

Wealth and Squalor: from tradition to the Avant-Garde

The Victorian Era, revealed through Southampton City Art Gallery collection.

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The nineteenth century is a golden age for English History and Art. For instance, many English museums were opened during the Victorian period, and art magazines and blockbuster exhibitions were launched. Besides, the British school was not only recognised in England, but was also popular outside its boundaries. As the English people witnessed the Industrial Revolution under Queen Victoria's reign, they saw the world with a different perspective.

Queen Victoria's name is inextricably linked to the nineteenth century, but Victorian Art starts with her accession to the throne, around 1837. From this year to 1901, several schools and movements flourished, all with distinctive characteristics. Owing to the fact that Queen Victoria ruled for sixty-three years, there is no overall artistic movement covering such a long period of time. Thus, there is a major difference between a painting realized during the first years of Queen Victoria's reign and an impressionist painting created towards the end of the century. As a descriptive term, the word *Victorian* can therefore seem misleading.

Nevertheless, works created during this time all have something in common, as they were a mirror of this complex and burgeoning society. Above all else, Victorians artists were the heirs of the Romantic Movement, which they perpetuated and shaped in accordance with their own time.

A Glimpse of The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and The New English Art Club

Throughout Southampton Art Gallery's collection, two major Victorian movements stand out: The Pre-Raphaelites and The New English Art Club. The Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood was founded in 1848, by William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millas and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. These three young men wanted to reform English Art, which they believed to be too academic and unadventurous. They wished to go back to the bright colours, abundant details and purity of Quattrocento Italian Art, before Raphael's pompous paintings. While

they were much criticized when they first exhibited their works in 1849, Pre-Raphaelites had a huge influence on progressive painters, during the second half of the century. By the mid-1850s, their style became an established feature of Victorian genre, even though the hard-edged aspect of their paintings was to be much diluted.

During the 1860s, a classical revival emerged as a reaction against the glut of Pre-Raphaelite ideas. At the same time, it can be difficult to draw a straight line between the two camps. For example, Burne-Jones was influenced by both of them. In fact, it has been said that these two movements were two branches of what is called the Aesthetic Movement, which was deeply Victorian. Thus, both Pre-Raphaelites and Classical artists were above all else romantics.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, major artists were very much linked to the Royal Academy. But by the end of this period, the artistic world was evolving outside this institution. Thus, the New English Art Club was founded by avant-garde artists, who were strongly dissatisfied by the conservative and rigid Royal Academy. In 1886, the group launched its first exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery. Their works were especially influenced by French impressionism, discovered by some of the members while they were studying in Paris. Among this club were artists such as Philip Wilson Steer, Henry Tonks, John Singer Sargent or Walter Richard Sickert. This last painter was to be a key figure for British Modernism.

By a strange twist of fate, the New English Art Club quickly became conservative. It led Sickert and Steer to form another group, only focused on impressionism. In 1889, they exhibited their own show called *London Impressionists*.

The Vogue for Historical and Literary Paintings

The term *genre* can be applied to pictures depicting situations and scenes of everyday life. During the first years of Queen Victoria's reign, genre scenes from literary classics and popular history were in vogue. While British society was facing many changes, a nostalgia for the past emerged in paintings. The years 1840–70 marked the golden age of historical genre painting. After this date, the interest for the past decreased.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century history painting was still considered the most important type of painting. English artists generally cared more about an intimate vision of the past, which seemed to be an idyllic memory. Indeed, they liked to illustrate more personal, domestic anecdotes, with a less formal approach. These paintings were also characterized by their small size, compared to French historical paintings. But in this way, English history seemed all the more modern and fascinating. Moreover, these painters were very successful on the art market.

From 1830, to paint a scene of the past was a key stage for an important British artist. The painter Edward Matthew Ward (1816–79) aimed to be a successor to William Hogarth and David Wilkie. Thanks to the support of the latter, he became a student of The Royal Academy. His style and his elaborate compositions created great fame for him. He went to Rome where he was noticed for his picture *Cimabue and Giotto* (1838, unknown location). In the vein of Hogarth, he realised works evoking the eighteenth century. But he did not confine himself to this period, as he also executed paintings going back further in history. Furthermore, he depicted some famous historic victims such as Anne Boleyn. In this painting, he focused his attention on Amy Rosbart, whose death still arouses suspicion.

Painting Modern Life

Although historical genre painting was popular, Victorian critics started to complain about its repetitiveness. Their observation led younger and more progressive artists to favour modern life subjects. This new interest brought creativity and freshness, and this type of representation appealed to a large public. The Industrial Revolution generated a new market for art and these new, rich patrons liked the authenticity of contemporary scenes, looking for subjects that were not too obscure. Victorian genre also draws its origins from rural and domestic subjects of Dutch seventeenth-century painters and William Hogarth's satires of eighteenth-century urban life.

During its first period, genre painting had found a leader in William Powell Frith. He was famous for his paintings from everyday life, such as *The Derby Day*. Frith and his followers dominated the modern-life scene until the end of the 1860s. In the 1870s, a new group of

painters emerged, whose subjects were this time far more serious. They focused on social and realist subjects, which could be very dramatic. Luke Fildes, Sir Hubert von Herkomer and Frank Holl stood out from this group. This last painter can be considered as the most interesting and skilled of the three.

On the other hand, some artists were more interested in depicting the refinement and charm of high society. The most famous painter of this genre was a French artist, James Tissot. He moved to London in 1871, where his work quickly became popular among the public. He devoted his career to the representation of beautiful and elegant women.

Victorian genre paintings are important for the understanding of this period, as they encapsulate their way of life. After Sir Thomas Lawrence's death (1830), it seemed that the tradition of portrait painting was coming to an end. However, many worthy portraits were produced during the Victorian period. Many painters continued to practice in portraiture, but it was considered more of a side-line. Owing to the creation of photography, new social changes and the vogue for genre painting, it was harder for artists to make a living out of portraits. However, towards the end of the century England was to see more of a golden age of portraiture, epitomised by the success of John Singer Sargent's delightful and fancy portraits of high society. Through the comparison of portraits, it possible to see the different styles that coexisted during this period: Academic, Pre-Raphaelite, Classical, and Impressionist.