

Pre-Raphaelites and Symbolism

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers the Pre-Raphaelites and Symbolism. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe the motivation behind the Pre-Raphaelite movement, and identify examples of Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist painting. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

1. Period and Location: Pre-Raphaelites and Symbolism
2. The Pre-Raphaelites
3. Symbolism

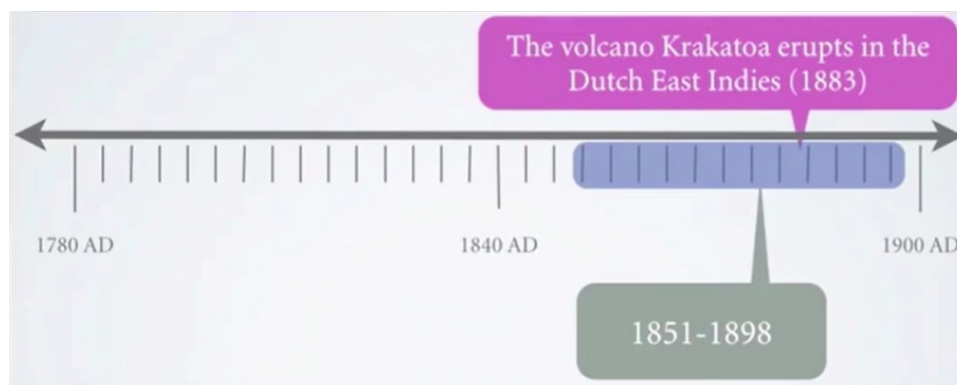


BIG IDEA

Philosophically, the Pre-Raphaelites were against the academy and the classicizing tendencies of Raphael and Michelangelo, and longed for the Quattrocento, the 15th century and medieval periods.

1. Period and Location: Pre-Raphaelites and Symbolism

The artwork that you will be looking at today covers the period from 1851 to 1898, and focuses geographically on three locations: London, England; Paris, France; and Oslo, Norway.



2. The Pre-Raphaelites

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, as it was known, distilled down to its basic philosophy, would be essentially anti-Academy. Specifically, the Brotherhood was against the classicizing tendencies of Raphael and Michelangelo, who were supported by the Royal Academy of Art and its founder, Joshua Reynolds.

Artistically, the **Pre-Raphaelites** emphasized bright colors, detail bordering on photo-realism, and the accurate depiction of nature. Philosophically, they felt that contemporary art had lost the moral integrity of past art. They longed to return to the **Quattrocento**, or better yet, back to medieval times.



TERMS TO KNOW

Pre-Raphaelites

A group of late 19th-century British painters united by their rejection of academic painting and the legacy of Raphael in art

Quattrocento

Of or referring to 14th-century art, especially in Italy

Now, this reverence of the past was also due in part to an honesty or perhaps genuineness in the work produced during that time. The Industrial Revolution was replacing traditional craftsmen, and this longing for tradition and view of art as a way of life were ideas at the heart of movements such as Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau.

The painting shown below, “Ophelia” by John Everett Millais, is a prime example of Pre-Raphaelite stylistic conventions. Its bright colors, photo-realistic detail, and accurate depiction of nature are used to portray the scene from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, in which Ophelia sings in a river before drowning.



- “Ophelia”

- 1851
- Oil on canvas
- John Everett Millais



THINK ABOUT IT

Although expertly painted and a fine example of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, some people find something unsettling about this image. How does it make you feel? Do you feel like you know something is about to happen without being able to do anything about it?

Another example from the Pre-Raphaelite movement filled with sobering imagery is the painting below, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, called “Pia de Tolomei.” It depicts a scene from the medieval author Dante and his book *Purgatory*, in which La Pia, which means “the pious one,” is wrongly accused of being unfaithful to her husband. Instead of seeking counseling, her husband locks her up. She’s shown on the verge of death, touching her wedding ring, next to a prayer book and love letters to her husband, which are symbolic of her innocence, and nestled within fig leaves, which are symbolic of her shame.



- “Pia de Tolomei”
- c. 1868
- Oil on canvas
- Dante Gabriel Rossetti



DID YOU KNOW

The model for this painting was actually the artist’s lover and the wife of his good friend. Is it possible that this

piece also represents some sort of confession or catharsis?

3. Symbolism

The Symbolist movement was anti-rationalist in philosophy and sought to depict the world of spirituality, imagination, and dreams. Heavily influenced by Dark Romanticism and an eventual influence on the development of Surrealism, **Symbolists** felt that painting should depict more than just what can be seen, as in Realism. Instead, art should express emotions in visual form.



TERM TO KNOW

Symbolism

A 19th-century art movement that rejected Realism, using the convention of representing things through symbols or signs.

Odilon Redon was one of the Symbolist movement's most important figures. Like Surrealist paintings to come, the Symbolist paintings, such as "The Cyclops," shown below, are open to quite a bit of interpretation.



- "The Cyclops"
- 1898
- Oil on cardboard
- Odilon Redon



THINK ABOUT IT

Cyclops were known in mythology to be rather unpleasant, giant monsters. Despite this, the painting can be interpreted in one of two ways: Is it depicting someone vulnerable from impending danger, as in the nude woman being eaten by the cyclops? Or perhaps is it a depiction of unrequited love, as in the cyclops, resigned to a fate devoid of love? You decide. The wonderful thing about art like this is that everyone sees something different.

Edvard Munch was a Norwegian painter whose style is often cited as one of the most important in terms of its influence on Expressionism. His painting “Madonna,” shown below, while open to interpretation, is almost always agreed upon by critics as *not* depicting the holy Madonna, but rather a beautiful woman.



DID YOU KNOW

“Madonna” means “my lady.”



- “Madonna”
- 1894
- Oil on canvas
- Edvard Munch

Now, it’s hard to say whether this was someone specific or symbolic of all women. Some have described it as representative of a femme-fatale, suggestive of the power of women. Others, however, feel that this was more a depiction of a woman in the throes of passion. Munch often used an aura of color like you see here to heighten a certain implied sensation, such as pleasure.



DID YOU KNOW

Munch's name is pronounced "Moon-k."

This next example, Edvard Munch's "The Scream," is one of the most famous paintings in history. It's a form of early Expressionism depicting the now-iconic image of a man in a fit of intense anguish or fear. Supposedly it isn't the man screaming, but rather his awareness of a primal scream or shriek passing through nature, which would explain why his ears are covered by his hands.



- "The Scream"
- 1893
- Oil on canvas
- Edvard Munch

Munch apparently based the painting on a similar experience he had had while walking along a pier with friends, who are seen in the background. Munch uses swirling lines that repeatedly return you to the main figure of the painting, while the brush strokes of the deck of the pier almost feel as if the friends are perhaps accelerating away from him or he's accelerating away from them.



DID YOU KNOW

The blood red clouds have been suggested by some critics as more than just symbolic—that they could be the actual effect from the eruption of Krakatoa in the Dutch East Indies in 1883. Depending upon the time period that this painting refers to, this is a possibility, at least in terms of time. It may help explain Munch's decision to use this particular color as the background for this remarkable painting, a pastel version of which set a record that may still hold for the most expensive work of art sold at a public auction, around \$111 million.



SUMMARY

In today's lesson about the **Pre-Raphaelites** and **Symbolism**, you learned how to identify and define today's key terms and describe the motivation behind the Pre-Raphaelite movement. You also learned how to identify examples of Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist painting.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



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