The Review

Exhibition review

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five stages simultaneously, was that you couldn't see what was going on in all the stages. Depending on where you were in the audience you saw a different part of the play. So I missed completely the ending of Lady Macbeth — apparently in a washing machine! Despite this, the scale and visual imagery made it a hugely memorable performance of Macbeth.

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PRE-RAPHAELITES VICTORIAN AVANT-GARDE

Tate Britain

12 September 2012–13 January 2013

The curators of this large multimedia exhibition have attempted to present the Pre-Raphaelite artists as Britain's first modern art movement, hence the subtitle 'Victorian avant-garde'. One of the curators, Alison Smith says 'I wanted to show them as modern artists rather than soft romantics'.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood began in 1848 with just three young men as its founder members. Rossetti, Holman Hunt, and Millais rebelled against the standard teachings of the Royal Academy. They wanted to return to clean lines and took pre-renaissance art as their example. Being true to nature was what they aimed for and initially they behaved like a secret society, with their initials PRB prominent in paintings such as *Isabella* by Millais. The journal *The Germ* acted as their manifesto. Their paintings were characterised by vivid colours, and depicted intimate relationships realistically and with extraordinary attention to detail. In *Ophelia*, for example, Millais spent a year on the riverbank painting an area the size of a 5 pence piece each day. The true Brotherhood lasted only a few years and, as time passed, different styles developed, with an emphasis on art for arts sake and with beauty as the main theme in many of Rossetti's portraits of women.

Critics at the time were vociferous in declaring their work ugly and jarring to the eye. Millais's, *Christ in the House of His Parents*, was labelled blasphemous and

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Charles Dickens was a prominent critic. True to his ideals of depicting realism, Millais had spent time living in a carpenters shop and used his sister-in-law as a model for the painting.

The exhibition follows a series of themes, rather than being in chronological order, and this emphasises the conflicting styles and ideas of the movement. The Pre-Raphaelites attracted extremes of views, either being loved or loathed and often for the same reasons. They were rebellious yet conservative and have been criticised for not being modern enough. Though Millais was a founder member he was later knighted and became President of the Royal Academy.

Lovers of the Pre-Raphaelites will be amazed by the works collected here, as I was, but whether the curators succeed in portraying the Pre-Raphaelites as the forerunners of British modern art remains unclear. The term avant-garde implies something shocking and even ugly, yet often these paintings are romantic and moralistic, and I remain confused about what the Pre-Raphaelites are all about. Perhaps the artists were confused themselves. They set out to disturb the system and to pose serious questions and in this the exhibition has succeeded.

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Photo: Tate Photography

John Everett Millais,
Ophelia,
1851–1852,
Tate.