

The Aesthetic Movement

History

The Aesthetic Movement in England was a counter-cultural movement in Victorian art and literature taking place primarily between 1860 and 1900. The seeds of the movement were planted by the artist and critical theorist John Ruskin. His disciples – artists such as William Holman Hunt, D.G. Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, and James Abbot Whistler – created a kind of aesthetic prototype when they founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1849 ([Landow](#)). The tenets of the PRB were primarily a reaction against the dehumanizing industrialization of the Victorian Age, displayed most prominently at the Great Exposition of 1851 ([Monet](#)). Their feelings towards the Industrial Revolution can best be seen in their art and clothing styles, both of which harken back to the simplistic styles of Medieval England (i.e. Pre-Raphael). The figures of the PRB and those in the paintings of they created are characterized by their long hair, muted or earth-colored dress tones, subtle floral accents, and Eastern-inspired jewelry ([Monet](#)).

This obsession with Medieval fashions had a twofold purpose: it allowed for the freedom of movement and expression precluded by traditional Victorian dress and, as it relied on natural dyes and homespun linens, went well with the Pre-Raphaelite focus on cottage industries and hand-crafted goods ([Monet](#)). These sensibilities would eventually turn into those we currently consider "aesthetic," but at this point, the well-known dictum "art for art's sake" had not yet been adopted, and most Pre-Raphaelites still considered art a means to achieve social and moral revolution. Many even shied away from the term "aestheticism" as it was then considered to refer to things without artistic merit ([Swafford](#)).

It wasn't until 1858 that unabashed aestheticism in art took off fully as a movement. By this point, the Trade Treaty passed between England and Japan had allowed an influx of Eastern art and influences to pour into and redefine the English art scene and the Grosvenor Gallery had been opened as a safe-haven for the display and promotion of aesthetic art ([Brookes](#)). The major turn came in 1873 when Walter Pater published his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* ([Landow](#)). Referred to by Wilde as a "golden book" ([Swafford](#)), the "Conclusion" tacked onto the end of *Renaissance* laid the foundations for Aestheticism in its most recognizable form. In his "Conclusion," Pater argued that life is fleeting and that moments of undeniable joy in life are more temporary still. Pater therefore says that the only chance we have of feeling fully satisfied in life "lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time" ([Pater](#)). His best idea as to how one might achieve this feat was through art: "For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" ([Pater](#)). Pater taught at Oxford for much of his career and in that time became a mentor to several students who would go on to become prominent figures in the Aesthetic Movement, including Oscar Wilde ([Landow](#)).

Wilde carried the torch of Aestheticism into the public eye, becoming one of its most popular and controversial figures. He would become such an essential part of this period in art and literature that many use his 1900 death to mark the end of the Aesthetic movement ([Brookes](#)). In literature, Aestheticism manifested itself in the depiction of ennui, nostalgia, and a recurring sense of loss. There was also a focus on the particularly ornate or perverse and on the notion of living life as art. References to Rome and Egypt also abound in Aesthetic literature, but unlike in previous artistic movements, these allusions were used entirely for artistic effect ([Landow](#)). In one form another, each of these defining characteristics pops up in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, making it one of the best examples we have of the beliefs and feelings of aesthetes like Wilde.

Pre-Raphaelite Styles

- The Pre-Raphaelite Movement preceded the Aesthetic Movement, and its unique approach to fashion and art had a tremendous influence on the styles of Aesthetes.



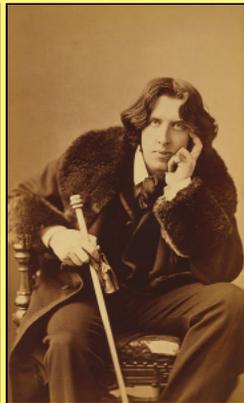
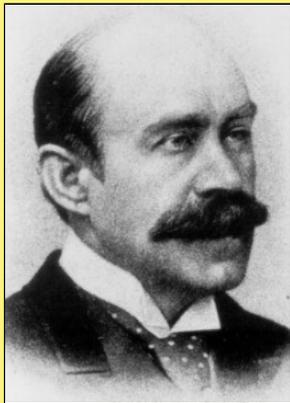
- John William Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalot* is a beautiful illustration of Pre-Raphaelite sensibilities. The Lady's flowing hair and trailing Medieval garments were a trademark of the PRB. The muted earth tones and enveloping presence of nature were also characteristic of the movement's anti-industrial movement.



- James Abbot Whistler's *Symphony in White* is another example of the natural simplicity of the Pre-Raphaelite style. The composition of the piece also reflects the slow growth of Aesthetic ideals among the PRB. While critics of the age regarded the painting as a modern version of the Virgin Mary or a comment on the loss of innocence, Whistler himself stated simply that it was only a woman dressed in white standing in front of a white background (Monet).



- The Pre-Raphaelites didn't just promote their unique clothing style in art. Many actually dressed like the Medieval lords and ladies they admired. The woman in the pink dress in William Powell Frith's *A Private View at the Royal Academy* is dressed in this manner. The long train and flowing cape signaled a departure from traditional Victorian dress. Contrast her style with the more restrictive dress of the women in the left hand-corner. FUN FACT: The man on the far right, whom our pink-loving friend seems so engrossed by, is Oscar Wilde! (Monet)



- The ideas of the Pre-Raphaelites had a major influence on the styles and philosophies of the future leaders of the Aesthetic Movement, including Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. Their influence on Wilde can be seen most directly in his flamboyant and unshapely clothing styles.

Lecture

On June 30, 1883, Wilde delivered a lecture on Aestheticism to art students of the Royal Academy. Here are some of the highlights:

- On Beauty: "We want to create it, not to define it. The definition should follow the work: the work should not adapt itself to the definition."
- "Such an expression as English art is a meaningless expression. One might just as well talk of English mathematics. Art is the science of beauty, and Mathematics the science of truth: there is no national school of either. Indeed, a national school is a provincial school, merely. Nor is there any such thing as a school of art even. There are merely artists, that is all."
- "All that you should learn about art is to know a good picture when you see it and a bad picture when you see it. As regards the date of the artist, all good work looks perfectly modern: a piece of Greek sculpture, a portrait of Velasquez---they are always modern, always of our time. And as regards the nationality of the artist, art is not national but universal."
- "Whatever is popular is wrong."
- "The sign of a Philistine age is the cry of immorality against art."
- "Nothing is worth doing except what the world says is impossible."
- "Religion springs from religious feeling, art from artistic feeling: you never get one from the other; unless you have the right root you will not get the right flower; and, if a man sees in a cloud the chariot of an angel, he will probably paint it very unlike a cloud."
- "To paint what you see is a good rule in art, but to see what is worth painting is better."
- "What is a picture? Primarily, a picture is a beautifully coloured surface, merely, with no more spiritual message or meaning for you than an exquisite fragment of Venetian glass or a blue tile from the wall of Damascus. It is, primarily, a purely decorative thing, a delight to look at. All archaeological pictures that make you say 'How curious!' all sentimental pictures that make you say, 'How sad!' all historical pictures that make you say 'How interesting!' all pictures that do not immediately give you such artistic joy as to make you say 'How beautiful!' are bad pictures."
- "If a man is an artist he can paint everything."
- "A picture is finished when all traces of work, and of the means employed to bring about the result, have disappeared."
- "Art should have no sentiment about it but its beauty, no technique except what you cannot observe. One should be able to say of a picture not that it is 'well painted,' but that it is 'not painted.'"

[Wilde](#)

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