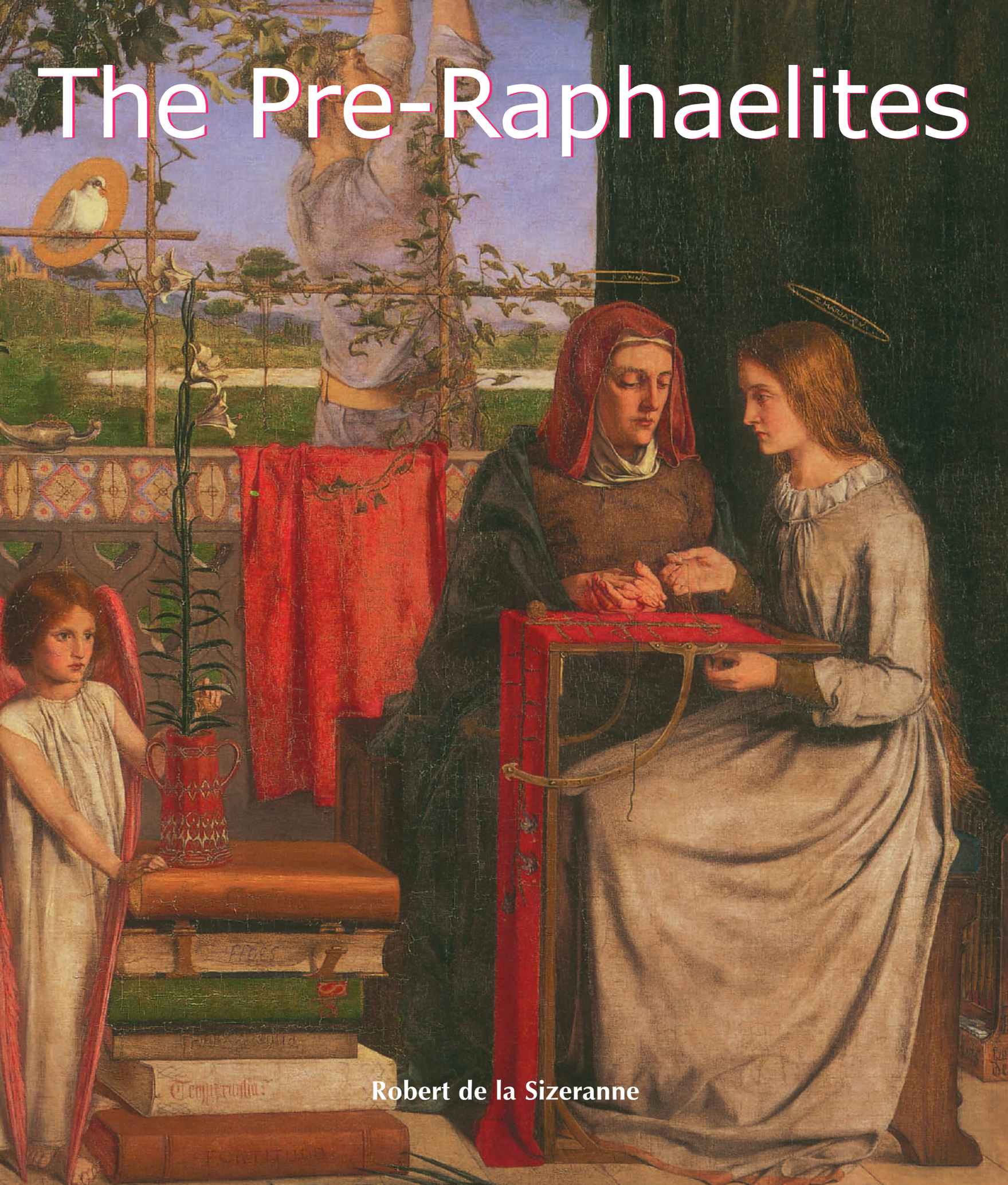
The Pre-Raphaelites



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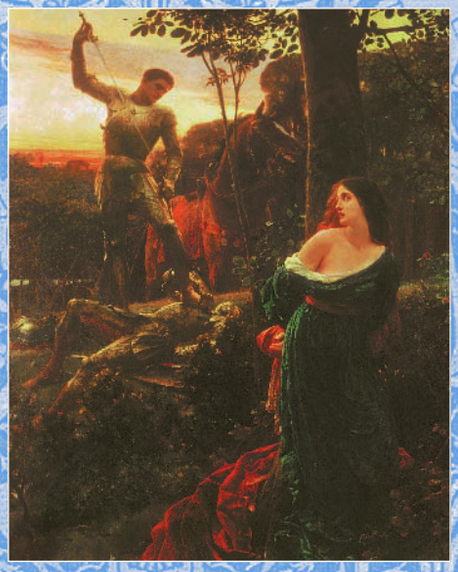


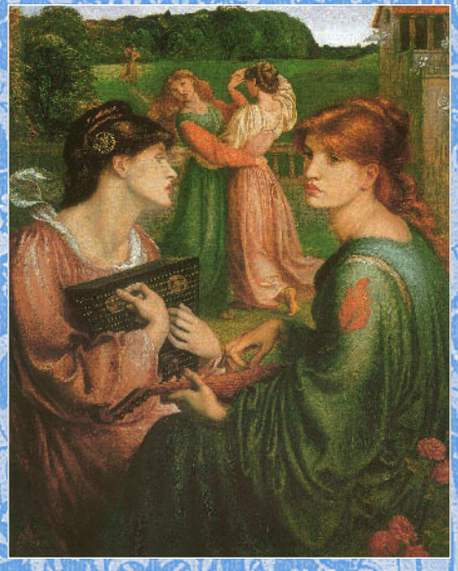



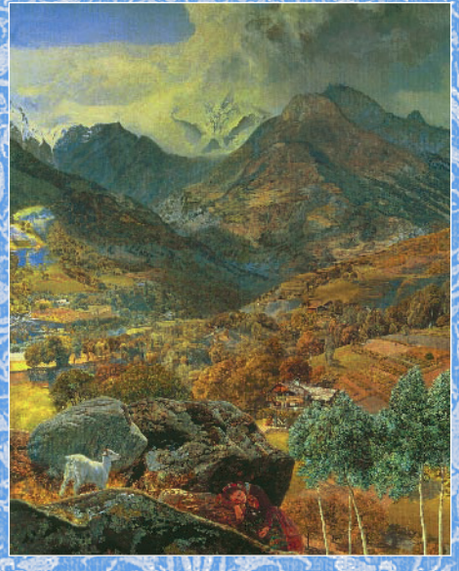
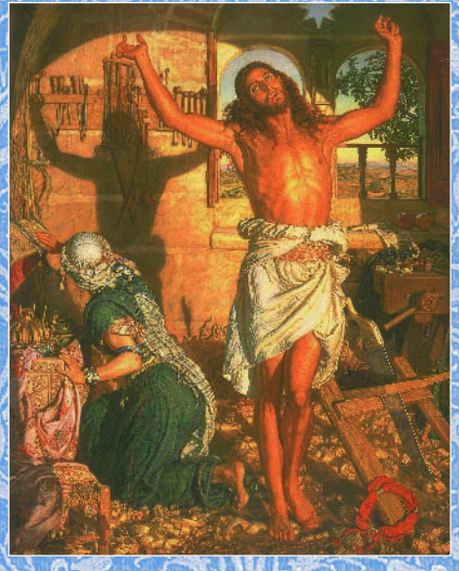

Contents

I. The Origins of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood 7

II. The Definition and Results of Pre-Raphaelitism 77

III. Intentions 109

Major Artists 153

Notes 194

Index 196



I. The Origins of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

English Art in 1844

Until 1848, one could admire art in England, but would not be surprised by it. Reynolds and Gainsborough were great masters, but they were eighteenth-century painters rather than eighteenth-century English painters. It was their models, their ladies and young girls, rather than brushwork, which gave an English character to their creations. Their aesthetic was similar to that of the rest of Europe at that time. Later, Lawrence painted in England just as Gerard did in France. Walking through the halls of London museums, one could see different paintings, but no difference in manner of the painting, drawing, or even in the conception or composition of a subject. Only the landscape painters, led by Turner and Constable, sounded a new and powerful note at the beginning of the century. But one of them remained the only individual of his species, imitated as infrequently in his own country as elsewhere, belonging no more to a single region of the Earth than a comet belongs to a region of the sky, while the work of the other was so rapidly imitated and developed by the French that he had the glory of creating a new movement in Europe rather than the good chance of providing his native country with a national art. As for the others, they painted, with more or less skill, in the same way as artists of other nationalities. Their dogs, horses, village politicians, forming little kitchen, interior and genre scenes were only interesting for a minute, and even then the artists did not handle them as well as the Dutch. Thus, no one anticipated that out of all this something new and great would emerge. From time to time, a strange lightning bolt illuminated this reasonable and prosaic life. One of Blake's small paintings showed the Prime Minister, Pitt, in the form of an angel wearing a green and gold robe, leading the English parliament, depicted with the appearance of the monster described in the book of Job[1], across the clouds. Then everything was again sleepy and calm; average people, average stories, average painting. Weak, muddy colours layered over bitumen, false and lacking in vitality, the shadows too dark and the highlights too intense. Soft, hesitating outlines that were vague and generalising. And as the date of 1850 approached, Constable's words of 1821 resonated; "In thirty years English art will have ceased to exist."

John Everett Millais,
Mariana, 1851.
Oil on mahogany, 59.7 x 49.5 cm.
Tate Britain, London.

And yet, if we look closely, two characteristics were there, lying dormant. First, the intellectuality of the subject. The English had always chosen scenes that were interesting, even a bit complicated, where the mind had as much to experience as the eye, where curiosity was stimulated, the memory put into play, and laughter or tears provoked by a silent story. At the Victoria and Albert Museum, one is struck by this British taste for intellectual subjects. There we see scenes from *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, *The Imaginary Invalid* and *The Learned Ladies*, from *Don Quixote*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, images taken from Duncan Gray or of Portia and Bassanio, in short, scenes from the theatre and literature of every country. These paintings are the work of Wilkie, Redgrave, Frith and Leslie. This was the art of the first half of the nineteenth century. It was rapidly becoming an established idea (visible in Hogarth) that the paintbrush was made for writing, storytelling and teaching, not simply for showing. However prior to 1850 it merely spoke of the pettiness of daily life; it expressed faults, errors or rigid conventional feelings; it sought to portray a code of good behaviour. It played the same role as the books of images that were given to children to show them the outcomes of laziness, lying and greed. The other quality was intensity of expression. Anyone who has seen Landseer's dogs, or even a few of those animal studies in English illustrated newspapers where the *habitus corporis* is followed so closely, the expression so well-studied, the look of the animal so intelligent and so different depending on whether it is waiting, feeling fear or desire, questioning its master, or thinking, can easily understand what is meant by "intensity of expression". It is not just "accuracy" that we mean, for this is not a distinctive characteristic of English art. Our wildlife artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also captured expressions accurately, and yet what a difference there is between Oudry's or Desportes' dogs in the Louvre and Landseer's in the National Gallery in London! But, in the same way that intellectuality was only present before 1850 in subjects that were not worth the effort, intensity of expression was only persistently sought and successfully attained in the representation of animal figures. Most human figures had a banal attitude, showing neither expressiveness, nor accuracy, nor picturesque precision, and were placed on backgrounds imagined in the studio. They were prepared using academic formulas, according to general principles that were excellent in themselves, but poorly understood and lazily applied, fading away with the dimming memory of the old days of Reynolds and Gainsborough.

Such was English art until Ford Madox Brown came back from Antwerp and Paris, bringing an aesthetic revolution along with him. That is not to say that all the trends that have emerged and all the individuality that has developed since that time emerge from this one artist, or that at the moment of his arrival, none of his compatriots were feeling or dreaming the same things that he was. But one must consider that in 1844,

Dante Gabriel Rossetti,
Mariana, 1870.
Oil on canvas, 109.8 x 90.5 cm.
Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums, Aberdeen.

Charles Allston Collins,
Convent Thoughts, 1850-1851.
Oil on canvas, 84 x 59 cm.
The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Oxford, Oxford.

John Everett Millais,
Ferdinand Lured by Ariel, 1849-1850.
Oil on panel, 64.8 x 50.8 cm.
The Makins Collection, Washington, D.C.









when *William the Conqueror* was exhibited for the first time, no trace of these new things had yet appeared. Rossetti was sixteen years old, Hunt seventeen, Millais fifteen, Watts twenty-six, Leighton fourteen, and Burne-Jones eleven, and consequently not one of these future masters had finished his training. If one considers that the style of composition, outline and painting ushered in by Madox Brown can be found fifty years after his first works in the paintings of Burne-Jones, having appeared in those of Burne-Jones' master Rossetti, one must acknowledge that the exhibitor of 1844 played the decisive role of sower, whereas others only tilled the soil in preparation or harvested once the crop had arrived.[2]

What, then, was in the hand of this sower? In his head was the idea that art was clearly perishing because of the systematic generalisation of forms, and could only be saved by the opposite, that is, the meticulous pursuit of individual traits. In his heart was the indistinct but burning desire to see art play a great social role in England, that of bread rather than sweets reserved for the tables of the rich. Finally, in his hand were a certain elegant awkwardness, a slightly stiff delicacy, and a meticulous attention to detail that he had learned partly from the Gothic school of Baron Wappers in Antwerp, and partly from direct observation of the Primitives. All of this was quite revolutionary, and for that reason must have displeased the conservative spirit of the English. But it was also anti-French, anti-continental, absolutely original and autonomous, so it must have appealed to their patriotism for these reasons. "It was in Paris that I decided to do realistic paintings, because no Frenchman was doing it," said Madox Brown. We shall not stop for the word "realistic", which can have several different meanings depending on the country. Let us retain only this rallying cry against the French school and in favour of a national art.[3]

When Madox Brown arrived in London, the great competition begun in 1843 for the decoration of the new Palace of Westminster was underway and had produced no less than one hundred and forty works signed by the best artists of the day. This aesthetic tournament is an important date in English art history, because it helped then unknown leaders to stand out from the crowd. Watts, a young artist who had learned independently, had just been noticed there. Madox Brown had sent five large compositions. The principal one was an episode from the Norman Conquest: *The Body of Harold brought to William the Conqueror*. These were his first forays down a new path, his protest against old and official art. But no echo had responded to his call. His failure and the contempt of the public were so obvious that the day when the young master received a letter signed with an Italian name — Dante Gabriel Rossetti — in which the writer praised his work and asked to become his student, he had no doubt that this unknown

Joseph Noel Paton,
The Bluidie Tryst, 1855.
Oil on canvas, 73 x 65 cm.
Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.



John William Waterhouse,
The Lady of Shalott, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 153 x 200 cm.
Tate Britain, London.



man was mocking him. A few days later, he presented himself at Rossetti's home. "I was told," recalls the poet, "that a man was asking to see me. This man wanted neither to come in nor to give his name, and was waiting in the corridor. So I went down to see him, and when I arrived at the bottom of the stairs I found Brown holding a large stick in one hand and waving my letter about in the other. Instead of greeting me, he cried out: 'Is your name Rossetti and was it you who wrote this?' I responded in the affirmative, but I was shaking in my boots. 'What is the meaning of this letter?' he asked, and when I replied that I meant exactly what I had said, that I wanted to be a painter and had no idea what I should to do become one, Brown began to realise that the letter was not a mockery but a sincere homage, and he immediately changed from a mortal enemy into the gentlest of friends."[‡] This young man, who appeared so unexpectedly to join ranks with Madox Brown, was only twenty years old. He was the son of an Italian exile, born in the little town of Vasto d'Ammone perched in the mountains of the Abruzzo region. It was because his father, a highlander curious about civilisation, had gone down to Naples and worked for many years as a museum curator that the ideas of art and of great art had entered into his family. It was because this protector of the ancient gods was also a destroyer of modern monarchies, a poet known for his impetuous songs who so incriminated himself that in 1820 the return of the Bourbons saw him thrown onto English soil. And finally, it was because he married the sister of one of Byron's friends, the doctor Polidori, that his children could gather from the memories, passions and grief of the family an echo of all the great patriotic pains that had unsettled the youth of that century. All of these events were perhaps necessary so that, in March 1848, the Gothic art of Madox Brown left some impression other than that of scandal or outmoded charm on an inhabitant of London. While the English remained indifferent to what would become their national art, the young Italian applauded it with enthusiasm and, thanks to the allowance granted by his grandfather Polidori, began his apprenticeship as a painter. Madox Brown, thinking that the first priority was to force this fiery spirit to conform to the rigid discipline of reality, had the future creator of *Dante's Dream* work at copying tobacco boxes. Rossetti, who had gone through his academic courses without learning much, resigned himself to follow the advice that he had requested, for better or for worse. He worked impatiently, passionately, carelessly and in disorder, cleaning his palette with bits of paper that he threw on the ground and that later stuck to the boots of visitors, starting twelve paintings at once, then falling into complete prostration, weary, disgusted with everything and with himself, finishing nothing, no longer wanting to listen to anyone, and rolling on the ground letting out awful moans. Then he disappeared for a month. Madox Brown was not angered, thinking that his student had heard some voices from the heavens calling him to other work. These voices were those of the "trecentists" (thirteenth-century Italian poets) that he listened to in the libraries, as he was trying

Frederick Sandys,
Morgan-Le-Fay, 1864.
Oil on panel, 61.8 x 43.7 cm.
Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, Birmingham.

John William Waterhouse,
The Lady of Shalott, c. 1894.
Oil on canvas, 120 x 68 cm.
Leeds Art Gallery, Leeds.

William Holman Hunt,
The Lady of Shalott, 1886-1905.
Oil on canvas, 188 x 146 cm.
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT.







