Signs of the Times

by Malcolm Warner

When Queen Victoria and her husband, Prince Albert, commissioned Franz Xaver Winterhalter to paint *The First of May, 1851*, they wanted a family portrait that would also be an allegory of national pride and achievement. The aged duke of Wellington—known affectionately as the Iron Duke, victor over Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo—was the idol of the people, and for many the embodiment of British courage, forthrightness, and good sense. As godfather to Prince Arthur, he came to Buckingham Palace on the afternoon of May 1 with presents for the boy on his first birthday, and this is the event that occupies the queen, the child, and Wellington in the portrait. Prince Albert, however, turns slightly away, in the direction of a distant building with the sun's rays bursting from behind—not a royal palace, as one might expect, but the Crystal Palace, that huge structure of girders and glass erected in Hyde Park for the first world's fair, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations.

The exhibition, which the queen had opened earlier that afternoon, had been largely Prince Albert's idea. The period since Waterloo had been one of unbroken peace for Britain, and it was hoped that the exhibition would help maintain peace by promoting a spirit of friendly exchange among the nations. Peace had brought prosperity, and this too would continue as a benefit of the technological progress celebrated in the exhibition's extraordinary displays of machinery. It was also hoped that bringing Britain's material achievements to the attention of the world would advertise the wisdom of its ways in politics, notably its commitment to political reform and the Liberal Party tenets of laissez-faire and free trade. If the Iron Duke was a living monument to the glory of the past, the Crystal Palace promised glories into the future.

Among the 100,000 exhibits in the Crystal Palace there was some sculpture, but the only paintings admitted were "illustrations or examples of materials and processes." If there had been paintings chosen as

The First of May, 1851, *by Franz Xaver Winterhalter*

works of art, it is not difficult, knowing the eminent and popular painters of the day, to guess who the British contingent would have been; they would not, generally speaking, have presented a very bright prospect. Apart from the work of a few embattled young rebels, nothing in British painting showed even an inkling of the raw modernity Joseph Paxton had brought to the architecture of the Crystal Palace.

Some of the problems of painting in this brave new Britain appear, although the artist himself would never have seen them as such, in Winterhalter's family portrait. The Great Exhibition was the picture's whole reason for being. It proclaims the triumph of the modern and the material; but its heart is clearly elsewhere, with the traditional and the ideal. It is couched as an homage to the old masters of the 16th and 17th centuries, a would-be *Adoration of the Magi*. As the queen explained later, disapprovingly, to Prince Arthur: "Dear Papa and Winterhalter wished it to represent an Event, like Rubens—& Paul Veronese did . . . *without any exact fact.*"

Since the middle of the 18th century, the goal of most ambitious painters in Britain had been to align themselves with the tradition of European art passed down from the High Renaissance in Italy through old masters such as Veronese and Peter Paul Rubens. The mainstay of this tradition, that of the so-

Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Night *(1834–35), by J. M. W. Turner*

called grand manner, was the notion of the ideal. The aim of the artist working in the grand manner was not to show people and things as they appeared in real life but in the noblest manner possible. This was the aesthetic philosophy promoted by Joshua Reynolds, the eminent portraitist who had been the first president of the Royal Academy, and whose *Discourses* (delivered 1769–90) remained the canonical work of art theory in Britain. For him, the ideal was "the great leading principle, by which works of genius are conducted," and the duty of artists "to conceive and represent their subjects in a poetical manner, not confined to mere matter of fact." He held that they could follow no better model in this than the Renaissance master Raphael.

By the time of the Crystal Palace, however, some bright, serious critics and painters had come to believe that Reynolds's version of the history and purpose of art was a dead hand. The critic John Ruskin asserted that the greatest of all British painters, J. M. W. Turner, had been hampered by the notion of the ideal in landscape painting, and rose to greatness despite its influence. Ruskin's inspiring prose must have led many a young, dissatisfied painter to look to Turner for suggestions as to a way forward. But in the end, there seemed almost as little future in following him as in following Reynolds. One reason for this was an important shift in ideas by which the more extravagant productions of the Romantic

movement, in art and literature, came to seem outdated.

This was an age that had broken away from the past as had no other in history, and it was keenly conscious of its own singularity. The "Mechanical Age," as the social prophet Thomas Carlyle had named it in his essay "Signs of the Times" (1829), called for a progressive art in tune with its practical, inquiring tendencies. The rise of Manchester and other industrial cities had, in fact, brought about a boom period in British art. The recently enfranchised, Liberal upper-middle classes were not only wealthy enough to pay high prices for paintings but also inclined to buy the work of British artists rather than the old masters— works that illustrated the play of ideas and attitudes, the tensions and debates that exercised the middle-class mind.

The painting that would speak to the age would present the world neither as beautified and old masterly, nor as apprehended through strong, complicated, and personal feelings; like the age itself, it would deal honestly and heartily in facts. It would respect the importance of material things in themselves. The subject matter of the new painting need not be literally mechanical, showing scenes of locomotives and factories, nor even drawn from modern life. Whether modern or historical, biblical or literary, it need only be of serious interest to living men and women. The revolution would lie in the handling, the description of things in a language that was 19th-century Britain's own. These are some of the ideas that lay behind the founding, in 1848, of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

The Pre-Raphaelites believed artists had been more humbly observant of nature before the High Renaissance, and in that sense were trying to return to an earlier time. But if their choice of name sounds regressive rather than progressive, it is misleading. In fact, their main idea was to challenge Reynolds and the grand manner; they should perhaps have called themselves "Anti-Raphaelites," which would have prevented at least some of the misunderstanding that met their first works.

Reynolds had urged the artist to avoid the particular, but the Pre-Raphaelites believed that the particular was everything, and that the people and things in a painting should approach not the ideal, but the most painstaking, warts-and-all kind of portraiture. "Pre-Raphaelitism has but one principle," stated the sympathetic Ruskin, "that of absolute, uncompromising truth in all that it does, obtained by working everything, down to the most minute detail, from nature, and from nature only."

The members of the "P R B," especially William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais, tried to approach painting with the rigor of the modern scientist: they disdained received notions, working directly and entirely from their own observations. The Pre-Raphaelites presented no glimpse or "impression" of the world; their method had more to do with collecting data than with the everyday experience of the eye. It developed in the spirit of modern empiricism and, more than any other kind of contemporary British art, in the spirit of the Crystal Palace. The Pre-Raphaelites' pictures are great exhibi-

tions in themselves: accumulations of objects are carefully displayed, and the sheer quantity to see and consider demands a long visit.

The Pre-Raphaelites loved facts for themselves, but also as the means to a higher end. Frederic George Stephens said that the scientific approach to painting was calculated to serve art's "moral purposes" and compared the artist to a priest. It was a central idea of the period that art should be the instrument of good. It could do good even at the level of technique, by showing the right moral qualities in the way it was made. The products of intense and grueling application on the part of the painters, Pre-Raphaelite pictures embodied the idea of industry.

The moral and religious understanding of work grew naturally, in the minds of earnest painters, into a moral and religious understanding of brushwork: if it showed honest toil, it was good; if not, especially if it suggested some kind of sensual pleasure in paint as a material, it smacked of sin. Only against the background of the Victorian religion of work can we begin to understand, for instance, the fervor of Hunt as he described the fluent, old-masterly technique taught to him by his early teachers as loose, irresponsible handling, or warned that the "wildness" of impressionist brushwork "stimulates a progressive lowering of the standard of personal responsibility, and must breed increased laxity of principle in social rectitude, until the example of defiant indolence imperils the whole nation."

Art should also do good, painters like Hunt believed, through the ideas suggested by its subjects and symbols. Their paintings tell stories with morals, and present characters of interest and importance from the
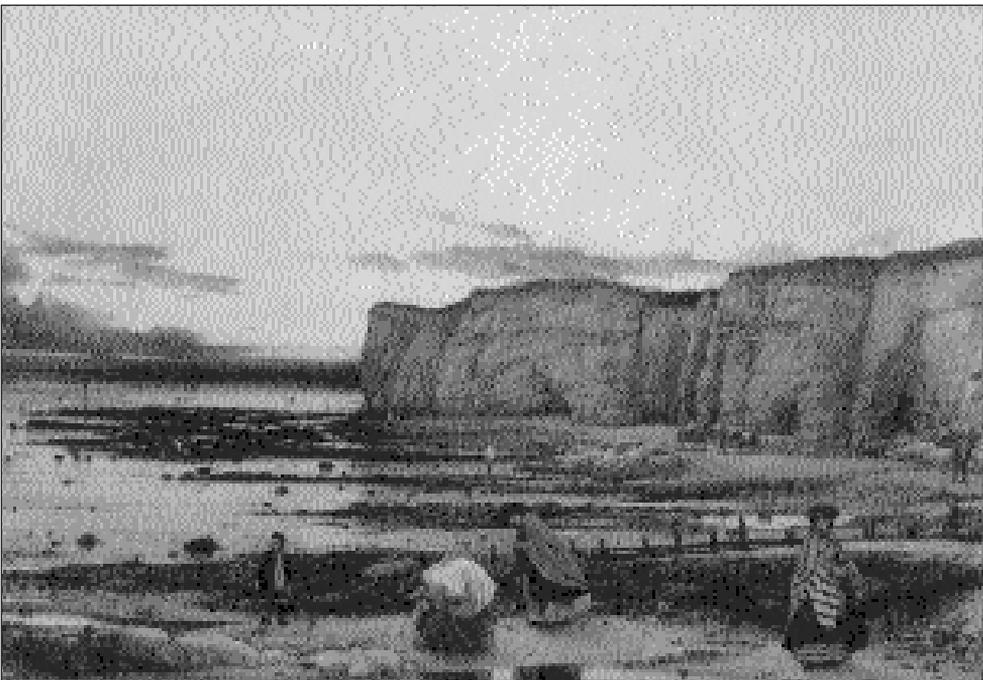
Pegwell Bay: A Recollection of October 5th, 1858, *by William Dyce*

moral point of view. The Pre-Raphaelites found morals in everything; they revered nature not only for its glories and wonders as God's creation, but for the capacity of each object to suggest ideas. Even the man-made world, viewed in the spirit of humility and moral awareness, contained in latent symbolic form an elaborate commentary upon itself: Hunt, for example, depicts a woman's entire future in a dropped glove.

Though entirely sincere in the optimism and self-confidence they announced to the world in the Great Exhibition, the early Victorians were by no means free of private doubt and anguish. The sheer speed at which society and ideas were changing, the transitional state of everything, induced a mental and spiritual unease. The discomfort was nowhere more intense than in the sphere of religion, where people quite rightly sensed an impending crisis. The certainties of Christian faith with which most of them had grown up were beginning to fade under the influence of scientific and materialistic habits of thought. Biblical scholars had begun to study Scriptures not as divine revelation but as historical documents that could be judged to be fact or, as was disturbingly often the case, something else. More important, the whole tendency of modern geology, particularly in the work of Charles Lyell, was to show the natural world not as the once-and-for-all work of a creator but as the result of a slow, constant, and continuing process of change, operating under its own laws, over a long period of time.

Science affected people's imaginations as never before, changing their view of the world and themselves. The British coastline and its cliffs, regarded by earlier generations as the very bulwark of national stability and security, began to suggest a whole new set of associations—with troubling scientific knowledge, with fossils and erosion. Under the famous white cliffs of Dover, where he wrote the poem "Dover Beach" (1851), Matthew Arnold seemed to hear the ebbing of the Sea of Faith. In *Pegwell Bay: A Recollection of October 5th, 1858*, that most intelligent of all Pre-Raphaelite paintings, William Dyce shows himself sighting a comet over more fossil-rich cliffs, an image suggesting the immensities of both geological time and astronomical space. Pegwell Bay was where Saint Augustine landed to bring Christianity to Britain; the boy and woman looking out from Dyce's picture could almost be scanning the horizon for a new Saint Augustine to deliver the country, not from paganism this time but from doubt.

I n this time of religious uncertainties, in which modern knowledge was undermining the authority of Bible and church alike, people looked for certainties from their writers and artists. It was the age of the writer as prophet, the artist as preacher. The Pre-Raphaelites were interested in religious subjects from the outset, and Hunt was to lead a realist revolution in sacred art; arising, in part, from the British Protestant's traditional distaste for devotional images, it may be more apt to call it a reformation. Taking his Pre-Raphaelite principles to their natural conclusion, he made it his practice to paint scenes from Scriptures—as far as possible—on the spot in the Holy Land, observing the local people, manners, customs, and surroundings, taking into account the discoveries and theories of biblical archaeologists. In *The*

The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple *(c. 1854), by William Holman Hunt*

Finding of the Saviour in the Temple (c. 1854), he painted the heads and costumes of the elders largely from models in Jerusalem. Such a picture stood as a testament to the truth of the given event and the characters involved, arrived at scientifically; if there were symbols pointing to higher truths, as there always were, they were confined to objects that would appear in the actual scene.

The spirit of the Great Exhibition held through the 1850s. But in the 1860s and early 1870s it showed signs of waning, and in the last quarter of the 19th century the early Victorian attitude of self-assured powering ahead turned into something more like coasting along. The defeat of the Liberal Party under William Ewart Gladstone in the general election of 1874, ending 28 years of Whig-Liberal domination in Parliament, marked a shift in the national consciousness. Although Britain remained the most powerful country in the world, its pre-eminence in industry and commerce was no longer unchallenged. At home, it was troubled by a growing sense of antagonism in public life, in particular by the controversy and violence over home rule for Ireland. The birthrate declined, strife between the classes increased, the countryside became more depressed, and the cities grew more polluted. By the end of the century, the optimistic Crystal Palace seemed to the young G. K. Chesterton and his contemporaries like "the temple of a forgotten creed."

The early Victorians might have been shaky in their beliefs, but they held fast to the idea that, in the end, definite answers did exist, that there was an absolute truth to be revealed and known, even if it might take the overthrow of cherished traditions and conventions of thought. From the 1860s onward, however, ideas developed and spread that made early Victorian doubt look almost like belief. After the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), which built on Lyell's ideas and advanced the theories of evolution and natural selection, the debate between science and faith grew more intense and upsetting.

Another, still related tendency in later Victorian thought was toward rel-

ativism, which denied the existence of absolutes, all so-called truth being relative to the mind and culture in which it appeared. Such were the ideas behind the highly seductive writings of Walter Pater, notably in his collection of essays *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). For Pater, reality began and ended within human consciousness; to comprehend experience, we should think "not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them." The person who believed that he could think his way out of his own "dream of a world," know things as they really were, discover the right way to live, was deceiving himself. The only life of any meaning was the inner, aesthetic life, the only faculty worth cultivating was that of taking pleasure in one's own sensations.

The greatest wisdom lay in the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake. To the fact-loving, morally conscious, early Victorian way of thinking this was, of course, anathema—which is why Pater, though writing mostly on the art of the past, had such a radical effect on the arts of his own time.

One way in which the movement against the factual and moral idea of art showed itself was in the increasing fondness of artists for likening visual art to music, which tends by its nature to be fact-free and moral-free. As early as 1861, Frederic Leighton called a painting *Lieder ohne Worte* (Songs without Words), a title borrowed from Felix Mendelssohn. It shows a girl at a fountain listening to running water and bird song, and the artist explained to a friend that he was trying "both by colour and by flowing delicate forms, to trans-

Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl *(1862), by James McNeill Whistler*

late to the eye of the spectator something of the pleasure which the child receives through her ears." Beginning in the 1860s, James McNeill Whistler also gave pictures musical titles—symphonies, arrangements, nocturnes, and so on—with the predominant colors given in place of keys, as in *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl*. Pater stated the principle of musicality in its most quotable form when he wrote, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music."

For Whistler and his friends, the idea of the painter as observer of facts was ridiculous. In his "Ten O'Clock" lecture (1885) he quipped, "To say to the painter, that Nature is to be taken as she is, is to say to the player, that he may sit on the piano." The Pre-Raphaelites' clarity of vision, their exhibitions of detail, their rawness, were strictly for the tone-deaf and lowbrow. People had come to expect too little of art and too much, ignoring the music of form and color in their desire for realism and improving stories; they had acquired "the habit of looking . . . not *at* a picture, but *through* it."

To the "aesthetic movement," as this tendency in British art and taste came to be known, the only essential concern of art was beauty. The aesthetic artists and critics used this term more broadly and vaguely than Reynolds: it was not necessarily bound up with bodily perfection, nobility, and the classical tradition. They found it in Greek sculpture and Renaissance painting, especially in Giorgione and the other Venetians, but also in medieval art and Japanese woodblock prints, both of which Reynolds would have considered primitive. For them, beauty lay in exquisiteness, in objects that gave pleasure simply by being well formed, in works of art with an arrangement of lines, shapes, colors, and brushwork that had a life and a grace of its own, independent of whatever it might describe.

According to Whistler, the problem for art and beauty in the modern world was the rise of the commercial and industrial middle class. When art was the province of the favored few, taste was governed by artists and all was well. But when the Industrial Revolution elevated the middle class, it also elevated bad taste. To distance themselves from the prevailing spirit of philistinism in the world, he and other artists of the aesthetic movement assumed the position and demeanor of an upper class, a cultural aristocracy.

The last thing this breed of artist sought was engagement with the real world; the social turbulence of the times was something from which to remove oneself as far as possible. In a lecture to students of the Royal Academy (1883), Oscar Wilde advised them "to realise completely your age in order completely to abstract yourself from it." The artist must be, in Whistler's words, "a monument of isolation." The cozy togetherness of middle-class Victorian family life held as little appeal to him, generally, as industry and commerce, politics and fashion. The studio, not the parlor, was his sanctuary. He took no great pains to disguise the fact that his pictures were created in the studio, and even relished a certain artificiality, allowing models to look like models, costumes like costumes, props like props.

For those earlier Victorians who did seek engagement with society at large, the casting of models for figures in their pictures and the catching of expressions, the signs of both character and emotion, were of the utmost importance. By contrast, the beautiful

female face that was the chief icon of aestheticism was virtually without expression, at most "hinting at sadness," in Whistler's phrase. The models artists chose were not representative or typical, hardly human-looking in some cases; they were merely superior, an aristocracy of beauty. Their beauty was the mainstay of art; nothing could be allowed to disturb the perfect harmony of their features, and any marked expression, artists believed, would do just that. If the aesthetic face expresses anything at all, it is tenderness and gentle melancholy. Edward Coley Burne-Jones touched upon this point in defending the minimal expressions on the faces
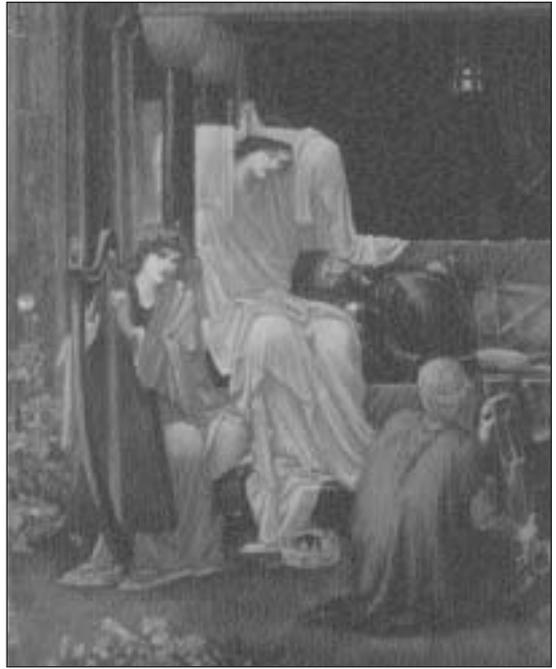
The Sleep of King Arthur in Avalon *(detail), by Edward Burne-Jones (unfinished, begun in 1881)*

of the three grieving queens in *The Sleep of King Arthur in Avalon* (1881–1898): "A little more expression and they would be neither queens nor mysteries nor symbols, but just . . . Augusta, Esmeralda, and Dolores, considerably overcome by a recent domestic bereavement."

The aristocratic persona and serious work hardly go together, and the painters of the aesthetic movement took almost as much delight in idleness as the early Victorians took in industry. Never do their beautiful models actually do much; typically they stand or sit still, recline, even fall asleep. Seldom could their works be said to promote morality in the early Victorian sense; on the contrary, the combination of beauty and lassitude could be powerfully erotic, suggesting fleshly abandon. By the same token, artists played down any suggestion of labor in the way they painted, going for an impression of virtuosity rather than virtue, playing up the sensual side of picture making. They allowed the materials of painting a life of their own, free of the demands of describing reality. They tended to suppress space, making their compositions work first as designs in themselves, on the decorative, abstract level, and only after that as representations. They used color and technique as all-over, keynote devices, to harmonize the figures and objects in their compositions rather than to individualize them. Brushwork was there to be beautiful, to be looked *at*, not *through*. Millais, the lapsed Pre-Raphaelite, gave up painting single blades of grass in favor of a painterly bravura recalling Frans Hals and Velázquez. In *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (1875), Whistler painted fireworks in a manner that was pyrotechnic in itself,

Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket *(1875),*
by James McNeill Whistler

and Ruskin accused him of "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."

Whistler believed that artists always had to edit the world in their art, and that 19th-century Britain presented no particular problems in that respect; he could paint warehouses as palaces in the night, factory chimneys as campanili, the industrial riverfront as a fairyland. But for many later Victorians, finding beauty in the modern world seemed impossible. The problem went far beyond that of low taste among the newly enfranchised middle class: it was the machinelike soullessness of modern life in general.

The Victorians were haunted, ever increasingly, by nostalgia. In the optimistic time of the Crystal Palace, when progress was an article of national faith, it was easy to see the present as ascending toward an even-better future; by the 1870s, it seemed to many to be more like exile from a better past. As the Britain of the Industrial Revolution appeared ever smokier, grimier, and more inhuman, most people longed for the handmade, for the rural, for almost any and every preindustrial era. This had a profound and obvious effect on all the arts: it was an age of revivals. Millais painted "souvenirs" of Thomas Gainsborough and Reynolds that were meant to bring back the supposed grace and refinement of British life just before industry took hold, part of an 18th-century revival that made itself felt in all the arts, as well as in fashion. John Singer Sargent's portraits flattered people that they were like aristocrats from the time of Velázquez and Anthony Van Dyck. But there is no doubt that the greatest historical yearning of the Victorians was for the Middle Ages.

The medieval appeared to the Victorian mind as a national alternative to the classical, a rich source of stories like the myths and legends of the Greeks and Romans, only set in Britain. In a time of bewildering change, people enjoyed the thought, right or wrong, that the monarchy and other beloved institutions had

descended from the Middle Ages in a continuous tradition. The queen and Prince Albert played up to this when they had Edwin Landseer paint them as the 14th-century Queen Philippa and Edward III.

In the earlier Victorian imagination, the history and legends of the Middle Ages were seen as morality teaching by example. In the paintings of Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and others from around 1860, however, a different medieval and Arthurian world emerges, one beyond good and evil, a world of beauty, love, and mysticism. For them, the adulterous Queen Guinevere was no longer Alfred Tennyson's "wicked one, who broke / The vast design and purpose of the King," but a kind of sacred personage, whose great beauty and passion put mere morality to shame. The medieval world was a beautiful dream that no one pretended had any relation to the reality of life in that time, and paintings of it were self-consciously dreamlike.

The Victorian nostalgia for the Middle Ages was, at root, a nostalgia for that most lamented casualty of the modern world, religious faith. Burne-Jones was typical in his love of the Middle Ages as the age of faith, and of faith as a beautiful, medieval idea. Of course, he was too much a man of the 19th century to hold medieval Christian beliefs, but on an aesthetic level he could immerse himself in them totally. While at work on his large watercolor *The Star of Bethlehem* (1890), he was asked whether he believed in the miraculous story of the Magi and the guiding star. He answered: "It is too beautiful not to be true." How different his attitude toward religion and religious art was from that of Hunt, for whom beauty was hardly a consideration, let alone a guarantee of truth, and whose paintings could be described as too true not to be sometimes a little ugly. How ironic that Hunt, the earnest, modern believer and seeker after truth, received no commissions from the church, while Burne-Jones, for whom religion was more a matter of nostalgia and aesthetics, was in constant demand as a designer of stained-glass windows.

As a nation of engineers and empire builders, the most powerful on earth, the Victorians readily identified themselves with the ancient Romans. Yet the ancient culture that most interested them, perhaps for the very reason that they were like the Romans, was Greece. The ancient Greece of their imagination existed in a time that was good for all time, when eternal beauty took shape in the world.

The Victorians looked to classical culture as they looked to medieval culture, for qualities of which they felt bereft in their own. This is why the work of the Victorian classical painters, the "Olympians," as they have been called, has a quite different flavor from neoclassical art of the 18th century. For Reynolds in Britain, as for his contemporaries all over Europe, the classical world was one of grandeur, nobility, and virtue; the work of art that seemed best to capture its essence was the commanding, heroic figure of the famous Apollo Belvedere. To aesthetic taste, the sense of purposeful action about the Apollo compromised its beauty, while the writhing dynamism and emotion in a piece such as the Laocoön were anathema. The aesthetic movement chose classical touchstones showing the avoidance of emotion. They were works of the most patent grace and serenity, female and passive: the goddesses from the pediment of the Parthenon

Chill October (1870), by John Everett Millais

(then known as the Fates), and the Venus de Milo.

Unlike their counterparts of the previous century, who tended to value line and form above color, the Victorian classical painters were ardent colorists. They had no wish to carry over into their pictures the austerity of bare marble; on the contrary, they believed color to be the vital touch that could make Greece come alive in 19th-century Britain. They were given heart by recent archaeological discoveries, which suggested that originally some Greek sculpture itself had been brightly painted. Through color and brushwork, the attributes of painting as opposed to sculpture, the painter could infuse Greek form with some of the mystery and suggestiveness the modern mind craved.

The later Victorians' vision of the British landscape was almost as saturated with nostalgia and longing as their dreams of the Middle Ages and ancient Greece. Nowhere did industrialization show its dark side more ominously than in the spoiling of the countryside, made yet grimmer by agricultural depression and depopulation. As fears of irrevocable loss deepened, the painting of landscape became more charged with mood, or "sentiment," as it was commonly called. The fact-by-fact, tightly symbolic approach taken by the Pre-Raphaelites gave way to a concern with broad conditions of light, atmosphere, and weather, nature's mood-creating "effects." A pervasive sentiment of melancholy suffuses the later Victorian landscape, a dwelling on grayness and bleakness, a liking for dusk, autumn, and winter, as is evident in such works as Millais's *Chill October* (1870).

The painting of proletarian subjects, both rural and urban, took on a seriousness and grandeur far beyond traditional genre painting at this time. Like landscape, scenes of hard work, hard times, and poverty were charged heavily with sentiment, generally pessimistic in tone, and painted with an eye to broad, overall effects. The interest in such subjects

emerged from a complicated weave of middle-class attitudes that included both pity and a slightly envious admiration: the life of manual labor was tough, yet glorious in its physicality; it was free of mind-wearying complexity; its joys, sufferings, and tragedies were elemental. The fascination of country people in particular, farm workers, fishermen, and their families, was that they were supposedly in touch with nature. They were also thought of as pious, childlike in their souls, accepting of all the beautiful religious beliefs that modernity had rejected. The work they did, sowing and scything, for instance, evoked deep symbolic and biblical associations. In *A Hopeless Dawn* (1881), Frank Bramley shows a print of *Christ's Charge to Peter* by Raphael in the fisherman's cottage to make the point that fishermen were Jesus' first followers.

The pursuit of sentiment and effects in the grander forms of landscape and genre painting that flourished from the 1870s onward fostered much experimentation in technique. Artists looked with renewed admiration to the painterly touch of the old masters, to Velázquez in particular; they looked to the great painters of the British tradition, to Gainsborough and John Constable, with the thought that the free, direct, natural feeling about their brushwork expressed the national character. Most controversially, some young artists of the 1880s and 1890s developed bold techniques influenced by contemporary painting in France, including the "square" touch, in which strokes and dabs of color retain enough of their separateness and direction to give a slight all-over blockiness to the image, a highly infectious technique invented by the French painter of peasants Jules Bastien-Lepage. Walter Sickert learned his version of French impressionist technique from

A Hopeless Dawn *(1881), by Frank Bramley*

Sower of the Systems (1902), by George Watts

Edgar Degas, and used its uncanny power of suggesting the play of light, its glints, gleams, reflections, and color-rich shadows, to paint the highly British subject of the London music hall. His aim was to be neither moral nor particularly realistic, he claimed, but to catch the protean beauty that was particular to modern urban life.

To many older British painters, the spread of French technique appeared as an insidious disease afflicting the young. One objection was that it was un-British, not just in the literal sense but in going against the national character. For Millais, part of the essence of Britishness was being an individual; the truly British painter, Gainsborough or Constable for instance, developed a technique that was British not only in its freedom and naturalness but in being wholly and unmistakably his own. But the French-influenced painters, Millais said, "persist in painting with a broken French accent, all of them much alike, and seemingly content to lose their identity in their imitation of French masters." To Burne-Jones, they represented simply

the dire impoverishment of painting: "They don't make beauty, they don't make design, they don't make idea, they don't make anything else but atmosphere and I don't think that's enough—I don't think it's very much."

The most pessimistic of these older Victorians could never have suspected that a hundred years later, at the end of the 20th century, French impressionist painting would be the most beloved and celebrated art of the Western world. Now all 19th-century art tends to be measured against the French avant-garde, the impressionists and the postimpressionists, leading toward fauvism, cubism, and so on. People commonly speak of Turner, rather insultingly, as if his main importance were as a forerunner of impressionism, a voice crying in the artistic wilderness. In this light, the Victorians can seem hopelessly stuck in a preimpressionist mentality, as they did to those British modernist critics of earlier this century who did so much to blight their reputation.

Of course, it all depends on which aspects of Victorian painting, and which artists, one takes as representative. Sometimes a Victorian can almost out-modern the moderns. When urged by a friend to add some touch of realism to one of his paintings, Burne-Jones replied with the resoundingly 20th-century statement: "I don't want to pretend that this isn't a picture." Like Whistler and all the painters of the aesthetic movement, he thought of a painting in protomodernist terms, as a musical arrangement of forms and colors on a surface, a thing to be looked *at*, not *through*.

It is not as surprising as it might first seem that the young Pablo Picasso admired Burne-Jones; after seeing some of his paintings reproduced in art magazines, the Spanish artist hoped to come to Britain to study them at first hand. Victorian painters even discussed and experimented with the idea of abstraction. Leighton recommended classical subjects "as vehicles . . . of abstract form," and the briefest look at George Frederic Watts's *Sower of the Systems* shows the leaning toward abstraction that was present in all aesthetic and idealist painting.

Looking at the Victorians within such a frame of reference, assessing their position in the history of European 19th-century art, has its value. Certainly, doing so makes for an interesting debate. But Victorian painting really comes alive when we understand its currents and crosscurrents as part of the history of the diverse movements and tendencies within what has famously come to be known as the Victorian frame of mind.

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