



ADAD5003 RESEARCH IN CONTEXT



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Question 3: The distinction lies in the fact that fine art is the idea (brought to life) while an illustration is a depiction (or explanation) of an idea. Fine art is simply art for art's sake. (Apatoff, 2011). Discuss the factors that typically determine whether the pre-Raphaelite artists can be labelled fine artists or illustrators (giving examples), and the connotations of this labelling.

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This essay will explore the artwork of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were a group of around seven intellectuals who were artists and often poets or social commentators of the mid-1800s. Their artworks are very well known in Britain and indeed across the world as the movement changed artistic trends immeasurably. The Pre-Raphaelite artists, primarily Dante Rossetti, William Hunt and John Millais, rejected what was the conventional attitude to great art believing it to be unrealistic and lacking in emotional intensity or meaning. They preferred expressing the idea of a story, text or situation. Wherever possible they painted from life yet they painted to illustrate what they had read, which is why the term **illustrative** artists is best suited to them. We are still very familiar with their paintings in the twenty first century, as they feature in galleries and museums - or perhaps on calendars and in literature we read. Art collectors are fascinated with their paintings and illustrations. Their book illustrations in the later 1800s were used by the biggest publishers of the time, like Routledge of London, as they knew the illustrations were as meaningful and popular as the texts themselves. Andrew Lloyd-Webber is one such celebrity who enthuses about their work and their focus on 'extraordinary doomed women' (*Andrew Lloyd Webber - A Passion For The Pre-Raphaelites. 2011*) . This essay discusses these artists as illustrators as opposed to fine artists, exploring the distinction between the two.

Many artists find the distinction between what fine art is and how it compares to illustration a difficult one to understand. Some have explained it simply as follows: fine art is much more creative, original and produced for exhibition, whereas illustration is more 'supportive in purpose' and 'commercial in sense' (Bailey, 2017) , usually for mass reproduction via printing press. If this is the case then the Pre-Raphaelites are straddled somewhere between the two. Their work was often illustrative and depicted Bible stories or Literary Works – yet the creation of these accompanying drawings and paintings were highly creative and original, with symbolic features and interpretation which set them on an equal footing sometimes with the original text they were illustrating.

The original three members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were all young artists born in the late 1820s and who had gone on to study Art at the Royal Academy of Art, founded in 1768. All young art students earned their craft there. The three founding members of the 'PRB' as they called themselves - Millais, Rossetti and Hunt, were forced to study Renaissance Art as students, especially that of the Italian Raphael. They acknowledged and respected his great skill but were not in favour of the unnatural and decadent style themselves, feeling that it did not capture

reality and the truth of everyday lives. Raphael's paintings were idealised and for example showed biblical figure with no imperfections or expression. Here in **'The Madonna of the Pinks'** (Raphael, 1506) , Raphael has painted Mary as cherubic and flawless. Jesus, similarly, has no marks or imperfections. This can be greatly contrasted with a painting by John Millais much later, who depicted what he saw as the reality of family life for Jesus. This painting, **'Christ in the House of His Parents'** (Millais, 1849) caused outrage at the time as it was almost seen as blasphemous to suggest that such individuals might have been flawed in any way. Millais' painting focused on gritty realism of Joseph's veins and bruises as well as the harsh details of Jesus' overgrown toenails and very vivid bloodstains on his hands. Also, Millais composition differed so much to that of Raphael. The Italian had used what was called the Pyramid Structure which placed Jesus as the focus whereas in Millais painting there is just as much focus on the smaller details, like the swollen hands of St Ann. The press at the time were highly critical of this painting of Millais with Dickens calling it 'vile' and 'ugly'. Millais and his contemporaries also injected a vibrancy into the colours used in these religious depictions, creating a new emerald green colour and using varnish in their paint to create mirror like effect. It could be argued then that although Millais was an illustrator of the Bible, painting to support what he had read, he was also imaginative, creative and actually providing an interpretation which was original and thought-provoking. He is creating fine art when illustrating an idea.



'The Madonna of the Pinks' Raphael 1507



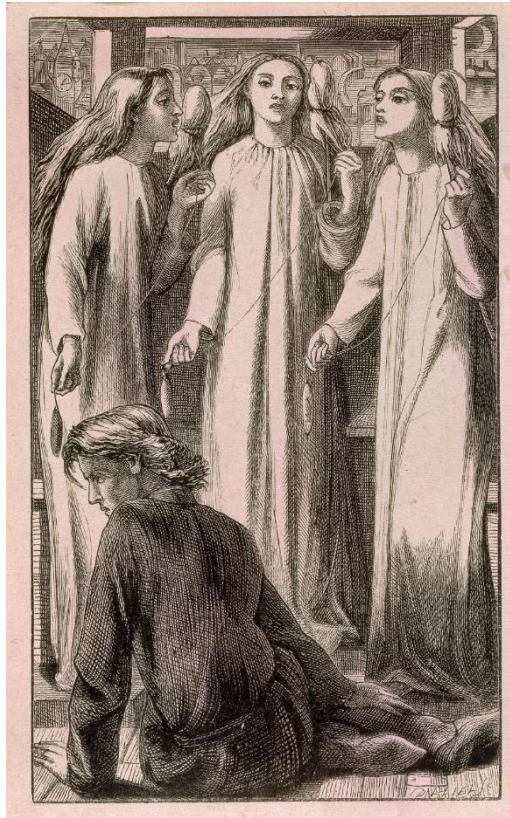
'Christ in the House of His Parents' Millais 1849 – 50

One of the most literary of the Pre-Raphaelite artists was Dante Gabriel Rossetti, another student who was revolutionary in spirit, a poet at heart. He also originally focused on religious themes but quickly moved on to painting and drawing subjects from literature – especially poetry and Shakespeare. Like his fellow pre-Raphaelites he was concerned that his work depicted the reality behind key figures in literature, doing much more than just illustrate. Rossetti used symbolism and in doing so drew the viewers attention to small details which told them so much about the life of the subject. This meant that the work of the pre-Raphaelites worked as an interpretation of the literature and stories they painted, as a social commentary often of what they saw behind these great characters. They illustrated but attached meaning and were highly suggestive in their choices of focus and colour.



'The Anunciation' Rossetti 1849 – 50

In **'The Anunciation'** for example, Rossetti depicts Mary as a simply clothed young girl who is downcast and reluctant to accept the lily and Gabriel's holiness is downplayed. The expression and emotion is the focus in this painting so there is what Professor Alison Smith in the BBC documentary (BBC, *The Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Revolutionaries* 2014) calls 'intimacy' and a drawing in of the viewer straight into the painting, so we can experience something of that moment. Professor Smith tells us that Rossetti liked to have what he himself called *'free reign to allegorise on my own hook'* and this is why the pre-Raphaelites were not simply illustrators. Professor Goldman in his lectures (Goldman, 2010) suggests that in the painting **'The Maids of Elphinmere'** (Rossetti, 1855), Rossetti is actually 'placing himself as illustrator on an equal footing with the poem itself'. Therefore the role of the illustrator is so much more than someone slavishly attempting to copy the details of the story. Instead, Rossetti believed they were commenting on it and emphasising what they believe should be taken from the text.



Maids of Elfen-Mere, Rossetti, published 1855.

In his blog, David Apatoff (Apatoff, 2011) explores some of the views on the difference between fine art and illustration that he has heard over time like:

‘The **distinction** lies in the fact that **art** is the idea (brought to life) while an **illustration** is a depiction (or explanation) of an idea. **Fine Art** is simply **art** for **art's** sake. ... But **illustration** is illustrating a story or idea’

Yet, he feels that essentially the only difference is how the artist gets paid. Illustrators could enter into a very profitable mass production industry. But the nature of the work itself could be fine art even if it is an illustration. Millais was probably more successful in entering the more commercial world of the published illustrator later in the 1800s as both Rossetti and Hunt would spend vast amounts of time agonising over illustrations and paintings. Millais had a more varied and diverse interest in not just drawing from literature and religious texts, but also children’s books and periodicals of special interest. Professor Goldman’s lecture points out that Millais was allegedly very good at meeting tight deadlines (Goldman, 2010). The Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood’s founders all contributed to an illustrated copy of Tennyson’s poems – ‘**The**

Moxon Tennyson' (*Poems Moxon edition*) and of the illustrations, 18 designs were Millais', 7 were Hunt's and just 5 were Rossetti's. In 1882, Millais was still producing illustrations for books on a range of topics. Millais illustration was ranging from the mystical and religious aspects of the poems like '**St Agnes Eve**' (*Poems Moxon edition*) where he makes much of the movement and feeling in the poem, drawing the reader's attention to the finer details of 'breath turning to vapour'. That was what was original about the Pre-Raphaelites' illustrations. They were so true to the life of the subjects depicted in the written works.



'St Agnes Eve' by Millais, 1855 – 57 *'breath turning to vapour'*

It is important to recognise the influence of John Ruskin on the works of the three main Pre-Raphaelites, Millais, Rossetti and Hunt. During the mid-1800s the brotherhood were suffering from vast public

approbation where key newspapers and periodicals were criticising their work. There seemed to be a dislike of their audacious attempt to revolutionise the art practices of the nineteenth century. They were young and rebellious, keen to capture the spirit of the revolutionary passion elsewhere in Europe with Karl Marx inciting sympathies for the working class. This did not sit well with the establishments of the time and many refused to buy their work. Critics labelled the work of Hunt calling it 'frantic trash' because there was an intimacy in his work, with the focus not on what art critics would expect and there was also the use of secondary scenes within his paintings to suggest the life that surrounded the subject. He was interpreting lives and situations for himself and this was adding an extra dimension to art and illustration. All three artists were more enthusiastic about earlier Al Fresco paintings of the earlier 'pre-Raphael' school, such as Giotto. There was more realism and an attempt to paint from life in these al fresco illustrations and this is what the brotherhood felt was what should represent literature and ideas.



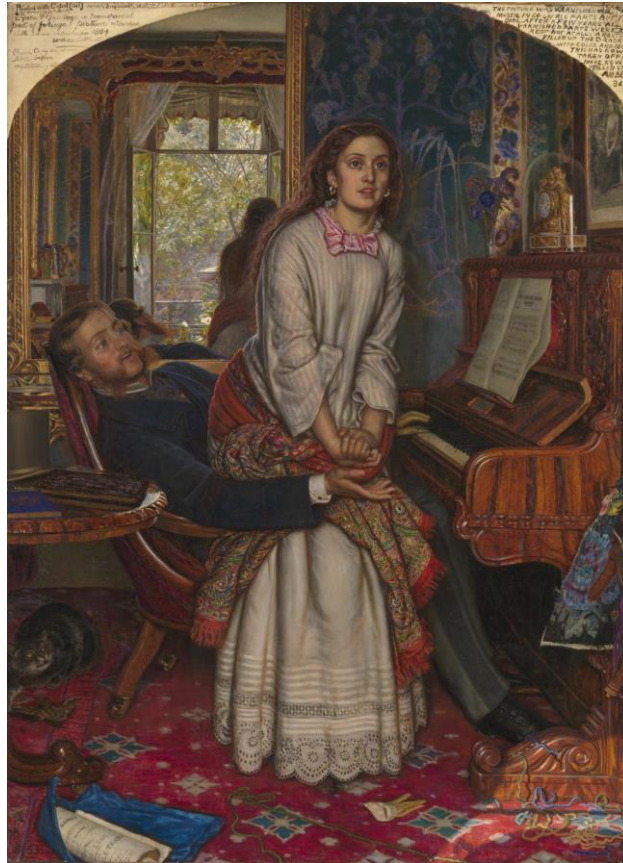
Details of figures from the *Raising of Drusiana* in the Peruzzi Chapel, Giotto circa 1320

Dante, Millais and Hunt met regularly and celebrated the writing of the well-respected Art Critic and writer John Ruskin who had written that artists and writers must 'go to nature' (Ruskin, 1903) in their work. They interpreted this as an important return to the lives of the everyday, hence their preoccupation with working class lives in particular. They wanted to capture modern urban life and were often very focused on the position of women within that landscape. Professor Alison Smith (BBC, 2014) describes how women of literature were clearly of interest, an example being Millais '**Mariana**' (Millais, 1851), where he captures the

boredom and frustrations of Shakespeare's character perfectly and it allegedly drew many women to flock around for hours in recognition of the feeling conveyed in this painting. Professor Smith also comments on Hunt's fascination with drawing the prostitute, probably his most famous being **'The Awakening Conscience'** in 1853 where he explores what Smith terms the 'role of the kept woman'. There is so much symbolism in the detail of this painting, like the discard glove and the trapped bird being eyed by the cat, that Hunt is providing a social commentary on the difficulties for the kept woman which was thought-provoking. Rossetti's painting **'Found'** does a similar thing – draws our attention to the predicament the poor woman finds herself in, echoed by the netted sheep behind her. These men were probing the attitudes of the middle classes and especially attitudes to what Andrew Lloyd Webber (an enthusiast and collector of their paintings) called their passion for the 'extraordinary doomed woman'. (BBC, 2011)



Mariana, John Millais 1851



The Awakening Conscience, William Hunt 1853



'Found', Rossetti 1854

After a period of an unpopular reputation within the art world in the mid-1850s, the pre-Raphaelites had some good luck in the shape of John Ruskin, who wrote a letter to the Times newspaper in support of their artworks. Ruskin was likely to be an admirer of their determination to celebrate the working class individuals, as he was a strong supporter of Marx, which meant he disliked snobbery and the way the hard-working lower classes were taken for granted and exploited. After seeing the pre-Raphaelites focus on the light of women and the attention they gave to the everyday working lives of the urban landscape, he was willing to celebrate their work as very important in its realism. (BBC, 2014). The Victorian Web gives details of the exhibition in the Tate Gallery where Ruskin, Turner's and the pre-Raphaelite paintings were exhibited and claims that his interest in them was that he felt they were kindred spirits 'Ruskin sprang to the defence of the PRB cause in 1851 (and in 1854) with letters to *The Times*, believing that their aims embodied his own' (Gamble, 2010).

In conclusion, it seems that the pre-Raphaelite artists were highly creative and certainly innovators in the world of art, which, if you read some definitions of fine art would include such artists as Rossetti, Hunt and Millais. They wanted to use art to provoke reactions – which is what fine art aims to do. However, they were primarily drawing and painting to support and accompany great literature and biblical content, so whilst they were creative, they can be classed as the very best kinds of illustrators. They added to texts, they drew key ideas and new thoughts from the texts and in doing that, they were very fine artists in their own right.

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