

Sex, Drugs and Death - the story of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

Well done everyone who braved a cold, snowy January evening to come and hear Geoffrey Kay's erudite talk on 'Sex, Drugs and Death – the story of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood'. We were well rewarded with a veritable feast for the eyes when shown their paintings – many intricate and beautiful, some cryptic, others unusual, but all fascinating.

In 1848 the charismatic Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, Ford Madox Brown and John Everett Millais were all young art students looking to find new ways of expressing themselves in their work. They shunned the Renaissance style typical of Raphael and his contemporaries, adopting instead the earlier look of Piero della Francesca, and it was this preference that led Rossetti to coin the name Pre-Raphaelites for his Brotherhood.

Prominent in the paintings were female models the favourite being the red-haired Lizzie Siddal (married to Rossetti), Janey Morris (wife of William Morris) and Effie Gray who, following a disastrous, unconsummated marriage to the eccentric critic John Ruskin, obtained a divorce and subsequently married Millais, who had always wanted her! In a time when illness and death were ever present, Lizzie, always sickly, became addicted to laudanum and, following her early death, left Rossetti utterly distraught. Little wonder that death and turbulence featured so heavily in many of the paintings – Ophelia, Chatterton (by Henry Wallis) and The Lady of Shalott by John William Waterhouse a latecomer to the Brotherhood.

Other paintings showed controversial depictions of religious and industrial themes, thus the Brotherhood gained popularity and hostility in equal measures. However, by the onset of World War I, the Pre-Raphaelites had become deeply unfashionable and it was to be a considerable time before their talent was once again fully appreciated.