The Aesthetic Movement: Pursuing Beauty in 1860-1900

Ruth Smith

This week Ruth Smith takes us through an overview of the Aesthetic Movement, introducing its main proponents, and exploring its ideas and paradoxes. Come with us on a whirlwind tour of the re-imaginings of beauty in the period 1860-1900.

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, oil on canvas (1888), private collection.

These two paintings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti demonstrate the shift from more didactic and moralistic representations in Victorian art to more sensual and hedonistic ideals.

The Girlhood of Mary Virgin (1848-1849), shows elements of 'Medievalism', which represented a desire to return to a simpler, more reflective way of life for those who were unhappy with the speed and materialism of the post Industrial age. *Bocca Bacciata* was painted by Rossetti ten years later and shows a shift, which William Holman Hunt thought demonstrated how Rossetti had 'completely changed his philosophy […] leaving monastic sentiment for Epicureanism', where pleasure is the sole intrinsic goal.

In Rossetti's *Bocca Bacciata* or '*Lips That Have Been Kissed*' one can see how he gathered inspiration from the Renaissance art of Venice (notably that by Titian). Venice was known for its use of colour, associated in Victorian culture to sensuousness and emotion. Furthermore, Venice associated with sexual desire, largely the subject of this painting. Through his use of colour and through leaving out didactic narrative, Rossetti was attempting to create an image that appealed solely to the senses.

William Holman Hunt thought that it betrayed the moral principles of the earlier Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, exhibiting instead a 'gross sensuality of a revolting kind', making 'mere gratification of the eye […] and animal passion […] the aim and end of art', (Holman Hunt writing to William Allingham in 1860).

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, oil on canvas, 1848–9, Tate.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Bocca Baciata (Lips That Have Been Kissed)*, oil on panel, 1859, Museum of Fine Art, Boston

Inscription on reverse translates: 'The mouth that has been kissed loses not its freshness; still it renews itself even as does the moon.' From Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron,* 1349–1352.

Wallpaper, colour woodblock print, possibly with some machine printing, on paper, 1853, V&A. Included in the 'Examples of False Principles of Decoration' in 1852.

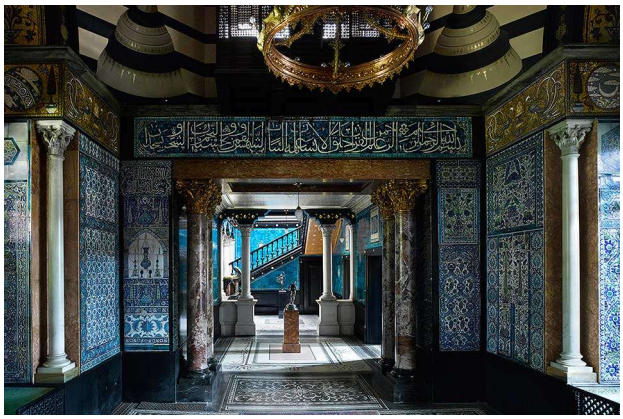
While amorality in art was becoming more popular, where an artwork was to be felt and enjoyed rather than to teach, in many ways notions of 'good' and 'bad' were replaced with 'beauty' and 'ugliness'

At the Great Exhibition of 1851, organisers collected articles that demonstrated good design to put them into a museum for the education of Britain's designers, manufacturers and the public who bought them. In 1852 an exhibit was unveiled called 'Examples of False Principles of Decoration'. This aimed to educate people of what their notion of bad taste looked like. There were moral implications: 'good taste' was a sign of a noble character, whereas 'bad taste' betrayed shortcomings in a character.

Philip Webb and William Morris, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., Painted and gilded mahogany, pine and oak, with copper mounts, 1861-1862 (made), V&A.

At the international exhibition of 1862, there was a marked improvement in British design, with particularly strong examples from William Morris's firm 'Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.' They made furniture and decoration that blurred the line between fine arts and utility.

Every aspect of life was implicated by the philosophy of the Aesthetic Movement, where one's whole life was to be lived as though it was an artwork. 'The House Beautiful', spearheaded by Oscar Wilde, suggested that one's whole environment should be considered an opportunity to express one's self through beautiful objects.



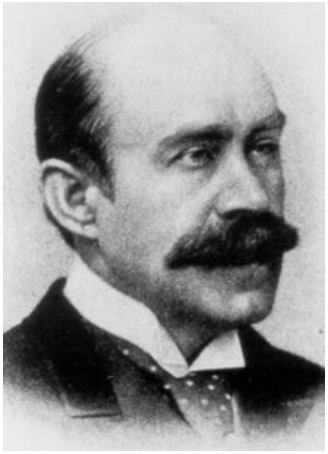
Frederic Leighton's House, designed by George Aitchison, in Holland Park, built 1866-1895.

Paintings, such as those by Albert Moore, particularly stressed their purpose as decorative objects through lack of narrative. They were largely inspired by the Parthenon Frieze, which demonstrates how they blurred boundaries between, art, architecture, and decoration. Their frontal, grid-like aspect with horizontal lines also appears like a stave on which Moore placed musical notes, for example the heads of the figures in *Dreamers*. This hints at how ideas of music and harmony were also woven into the aims of painting to create an experience appealing to all the

Albert Moore, *Dreamers,* oil on canvas, 1882, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham.

'Art for art's sake' was a popular slogan used by artists who identified with the ideals of the Aesthetic Movement.

James McNeill Whistler wrote that "art should be independent of all claptrap – should stand alone [...] and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism and the like." – Whistler in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, 1890.



Walter Horatio Pater (1839-1894), photograph by Elliott & Fry, 1890s.

Walter Pater was a writer and critic who had considerable influence on the Aesthetic Movement. His words, such as the ones quoted below, inspired many artists and writers to seek heightened sensitivity both in life and art.

'To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike… With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch.' Walter Pater, Conclusion to, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance,* (1873).