Pre-Raphaelitism Today

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In 1968, the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, mounted a pioneering exhibition which reconstructed the collection of James Leathart. This local industrialist was one of the most important patrons of Rossetti and his circle. Over twenty years later, at the end of last year, Leathart’s collection again became the focus of an adventurous exhibition at Laing, in the wider-ranging Pre-Raphaelites: Painters and Patrons in the North-East. Among the 141 items were many unfamiliar images including a substantial group of works by Bell Scott and paintings by lesser known associates of the movement such as Boyce, Campbell, Deverell, and Martineau. Society members could note Morris’s Redcar carpet, commissioned by Sir Isaac Lowthian Bell in 1879 and his Artichoke hanging, designed for Mrs Ada Godman in 1879. She spent the next ten years embroidering it!

A large number of major Pre-Raphaelite works entered Newcastle collections. Burne-Jones’s Merciful Knight, Madox Brown’s Pretty Baa Lambs and Hunt’s Hireling Shepherd were all bought or commissioned by Leathart. Rossetti’s large chalk drawing Pandora was owned by Thomas Eustace Smith, and James Hall bought Hunt’s Isabella and the Pot of Basil. The reasonably modestly priced catalogue of the exhibition will prove a useful addition to any Pre-Raphaelite Library. Almost all the entries are illustrated, 32 of them in colour, and the catalogue also contains an appendix of collectors with biographies and full bibliographies, which will prove of particular value to researchers.

The first room of the exhibition focused on Bell Scott’s presence at the Newcastle School of Design and on the murals he painted for the Trevelyans at Wallington Hall. Iron and Coal, which was not even lent to the major Pre-Raphaelite exhibition in the Tate Gallery in 1984, was its centrepiece. This work, studied in Paul Usherwood’s catalogue essay, is deservedly famous as a painting about Victorian heavy industry and commerce. Yet Scott had to persuade his patrons to include it in the mural scheme. We tend to ignore the other seven paintings, showing scenes from the history of the region from Roman times. These were represented in the exhibition only by small versions and studies. The modern interest in Victorian art is highly selective and, as this example illustrates, our interests differ substantially from those of the Victorians. Our preferences often reveal more about modern values than about Victorian history.

The second room was the most effective and crowded (in every way). It focused on Leathart’s collection, strong in small, intense pictures. Taking its cue from enlarged photographs of the interior of his house, it packed them closely on the walls, grouping some round a fireplace to suggest (although not reconstruct) their original domestic setting. Although Leathart owned a version of Brown’s contemporary subject, Work, and although the chimney of his leadworks appeared in the background of his portrait by Brown, the bulk of his collection consisted of romantic evocative subjects far removed from the sentimental and moral narratives of most Victorian figure painting. In its original context this ‘aesthetic’ approach to art had a radical perspective, and was a criticism of common Victorian values as expressed in art and hence ultimately
in society. The first part of the equation was made by the art critic F G Stephens (an erstwhile Pre-Raphaelite brother) in a series of articles on patronage in the Newcastle area which appeared in the early 1870s and which is discussed in the catalogue. But aestheticism was also an attempt to escape from the complex world of contemporary problems into some notional sphere of absolute artistic and emotional values. Rossetti, after all, wanted Brown to put a flowerpot over the leadworks landscape, ostensibly for compositional reasons. What does this say about Leathart’s collection? And what does it say about the popularity of this aspect of Pre-Raphaelism today?

The exhibition, the catalogue, and presumably also the lavish exhibition installation, were made possible by award-winning sponsorship from Ferguson Industrial Holdings PLC, a local corporation with Victorian origins. They mounted a display of their own packaging products at the end of the exhibition, inviting one to ‘spot the hidden Pre-Raphaelites and win a trip to New York!’ As I spotted (not unwillingly) I reflected on the salutary reminder that corporate image-building underlies business arts sponsorship, no matter how imaginative and generous, and had helped to shape the exhibition I had just witnessed, by the selection of a popular subject and its presentation in an engaging display.

Bell Scott’s work and Leathart’s collection were the focal points of the exhibition. The later rooms were more diverse, extracting the Pre-Raphaelite elements from wide-ranging collections. It was hard to form a clear picture of this phase of Newcastle collecting. The catalogue, unlike the display, was organised by artist and, infuriatingly, there disappointingly was no index of items by patron. Dianne Macleod’s introductory essay surveyed ‘avant-garde’ patronage in the area, but her partisan attitude to Pre-Raphaelite and aesthetic painting largely excluded a consideration of broader patterns of collecting, an issue I hope her long-awaited book on Victorian patronage will clarify. The inclusion of single Pre-Raphaelite paintings in collections that were generally conventional shows how their work, like that of more radical avant-gardes, was easily drawn back into the establishment. Indeed, today the concept of the avant-garde has become established. One of the causes of the general interest in Pre-Raphaelitism is that they were, ambivalently, an anti-Victorian movement.

The diversity of the later section of the exhibition raised a number of queries about its scope. Was George Howard, buying for his London home and for Naworth in Cumbria, a North-Eastern patron? Albert Moore’s work was well represented. Today we see him as a classicist, but his contemporaries often put him with the Pre-Raphaelites. His inclusion is historically sound. But there was a tendency, also marked in the 1984 Tate exhibition, to assume “once a Pre-Raphaelite Brother, always a Pre-Raphaelite”. By the mid-1860s, Millais’s Pre-Raphaelitism was widely seen as a past phase, and he was a fêted establishment artist. Millais’s Romans Leaving Britain (1865, Bell collection) and his Chill October (1871, Armstrong Collection) have an incongruous place in the display. The continental style nude by Charles Mitchell, a Newcastle artist, had little to do with Pre-Raphaelitism, nor did the historical and literary scenes of Emmerson, despite the fact that he was taught by Bell Scott. In fact I felt that there was a larger and even more adventurous exhibition outside this one, trying to get in and sometimes succeeding, dealing with the broader development of Victorian collecting on Tyneside. But would it have been so attractive to public and sponsor, without the magic word ‘Pre-Raphaelite’?
NOTE

The catalogue is published by the Tyne and Wear Museums Service at £9.95 as *Pre-Raphaelite Painters and Patrons in the North East*. 