# EXHIBITION REVIEW – *Pre-Raphaelites and Other Masters*

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This is going to be a very personal review. *Pre-Raphaelites and Other Masters*, the exhibition at the Royal Academy of the Andrew Lloyd Webber collection, attracted me, along with many others on the afternoon I went, as an opportunity to see for real so many Victorian paintings normally seen only in reproductions of varying quality. For if one cannot deny, on reaching the final rooms, the beauty of Alfred Munnings' horses or the charm of Stanley Spencer's vision of life, there is no doubt that it is the Pre-Raphaelites who are the real stars of this show.

Actually, the first impression, as one enters the exhibition, is almost one of disbelief at the sheer number of works gathered here. I must say straight away, though, that I do not agree with Lindsay Duguid's comment, in *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 November 2003, that it is a 'crowded jumble'. Or if it is, it is very much in the spirit of the Victorians and their fondness for clutter. I am not sure that a presentation along the lines of our more sober visual taste would be as representative of the cultural and artistic exuberance of the times. It is true, however, that the enormous variety makes the viewer, and the reviewer, a little dizzy at first. For the pictures range from John Everett Millais' *James Wyatt and his Grand Daughter Mary Wyatt* (figure 1) and *Four Children of the Wyatt Family*, by today's standards almost naive in their early Pre-Raphaelite meticulous and slightly stiff rendering of reality, to James Jacques Tissot's sophisticated brilliance, as in *L'Orpheline* or *The Return from the Boating Trip*. They go from the mystical, of at least dream-like quality typical of Edward Burne-Jones to the overtly titillating subtext in Lawrence Alma Tadema's or John William Godward's representations of pseudo-harem creatures. The pictures also go from the glamour of Albert Moore's *Red Berries* or John Atkinson Grimshaw's *Dolce Domum* to the ordinary domesticity of Kate Hayllar's *A Thing of Beauty* and Edith Hayllar's *A Summer Shower*. These two, by the way, being, in their quiet understated manner, amongst the most charming and effective paintings on show.

But beneath the diversity, one can soon see some unifying lines of force running through the exhibition, the first one, of course, being the narrative aspect of many of these paintings. Some stray remarks overheard as I went through the rooms would indeed tend to indicate that the Victorian taste for story telling is still very much alive. To my mind, though, the anecdotal dimension of much Victorian painting is one of its limitations. Pictures are almost systematically anchored in myth (John William Waterhouse's *Pandora* or *The Awakening of Adonis*), old legends

**Figure 1** Sir John Everett Millais, *James Wyatt and his Grand Daughter Mary Wyatt*, 1849, oil on canvas, 35.5 x 45 cm, © Collection Lord Lloyd-Webber

(Arthur Hughes' *The Knight of the Sun* or Gale's *The Wounded Knight*, to cite only two of many), or the narratives of contemporary life (Michael Frederick Halliday's *The Blind Basket-Maker with his First Child* or *The Measure for the Wedding Ring*). This tends to obscure the painting as such. What, all too often, is brought to light are the less pleasant characteristics of the period, its sentimentalism and self-righteousness. The absolutely ludicrous is, in my opinion, reached with William Holman Hunt's *The Shadow of Death*, which represents an apparently ecstatic Christ, doing what? dancing? praying? or – as his shadow on the wall behind seems to show – rehearsing his crucifixion?

More serious perhaps is the way in which this narrative bias probably prevented genuine artists from progressing. I am thinking here in particular of some of Burne-Jones' late works, *The Challenge in the Wilderness*, for example, with its almost monochrome figures and their strictly stylised draperies falling in variations of the triangle which answer the three golden circles of the trumpets. There is a glimpse there of what will later become cubist painting, but I cannot help feeling that this move away from narration was frozen by the perceived and overpowering necessity to tell a story.

The same can be said about one of the strong points of many of the paintings on show, the beauty of the colours. The depth and luminosity of Burne-Jones' blues and reds are a sheer pleasure to the eye. I am thinking of the blues in *Night and Vesper*, and the accumulated and saturated reds of *The Annunciation*, or their contrast with dark tones in *The Adoration of the Kings*. But Burne-Jones is only one among many. There are few oils by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in this collection, but *A Vision of Fiammetta* (figure

2) gives a fair example of the painter's jewel-like colours. The royal purple of the skirt in *April Love* by Hughes, the sensuous apricot, pale yellows and greens of Alma Tadema, the subtle juxtaposition, by Waterhouse, of soft reddish purple, olive green, dark dull blue, leaf brown and burnished gold in *The Danaides*, without forgetting the sumptuous russet/gold/orange of the woman's skirt in Millais' *The Proscribed Royalist*, all contribute to the enchantment one feels on moving from one picture to the next. But somehow, the colour never breaks free, enclosed as it is in the narrative.

This richness and depth of colour is also a hallmark of the items of decorative art collected by Andrew Lloyd Webber, the carpets, and above all William de Morgan's stunning ceramics in the reds and blues that appear in retrospect as one of the characteristics of the period. But with one difference, namely, that unlike the paintings which, despite the wealth of talent, remain determinedly Victorian and insular, the objects of decorative art often give the feeling, through their design, that they belong to a European movement, to what will later be called Art Nouveau. Some pieces are actually very close to the École de Nancy in inspiration.

Another common feature that I would like to mention may be felt as politically incorrect. But I must admit that to my woman's eyes, used to the constant deconstruction, not to say disintegration, of the female body in twentieth-century art, the obvious love of women in these paintings was quite striking, however stereotyped or lewd the expression of it might be in some of them. I will not dwell on those, but rather give place of honour to Rossetti's coloured chalk portraits. The softly and elegantly curving lines of neck, wrists and hands, drapery and hair all reveal, in these busts or heads, the artist's love of the female

**Figure 2** Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *A Vision of Fiametta*, 1878, oil on canvas, 146 x 88.9 cm. © Collection Lord Lloyd-Webber

body. It is as if the caress of chalk on paper translated the sensuousness of Rossetti's eye. A sensuousness which is, however, not as fancy driven as has often been said. The clearly different feelings produced by these portraits, despite similarity of treatment, indicate a basic respect for the sitter's personality. The best proof of this being the superb portrait of Christina Rossetti, whose spiritualised sensuality he renders perfectly in an unusually austere-looking work. On pale blue paper the poet's table and book are roughly outlined, as is the bulky, rather shapeless gown that she is wearing. But from this uncompromising bluish greyish mass rise the quiet but rounded curves of eyebrows and mouth, all in, again, quiet but at the same time warm tints, curves and tints somehow contrasting with and completing the lines and colour of the heavy dark hair demurely gathered at the nape of the neck.

But I will leave this somewhat dangerous ground to conclude with something totally different, with what was to me the real revelation of the exhibition, Grimshaw's landscape and townscape paintings. The narrative aspect is here cut to the minimum, so that, in the Lane pictures for example, one feels that the golden or silvery light is simply washing over you. But Grimshaw's mastery of light in all its forms is best seen in paintings like *Liverpool*, *On Hampstead Hill* or *Cornhill*, in which the dimness of a wet moonlight, the warm points of artificial light and the reflections of both on damp pavements and streets make this self-taught painter a northern cousin of the early Impressionists.

The great number and diversity of works on display mean that this review is necessarily incomplete and probably unfair in what it has chosen to distinguish, but I hope it has helped, even if a little, to dispel some of the prejudices about nineteenth-century British painting and to look at it for what it is, art, and not simply Victorian artefacts.

*The Andrew Lloyd Webber Collection was on show at the Royal Academy, London from 20 September – 12 December 2003.*