhibition of Hunt’s *The Eve of St Agnes*, or *The Flight of Madeline and Porphyro during the Drunkenness Attending the Revelry* in May of 1848. Though he was just twenty-one, his painting had managed to gain a reasonable position in the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition of that year. All three founders were students at the Academy but only Hunt and Millais were friends. Rossetti, who had recently dropped out, was a year older than Hunt and part of a dauntingly flamboyant bohemian set, but was moved to congratulate Hunt so enthusiastically on his picture that the three soon became involved.   
  
The singular confluence of ideas that was to characterise the Brotherhood had, however, begun before this. *The Eve of St Agnes* was the product of a collaboration between Hunt and Millais that was already innovative. It was prepared side by side with Millais’s *Cymon and Iphigenia*. The subject matter reflected the young men’s enthusiasm for racy poetry, particularly themes of revelry and rebellious love. Inspired by Titian’s *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1522-23) in the nearby National Gallery, both scenes were tales of abduction drawn from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Millais focussed on the Cymon’s first encounter with a semi-naked Iphigenia and her beautiful servants, but Hunt explored the danger of the abduction itself as the lovers creep past the sleeping guards.

Hunt and Millais rejected the decorous, generalised manner derived from the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Old Masters, searching instead for alternative models of art. Their bright palettes and archaic settings reflected an interest in the “primitives”, artists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Several books have been published on fifteenth-century technique, and in 1842 the National Gallery had acquired Jan van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434). Modern versions of the style by William Dyce and Ford Madox Brown were on display at the great talent show of the time, the exhibition of entries for the decoration of the new Houses of Parliament. Rossetti, was also interested in romantic and medieval art and literature, and had recently begun studying with Brown. The three artists had also established some common ground at an avant-garde sketching club called the Cyclographic Society, where Rossetti appears to have become a presiding influence around January 1848. By March he was circulating Criticism Sheets, one of which contains a glowing review by Millais and Hunt of his Delacroix-inspired design for *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, another subject from Keats. Illustrations by Hunt and Millais were based on the sparser, more linear designs of John Flaxman and Moritz Retzsch. Hunt’s *One Step to the Deathbed,* a shallow, angular tableau of Shelley’s poem *Ginevra*, showed a bride expiring at the festivities of her forced wedding. *The Eve of St Agnes* was similar in style and subject, but was, as Rossetti recognised, a completely different achievement. Hunt had translated the romantic themes of the individual versus society and truth versus allusion- which was hinted at in the Cyclographic drawings- into paint, a finished language of colour and line.

The unusually shallow composition gives the scene a new intimacy. It also allows Hunt to create a kind of debate across the painting: the drunken sleepers are compared with the alert lovers. Behind the sleepers we catch iridescent glimpses of intoxicated feasting through the rhythmic arches and this too is answered by the slice of sober reality seen beyond the door which opens the painting down the right-hand side. Dreams are compared to truth, appetite to love, social rules and rituals to personal freedom. Between the two the orthogonals of the floor direct the eye to an empty space. The mauve shadow falling like a bruise across the curtain places at the centre of painting a metaphor for the mystery at the centre of the Keat’s poem, the lovers mutual revelation and union in Madeline’s bed: “*Into her dream he melted, as the rose /Blendeth its colour with the violet”.* These young people are more defiant than poor Ginevra; Hunt found a visual expression for their rebellion.