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Gothic Art for the Industrial Age:

The Middle Ages Revisited in the Art of the Pre-Raphaelites

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A lecture by Stephen Fliegal presented to members of the Cleveland's Rowfant Club and Columbus, Ohio's Aldus Society at the Cleveland Museum of Art, November 10, 2002. Dr. Fliegal is curator of Medieval Art for the Cleveland Museum of Art. Pictures of art, artifacts, manuscripts and architecture referenced in the text of the lecture do not accompany the text of this lecture.

The works of the Pre-Raphaelites are among the best-known and best-loved of all English paintings, and yet there has been an unfortunate tendency over the years to dismiss them as mere Victoriana, and to deny them their proper place in the history of art. The Pre-Raphaelite movement itself spanned some fifty years, roughly the second half of the 19th century. As an artistic movement, it cannot be defined simply as a single style since it comprised artists of varying talents, artistic personalities, and visual tendencies. When most of us think of the Pre-Raphaelite painters we generally summon to mind memorable, almost iconic images of beautiful long-haired women in medieval dress, or scenes drawn from English history and Arthurian legend. While the Pre-Raphaelites were also interested in contemporary Victorian life, there is, to be sure, a fascination, some might call it an obsession, with that vast epoch we know as the Middle Ages. Nineteenth-century England had discovered the Middle Ages anew. Heroic pictures like Sir Francis Dicksee's *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, shown on your left, or Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Joan of Arc*, fed the insatiable appetite of a public now steeped in the poetry of Keats and Tennyson, Sir Walter Scott's historic novels, and in Gothic Revival architecture. In 1819, when Sir Walter Scott published his novel *Ivanhoe*, 12,000 copies were sold within the first few weeks following its publication – an astronomical number for the time. It is against the backdrop of Victorian medievalism that the Pre-Raphaelites launched their journey backwards in time.

Victorian "medievalism" was a complex movement, the origins of which extend back far beyond the Victorians themselves, and whose impact can be felt well into our own century. It was made up of many components—the Gothic Revival, essentially a movement of design—being just one of these. It embraces art and architecture, literature and philosophy, economics and sociology, as well as politics and religion. At the height of the Revival scarcely an aspect of life remained untouched by it. Visually, it changed the face of the English-speaking world and influenced public taste even into our own times. In art, the Gothic Revival reflects a shift from the use of classical sources, the subject of post-Renaissance art, and the rediscovery of northern traditions. It connected immediately to the rise of English nationalism in the nineteenth century. At this time the word "England" came to stand, metonymically, for the whole of Great Britain and even in some configurations, for the British Empire. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Pre-Raphaelites helped re-invent St. George, the patron saint of England, who destroyed the dragon and saved the princess. But what, we must ask, were the Victorians looking for in an age so unlike their own?

Victorian medievalism has often been characterized as a form of anti-modern dissent. The feudal system, monastic institutions, the code of chivalry, and the romantic reputation of the Middle Ages offered an escape from, or solutions to, 19th –century problems of social order, industrialization, poverty, and crises of faith. I show you on the right the Royal Albert Memorial in London, built between 1863 and 1872 after the design of George Gilbert Scott. The monument clearly relies on 14th-century English perpendicular architecture for its inspiration. And on your left is Scott's St. Pancras Railway Station and Hotel, built in 1863 and still one of London's busiest stations.

In the early nineteenth century, the Gothic style of architecture was increasingly used by owners of actual medieval manors and castles as the appropriate style for refurbishments, or by builders who wished to establish a link with the medieval past, and hence with English antiquity. This is Haddon Hall in Derbyshire. Originally built towards the end of the 15th century, it is typical of the vernacular medieval architecture in England of the sort Victorian owners loved to emulate. In the 1820s and 30s, the Gothic style became more archaeological in character as owners of such medieval houses sought furnishings based upon genuine medieval sources, and earlier Gothic Revival structures were criticized for the lack of fidelity to ancient models.

The art critic and social philosopher, John Ruskin, was one of the most eloquent and widely read champions of Gothic architecture during the 19th century. He is shown here in a portrait of 1854 by John Everett Millais. In his book, *The Stones of Venice*, published the year before, Ruskin devoted a chapter to "The Nature of Gothic", in which he praised Gothic architecture for "the magnificent science of its structure, and the sacredness of its expression." As a young man Ruskin had toured the Continent where he was deeply affected by her Gothic buildings such as Rouen Cathedral, shown here in an early photograph.

Ruskin praised the freedom with which craftsmen worked in the Gothic age, noting the great variations in structure and ornamentation seen when comparing Gothic buildings of different periods and regions. He proposed that this perceived freedom resulted in an art that was vibrant and reflected the individuality of each craftsman, unlike the dull, repetitive quality of factory-produced objects after the Industrial Revolution. Ruskin's assessment was, needless to say, fanciful and overly romanticized. Nevertheless, *The Stones of Venice* was a resounding indictment against the industrialism of the Victorian Age and the price we must pay for mass production and mechanical finish. Ruskin advocated a return to Gothic principles and medieval models as the only way out.

The architect, Augustus Welby Pugin, while working with Charles Barry, designed much of the sculpture and decoration for London's Houses of Parliament, built between 1832 and 1840. Pugin was along with Ruskin one of the most enthusiastic and forceful exponents of the Middle Ages in the 19th century. He looked back to this period as the fusion of all that was best in art, religion, and society, and saw in its Gothic architecture, Catholic faith, and feudal order correctives to the problems of the present. Pugin's Gothic principles were extended beyond architecture alone to include furniture, silver, and other branches of the decorative arts. I show you here a Gothic chalice of 1849, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art's collection, and a monstrance made by his firm in 1850, as examples. The monstrance is in St. Mary's Church, Clapham. Pugin was absolutely fastidious in his adaptation of original medieval designs. I think this is evident when we compare the fidelity of his designs with an authentic medieval object. On your right is a late 15th century German monstrance from the Guelph Treasure.

As far as solutions went, Pugin was convinced that only a spiritual revival could recreate the ideal of the medieval church. Only when moral values were restored would great architecture and liturgical furnishings once more be produced. For Pugin, this return to the medieval church became a personal reality when, in 1833, he converted to Roman Catholicism. Henceforth, most of his designs were made for churches within that faith, as for example the Roman Catholic cathedral in Birmingham shown on the right.

Like Pugin, critics, artists, and social reformers were quick to see parallels between the decline of Victorian architecture and the decline of post-medieval society. By the early 1870s, John Ruskin advocated a social philosophy crafted after the medieval model. He believed in the rightness and inevitability of inequality in the world. He conceived of the state as a hierarchic structure, like the feudal system of the Middle Ages, where each class is dependent on the one above it. The inspiration for such relationships, he believed, was to be found in the medieval ideal of chivalry. By chivalry he means the protection of the weak by the strong, which is the responsibility of the rich and the wellborn. In return for this protection, according to Ruskin, the masses will be expected to be obedient to their superiors. This well-known miniature from Jean de Berry's *Très Riches Heures* of about 1412 seems the perfect exemplar of Ruskin's philosophy: happy and contented peasants toiling beneath the baronial manor house, secure and protected by their lord, and wanting for nothing.

The Victorian medieval revival was already in full swing when in September 1848 seven men, each about 20 years old, gathered in a London house and founded a secret society called the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The term was culled from their conviction that the painting of Raphael was the origin of a bankrupt academic tradition. Three friends and former students of the Royal Academy of Art, Dante Gabriel Rosetti, seen here on the left, William Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais, seen on the right in a self-portrait, provided the driving force behind the Brotherhood. They would look backwards to the late Middle Ages, and to its great masters, Fra Angelico, Jan van Eyck, and Hans Memling for technique and method. Much of their subject matter would be gleaned directly from sources such as Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, or through the more recent literature of Walter Scott, John Keats, and Alfred Tennyson.

Among the earliest efforts of the Brotherhood was a scheme to illustrate Keats's poem "Isabella". Each member was to submit a design for the poem, which was to be executed entirely on these new principles. Millais's painting of 1849, shown on the right, clearly reveals a deliberated attempt at working in an unfamiliar and archaic style. The minute attention to detail, seen in the costumes and fabric, suggest a direct if hasty study of medieval panel or miniature painting much like those lavishly clad figures found in the *Très Riches Heures*. Yet, at the same time there is something contrived and unnatural about this painting, probably the result of Millais's early intellectual uncertainty. What is immediately noticeable in *Isabella* is the use of bright pigments on a white ground, a hallmark of Pre-Raphaelite technique. The effect, I think you will agree, startles as much today as it did in 1849.

Another example of Millais's highly medievalized paintings is this illustration of Mariana of 1851, bejeweled with color, and directly inspired by lines from the Tennyson poem. Millais is clearly fascinated here with the sumptuous coloring of medieval manuscripts and the fine brush technique of Memling and Van Eyck. The deep blue of Mariana's dress contrasts vividly with the intense colors of the stained glass that Millais copied from the windows of Merton College Chapel in Oxford. His painting derives in

spirit from Flemish panels like the well-known *Arnolfini Marriage Portrait* painted in 1434 by Jan van Eyck.

Women feature largely in the pictures of the Pre-Raphaelites. Indeed, the term "Pre-Raphaelite" now denotes a particular feminine look, with cascades of rippling hair, a long neck and soulful eyes. The role of Woman as Muse to the Pre-Raphaelite imagination is well-established and explored in the art historical literature. Many of Rossetti's paintings of women were, in fact, studies of his favorite model, Jane, the wife of William Morris. But what of women's experience in real life? How did women fare in the Pre-Raphaelite Circle? Thanks to the wealth of biographical information—unusual for women in most phases of art and history—we know a good deal about Pre-Raphaelite private life, and the connections and contrasts between art and reality. It is important not to confuse the two, nor to read biography into or from the pictures; even in portraiture, the distance between art and life is always significant.

Several of the Pre-Raphaelite painters were raised in unusually egalitarian families, where brothers and sisters shared artistic interests. Hunt's sister Emily was an aspiring artist; Joanna Boyce studied in Paris and encouraged her brother George in his career; Rosa Brett painted as well as kept house for her brother John. Simeon Solomon was close to his brother Abraham and sister Rebecca, themselves accomplished painters, and both Frederick Sandys and his sister Emma were taught by their artist father. In this post-Romantic period, however, artistic genius was widely regarded as an exclusively male attribute. Many went as far as Ruskin to claim that "no woman could paint" in the sense of producing great works. For this reason among others, the works of women artists seldom made their way into public collections. But the Pre-Raphaelite group was notable for its encouragement of women's artistic achievements; indeed, a whole sisterhood of female contemporaries, whose work is only now being rediscovered, existed alongside the male painters.

Victorian interest in the Middle Ages was, by the mid-19th century, accompanied by growing concern about authenticity of detail. Precision and verisimilitude became almost obligatory in the reconstruction of the past, and artists and writers were forced to take account of a wealth of archaeological data that both informed and extended their knowledge of medieval history. The London-based Pre-Raphaelites could turn to many sources in that city for historical reference. Monuments such as Westminster Abbey with its royal tombs provided historic examples of medieval forms and ornamentation, while the newly founded South Kensington Museum, later re-named the Victoria & Albert Museum, became an important repository for medieval works of art.

The 19th century was the great age of collecting medieval art, which was by then flooding the art market. The French Revolution, the decline and dissolution of princely houses in a Europe that was slowly democratizing, the secularization of monasteries—all of these were dispersing great and small medieval treasures across Europe and North America. Many of these will today be found in America's great museums. On the left, for example, is the great 12th-century Limoges enamel cross, now in this museum. It is often referred to as the "Spitzer Cross", after its 19th century Parisian owner, Frederic Spitzer. And on the right, I show you the so-called "Strogonoff Ivory" named after the Russian ex-patriate, Gregor Strogonoff, who owned this 11th-century Byzantine ivory while residing in Rome at the end of the 19th century. Such objects were highly sought after by eager 19th century collectors, steeped with enthusiasm for Medieval culture. The ramifications were especially great for medieval illuminated manuscripts which, in the 19th century, were often sold by weight. This unfortunately was largely a time

in which medieval manuscripts were dismembered, their exquisite miniatures removed and pasted into albums much like modern family snapshots, and their texts and bindings thrown away.

The Italian abbot turned art dealer, Luigi Celotti, acquired from Napoleon's soldiers a large number of illuminated manuscripts that they had looted from the Sistine Chapel in 1798. These he dismembered and sold profitably at Christie's in London on May 26, 1825. I show you a beautiful miniature from this Sistina group by Matteo da Milano, that passed from Celotti to the Englishman, William Ottley, and eventually by gift to this museum. John Ruskin, himself the owner of over one hundred illuminated manuscripts wrote in his diary in 1854: "Cut Missal up in evening—hard work." And here I show you an actual manuscript leaf excised by Ruskin from a 14th century antiphonal. Needless to say, medieval manuscripts by the tens of thousands, furniture, ivories, metalwork, paintings, were all finding their way into British homes, sometimes those of the middle class, and at modest cost. Suits of armor, for example, could be purchased in the 1830s for 25 to 30 pounds sterling apiece. Serious collectors were more pedantic about their purchases and provided authentic Gothic settings for the display of their collections. The work of scholarly societies played an important part in the encouragement and maintenance of new standards of accuracy in this sphere. Between 1834 and 1836 alone, twelve new antiquarian societies were founded, all of which produced journals to document their findings.

This data was assembled and catalogued by a new breed of historian, the antiquary, who to some extent replaced the 18th century connoisseur as the 19th-century collector and scholar. His knowledge was specialist rather than cultured, his activities painstaking rather than inspired, and his collections made on the basis of research rather than on taste alone.

Unlike the wealthy amateur, the Victorian antiquarian was not necessarily a member of the moneyed classes. A plethora of publications on historical costume, architecture, and genealogy were addressed to the educated, but not always leisured, sections of society. This was the world of Pre-Raphaelite medievalism. Medieval art was there to be studied or owned by those so inclined.

One of Edward Burne-Jones's most important early pictures, *The Merciful Knight*, painted in 1863, shows a serious attempt at historical veracity and scholarly observation. The knight's armor is an accurately rendered German field suit of about 1480, complete with sallet helmet, much like that shown on the left. Burne-Jones may have studied such armor at the Royal Armouries in the White Tower of the Tower of London. The Tower complex with its armouries was a major tourist attraction during the 19th century, drawing artists and casual sightseers in droves, much as it does today. Burne-Jones would surely have used this important repository to research the historical accuracy and ornamental detail of his knight's armor. *The Merciful Knight* illustrates the story of the 11th-century Florentine knight, Sir John Gualberto, who was miraculously embraced by Christ in token of a deed of mercy performed on Good Friday. The minor glitch is that Burne-Jones's knight wears 15th-century articulated plate armor, as yet unknown in the 11th century.

Another interesting study of chivalry and knighthood is Millais's 1857 picture, *Sir Isumbras at the Ford*, shown on the left, clearly meant to convey symbolic meaning and pathos. Here the inspiration is likely to be Dürer's 1513 engraving, *The Knight, Death, and the Devil*, with its own apocalyptic and moralistic imagery. Similarly, a study in chalk and watercolor by Edward Burne-Jones entitled the *Sleep of King Arthur in Avalon*, with its eerie and etherial atmosphere suggests a direct knowledge of the funerary sculpture of the *Tomb of Philippe Pot*, shown on the right. The sculpture, carved by Antoine le

Moitourier in the 1440s, is preserved in the Louvre in Paris. It must have been seen by Burne-Jones when he visited the Louvre with William Morris in 1855.

During the Middle Ages, the literature of chivalry became a popular form of entertainment, disseminated through poetry and song, among Europe's cultured and wealthy elite. Medieval nobility were steeped in the courtly literature of Arthur, Gawain, and Tristan. They ordered fine illuminated manuscripts, objects of daily life such as ivory boxes, combs, and even furniture, decorated with representations taken from Arthurian romance. Four centuries later, chivalry, once again, became a powerful magnet, this time for literate, largely middle class, Victorians familiar with King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table through the poetry of Tennyson and Keats. Rossetti in painting, like Tennyson in literature, turned to Arthurian themes. Sir Thomas Malory's treatment of Arthurian legends in the 15th century was to provide a large pool of subjects for Victorian writers and later for the Pre-Raphaelites, all attracted by his intensely medieval, chivalrous and romantic atmosphere. Bold knights and fair ladies were much appreciated by the Victorian public. This pen and ink drawing by Rossetti was originally intended to form a mural, one in a series of ten, to decorate the upper walls of the Oxford Union Hall. The scene recounts the sad and fateful episode of the Round Table in which Lancelot visits Guinevere in her chamber while Arthur is away hunting. The couple is discovered and challenged by the remaining knights. Lancelot fights and defeats them despite having only a sword and no armor. Guinevere is subsequently accused of treason and condemned to death at the stake. She is dramatically rescued by Lancelot, but the conflict between Lancelot and Arthur leads to the dissolution of the Round Table.

Two years later, in 1859, Rossetti painted what would be the last of his medievalist watercolors, his *Sir Galahad at the Ruined Chapel*. This watercolor is based directly on Tennyson's poem "Sir Galahad" of 1842. It reveals Galahad as the purest of Arthur's knights, whose celibacy and spirituality, serve to counterbalance the character of Lancelot. Galahad ultimately achieves the Holy Grail, and following Tennyson's poem, the Chapel of the Forest is revealed only to be a vision. Typical of Pre-Raphaelite treatment of Arthurian legend, Rossetti's study seems ambivalent, oscillating between accurate representation and moral homily.

During the Middle Ages, images of devotion and salvation were brought close to the viewer in order to encourage an emotional response. Works of art played a major role in this form of spirituality. Not only did medieval artists produce pictures for those who could not read, they also created images for those who, above all, wanted to have scenes of their salvation tangibly before them. The function of these images can be summarized in three ways: instruction, veneration and remembrance. Lay people were taught how to pray and ordinary believers were trained in the spiritual values that had evolved in the claustral world of the monastics. In addition to illuminated prayer books, the private quarters of a nobleman's residence were often adorned with small paintings, either diptychs or triptychs, such as this one on the right by the Italian painter, Duccio. They were made in such a way that the owner could put them on display wherever he was—by standing them on a table, hanging them on a wall, or, if it were small enough, he could even wear it around his neck. Devotional images were a transfixing conduit between the believer and the object of his or her devotions. This culture of prayer had been long lost by a Victorian society deep in the midst of a crisis of faith. While beautiful, though sentimental, medieval spirituality is obviously lacking in Pre-Raphaelite depictions of sacred subjects. A common devotional image during the later Middle Ages was the Annunciation. The Virgin Mary is usually shown in prayer as

she receives the Archangel Gabriel who announces the Immaculate Conception. Again, I use Duccio as an example.

For the Pre-Raphaelites, this powerful medieval image was a natural subject for pictorial art. Yet the painting of 1858 by Arthur Hughes, shown on the left, clearly lacks the conviction of faith and spirituality present in medieval Annunciations. The figures are stiff and the expressions blank and the composition is essentially contrived. Burne-Jones was slightly more successful with his guache Annunciation of 1861. However, his 1879 interpretation of the subject has clearly advanced in anticipation of art nouveau.

Of all the Pre-Raphaelite artists, William Morris drew on the Middle Ages more consistently than most of his contemporaries—as a craftsman, poet, and political thinker. One way in which the Pre-Raphaelite tradition lingered on was in various forms of the Arts and Crafts Movement, sponsored by Morris, and also in his utopian socialism. For Morris, the Medieval Revival, of which the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was part, reflected a sense of loss for a pre-industrial society with a coherent system of beliefs, and became, in one sense, a retrospective search for solace, inspiration, and ideals. William Morris was born in 1834 when the revival was already in full swing, and the Middle Ages remained until the end of his life in 1896 a constant source of inspiration for him. Morris re-evaluated the notion of the Middle Ages as an era of accidental confusion between two periods of order, the classical and the modern.

By the time he went up to Oxford as a student in January 1853, the association of medievalism and the social question was a comparatively familiar one in intellectual circles. Oxford was when Morris arrived still essentially a medieval town in all appearances. I show you here the Duke Humphrey wing of Oxford University's Bodleian Library, built between 1445 and 1489. And this is a view of the choir vaults of Oxford Cathedral begun in 1480. Morris would have known both of these buildings. It was at Oxford that Morris met fellow student Burne-Jones, and it was there that both men familiarized themselves with the writings of Ruskin and learned of the existence of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. [L34-R36] The Middle Ages for Morris was a fascinating dreamworld which fired the imagination with images of romance and mystery exemplified here by his 1858 picture of *La Belle Iseult*.

Fundamentally, however, Morris found Ruskin's brand of paternal politics and philosophical bias to be unacceptable. He instead chose to graft Ruskinian ideas about art and society onto his own democratic socialism. For Morris, medieval history was important in that it provided the Victorian reformer with attractive pictures of the perceived democracy of medieval institutions, of the fraternity of guilds, and of the creative freedom of the medieval craftsman.

Morris's interests ultimately came to rest upon the arts and crafts, the so-called decorative arts, through which he became one of the chief theorists and sponsors of Britain's Arts and Crafts Movement. The movement was a reaction against the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. Its aesthetic was therefore based on social and moral considerations. The Arts and Crafts Movement was essentially anti-academic, celebrating the virtues of individualism and the designer's right to experiment and to explore the full possibilities of his materials. Both as a theorist, as well as in his practice as a designer, William Morris was the greatest single influence on the Arts and Crafts Movement. He founded his firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. in 1861. In its early stages the venture was essentially of Pre-Raphaelite inspiration – Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, and Ford Madox Brown also being founders. At first the firm worked mainly for ecclesiastical clients, and at the outset stained glass formed the major part of its production. Furniture, some metalwork, and tiles were also produced. But it was not until after the 1870s that Morris began to concentrate on the designing of wallpapers and fabrics. The

wallpapers were hand-printed from wood blocks, and his weaves and prints were similarly all made by hand. In 1888, Morris was inspired to set up his own printing press after hearing a talk given by Emery Walker to the Crafts Exhibition Society. Once again, he spurned the commercial short-cut—his paper was hand-made, his inks were imported from Hannover, and since he loathed the typefaces that were commercially available, he designed three faces for the press based upon 15th-century types. Always, the medieval craftsman provided the model and the inspiration.

The Pre-Raphaelite fascination with the Middle Ages was to some degree also linked to contemporary thought about religion. Strong feelings and influential spokesmen, concentrated in the Oxford Movement in the 1830s, called for a return to medieval rituals and ceremonies. The High Anglican Church became the patron of Gothic architecture and the Tractarians advocated the use of crosses, candlesticks, altarcloths and vestments. Thus they sought to invest the contemporary church with the mystery and awe that they imagined would revitalize belief.

Nineteenth century medievalism fostered the sense of brotherhood and affection between men. This related to a conception, widespread at the time, of the pre-industrial past as a time of sociability. Contemporaries were very conscious of what they perceived as a breakdown of social feeling in their own age. Neighborliness and old communities were thought to have disappeared and connections between individuals to have broken down. The thread, therefore, which holds together the many different expressions of medievalism is the desire to return to an ordered yet organically vital society in the face of great social change. For the artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the Middle Ages was viewed increasingly as a golden age of faith, stability and creativity. They would look back longingly to an agrarian past, thought of as "Merry England", when institutions such as the manor or the village bound men together in relationships strengthened by mutual interests and affections. In so doing, the Pre-Raphaelites argued convincingly that the art of the present could indeed equal the art of the past.

For me, the Pre-Raphaelites were selective idealists. They, and critics like Ruskin and Morris were as much about social reform as they were about art. Perhaps therein lay the problem. Their vision of the Middle Ages as an historical epoch was clouded by a moral overlay, thus obscuring the veracity of their perception of medieval life and art. In their selective vision, they saw medieval society only in terms of its achievements, which are many, and in terms of its romantic trappings, but never with the realist's eye to its brutality, endemic warfare, disease and class inequality. Writing in 1923, about 30 years after the death of William Morris, the great Dutch historian, Johann Huizinga, described the Middle Ages with the following words:

To the world when it was half a thousand years younger, the outlines of all things seemed more clearly marked than to us. The contrast between suffering and joy, between adversity and happiness, appeared more striking. Calamities and indigence were more afflicting than at present; it was more difficult to guard against them, and to find solace. Illness and health presented a more striking contrast; the cold and darkness of winter were more real evils. Honors and riches were relished with greater avidity and contrasted more vividly with surrounding misery. … At the close of the Middle Ages, a sombre melancholy weighs on people's souls. Whether we read a chronicle, a poem, a sermon, a legal document even, the same impression of immense sadness is produced by them all. It would sometimes seem as if this period had been particularly unhappy, as if it had left behind only the memory of violence, of covetousness and mortal hatred, as if it had known no other enjoyment but that of intemperance, of pride and of cruelty.

Well, the truth is really somewhere between the idealism of the Pre-Raphaelites and the pessimism of Huizinga.

For me the great achievement of Victorian medievalism was that it laid the foundation for the academic study of medieval European history and civilization. The great medieval historians of the next century: Erwin Panofsky, Johann Huizinga, Charles Homer Haskins; Marc Bloch; David Knowles, Etienne Gilson, not to mention the Oxford "Fantasists", C.S. Lewis and J.R. Tolkien, all owed something to the legacy of Ruskin and Morris. The Pre-Raphaelites and other Victorians stimulated an intellectual interest in medieval civilization, where such interest was lacking before. And let us be honest, they produced some profoundly beautiful paintings. Carefully studied, Pre-Raphaelite images reflect perennial concerns—about sex and love, friendship and betrayal, social class and national identity, desire and loss. In our late industrial society, we struggle with the same issues and hopes—the balance between love and work, security and freedom, the pleasures of art and the needs of the world. Questions of social equity and sexual politics, then as now, are still matters of experience and debate. Sometimes the pictorial landscapes and imagery of Pre-Raphaelite art seems far removed from present-day concerns—an archaic and imaginary realm of knights and ladies. As in every age, however, the myths and the art of the past always find a way to engage with present desires and fears.