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From the MESSAGE, MEDIUM, CONTEXT research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

In this essay, we shall explore the female side of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Whether that be female muses or artists. We will touch upon beauty, class and race and how these affected the women of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. The brotherhood created a noble manifesto, focusing upon moving away from idealised forms of beauty and using close observation as a key tool in their artist's arsenal. However, no matter how beautiful the paintings they created, the women at the centre of them were real people with often very difficult and complex lives. They were much more than the strong features that the brothers so coveted. Perhaps the movement would have benefitted from more female perspectives and we can only imagine the abundance of accomplished artworks that may have been the result.

Fanny Eaton

Many of us are familiar with the Pre-Raphaelite muses, Elizabeth Siddal, Fanny Cornforth and Annie Miller to name but a handful. Each woman chosen for her appearance, flame-red hair, willowy frames and strong jawlines. These women did not align with the Victorian beauty ideals of the day and that is precisely why they were picked. Artists such as John Everett Millais used real, working-class people as models for works such as 'Christ in the House of His Parents'. The real and un-idealised forms were considered rather shocking by Victorian high society at the time.

Art historian Elizabeth Prettejohn has noted: 'The individuality of each model persists as an identifiable element in the final work'. Fanny Eaton is certainly identifiable as she was a black woman. Eaton was born in Jamaica after the abolishment of slavery. She was born during apprenticeship and therefore officially emancipated and a British citizen. It is assumed that Fanny and her mother made their way to London sometime in the 1840s, in search of a better life. Somehow Eaton began modelling for the artist Simeon Solomon in his work 'The Mother of Moses.' and went on to model for other Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Joanna Wells Boyce.



In his essay 'Fanny Eaton: The 'Other' Pre-Raphaelite Model' Roberto C. Ferrari discuss how 'Eaton's presence in paintings, where she appeared as the main subject, not only focused attention onto the 'Other' in Victorian society, but also challenged assumptions of what a black woman could represent'. It was an incredibly rare position that Fanny Eaton took as a woman of colour during the nineteenth century. One could be forgiven for thinking when looking at Victorian art that there were very few people of colour in Victorian Britain. In a 2014 article from The Guardian discussing a photography show called 'Black Chronicles II' that displays 'the first black people ever photographed in Britain', co-curator of the show Renée Mussai points out 'There is a widespread misconception that black experience in Britain begins with the arrival of the Empire Windrush and the first Jamaican immigrants in 1948, but, as this exhibition shows, there is an incredible archive of images of black people in Britain that goes right back to the invention of photography in the 1830s.' However, Fanny Eaton was of mixed heritage. Neither black nor white. Because of this, the Pre-Raphaelites used Eaton as a stand-in for Hebrew, Oriental and Indian characters. In an article for The Independent, the author Ian Herbert notes 'Ms Eaton is mesmerising in Moore's *Mother of Sisera* and appears in Rosetti's *The Beloved*, two of the exhibition's highlights. But she is an object, not a subject, and the underlying prejudice is revealed by one critic, who wrote in 1867: "A black is eminently picturesque, his colour can be turned to good account in picture-making."'. When observing Joanna Boyce Wells Painting 'Head of a Mulatto Woman (Mrs. Eaton).' Through our modern eyes, her profile is striking, noble and dignified. Perhaps even regal. She is beautiful and aesthetically pleasing- keeping in line with the objectives of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, yet there is an intriguing sensitivity to this piece that



perhaps only exists because its creator was also a woman. The women in the paintings of the brotherhood are stunning in a different way to the ideals of the time, however, they are still overwhelmingly just beautiful. Wells's depiction of Eaton has another layer of personal identity that the brotherhood did not often seem to afford their muses.

Female Painters

Joanna Boyce Wells was the sister of George Price Wells, a watercolour painter and friend of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Her artistic talent was mostly encouraged by her brother and father however the opposite was true of her husband and mother. The reason we have a pre-raphaelite 'brotherhood' in particular is because of the restrictions placed upon victorian women- even the daughters of wine merchants like Wells. Wells was simply not permitted the same opportunities and education as her brother, as it was not viewed as important for women of that time. It is evident within Well's work that had she been afforded those same opportunities, we would be discussing the pre-Raphaelites in a very different way. When Well's first displayed a painting at the Royal Academy in 1855, renowned victorian art Critic John Ruskin had very high praise indeed for the image. He said, 'The dignity of all the treatment—the beautiful imagination of faint but pure colour, place this picture, to my mind, among, those of the very highest power and promise. Complete achievement there is not in it as yet ... but if this artist, looking always to Nature and her own thoughts for the thing to be expressed, will strive to express them, with some memory of the great Venetians in her treatment of each separate hue, it seems to me that she might entertain the hope of taking place in the very first rank of painters.'



Wells died after giving birth to her third child and many great celebrities of the Victorian art world, such as Ruskin, mourned the loss of such a great talent. She was never allowed to realise her full potential due to the constraints of the time she was living in. Interestingly enough it was indeed the men in her life (her father and brother) that perhaps encouraged her the most. Another pre-raphaelite painter with an equally talented sister was Fredrick Sandys. His sister Emma remains a very mysterious figure, there is very little information available about her life. It is also worth noting that many of her paintings were wrongly attributed to her brother and it is only in



recent years that she is being given the recognition that she deserves. Maybe the fact that many of her works were wrongly attributed and that she still casts such a mysterious figure, tells us most of what we need to know about the lives of female contributors of the movement.

Evelyn De Morgan became a part of the later period of the pre-raphaelite movement. Unlike Joanna Boyce Wells, it seems that she was always encouraged to work with her very evident artistic flair and unlike Emma Sandys, there is a considerable amount of her life and work left available to us. She was certainly a very exceptional woman for her time, attending the Slade School of Art, travelling abroad unaccompanied and holding a solo exhibition. It seems that Evelyn De Morgan was infatuated with her work. A diary entry from her seventeenth birthday reads, "At work a little after 7... 17 today, that is to say seventeen years wasted in eating, dawdling and frittering time away... Art is eternal, but life is short... I will make up for it now, I have not a moment to lose." De Morgan was obsessed and it paid off. Her work was (and still is) often mistaken for that of Edward Burne-Jones.

In her painting 'The hourglass' she pokes fun at the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's frequent objectification of women by using one of their favourite models, Jane Morris, to comment upon



how their beauty ideals would be inevitably destroyed by time. Once again, a female perspective lends much more potent meaning to pre-Raphaelite imagery. Her biography found on the Watts Gallery website notes that 'Evelyn's early work defies the Aestheticism it is stylistically similar to as she chose narrative subjects rather than submitting to creating 'art for art's sake' which was central to the movement'.

Julia Margaret Cameron

Julia Margaret Cameron was both an unusual and exceptional woman for her time. She was born in India but grew up in France and came to photography much later in life, at around the age of 48, when her daughter gifted her a camera. Her niece Julia Jackson was the mother of author Virginia Woolf, who went on to write a book about her great aunt's life and work. All in all, a family of utterly remarkable women.

Cameron is recorded as saying, 'My aspirations are to ennoble Photography and to secure for it the character and uses of High Art by combining the real & Ideal & sacrificing nothing of Truth by all

possible devotion to poetry and beauty.' to scientist and photo-chemist Sir John Herschel in December 1864. Cameron had to fight to have her work understood. It was not technical perfection that she was seeking out. What makes her work stand out is the inclusion of scratches, blurring and other imperfections. Cameron made use of her family and servants as models, even celebrities and famous scientists of the time. Her work is perfectly at home amongst the images of the Brotherhood. Whilst Cameron did photograph beautiful women and certainly made art for art's sake her portraiture is more comparable to the paintings of Joanna Boyce Wells, in so much as these women have such intriguing auras surrounding them. Cameron made use of light and dark and blurring certain elements appealing to modernist sensibilities. Furthermore, the way in which she employed such a vast array of scenarios spanning domestic settings and scenes from the bible and literature, shows that Cameron had a deep understanding of the various roles women could play. In 1875 Cameron and her family moved to Ceylon. There is little to no work from this period before her death in 1879. Cameron came from wealth and as a result she was enabled to pursue activities such as photography in a way that other pre-Raphaelite women were simply not able to do. Luckily she donated a vast body of work to what is today The Victoria and Albert Museum



and as a result she has become an important reference for so many of today's artists. Her influence can be seen in work as current as Greta Gerwig's 2019 adaptation of *Little Women*.

This unofficial pre-Raphaelite sisterhood should stand as a testament to the unique strengths of women. These people were not victims, they very much grasped as much personal agency as their time permitted- and ran with it. Undoubtedly, without these women (muses and artists) we simply would not have any of those iconic paintings hanging in galleries today. It is important for current artist to understand their privilege and the debt they owe to sisterhoods such as the Pre-Raphaelites. Of course today, class, gender and race all still remain barriers between women and the art world. Art should be accessible to all, as a society we only stand to benefit from elevating some of these marginalised voices. The pre-Raphaelite women were mothers and sister, daughters and wives. However they were also artists and our world benefits greatly from their sensitive and considerable contribution.

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