

XVII

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**Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian ideals outside ironwork: William Morris' Red House and William Holman Hunt's *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* exemplify craftsmanship in an age of technology**

Against the backdrop of technological advancements of the day, artist William Morris' architecture in Red House and artist William Holman Hunt's depiction of popular literary character Isabella and the Pot of Basil reinforce naturalistic and emotional ideals of the Pre-Raphaelites and Arts and Crafts movement. The depiction of Isabella includes an outdoor scene that creates an intimate space in the surrounding environment and reinforces Pre-Raphaelite connections to individuals and nature. Morris' house, through its architecture and inhabitants, depicts a focus on handicraft, nature, design and story and a departure from ironwork and industrialization that was otherwise popular at the time.

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Despite the prevailing use of ironwork and mass production, the group of artists called the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood emphasized nature and handicraft for a more personal interpretation of the world around them. In a comparison of the similarities and differences between artist William Morris' architecture in Red House and artist William Holman Hunt's depiction of popular literary character *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*, similar themes are clear despite different approaches. The architectural details of the house represent ideals and beliefs held by the pre-Raphaelites in contradiction to the technological focus of the time. The depiction of Isabella creates an intimate space and reinforces pre-Raphaelite connections to individuals and nature. With criticism of the industrial and technological advancements of the day, this naturalistic and emotional depiction of Isabella reinforces pre-Raphaelite ideas. Morris' house, through its architecture and inhabitants, depicts a departure from ironwork and mass production that was otherwise popular at the time. As a movement, the pre-Raphaelites were instrumental in connecting the realistic paintings that predated them with the depictions of poems and characters that came after the movement ended. Critic John Ruskin's views are instrumental in the relationship of this house and painting to the movement and its impact. Though a discussion of the architectural elements of the Morris' house and Hunt's style of the painting, techniques creating emotion and portraying ideals are evident while opposing technological advancements.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Igra, Caroline. "William Holman Hunt's Portrait of Fanny: Inspiration for the Artist in the Late 1860s. *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 65. Bd., H. 2 (2002), pp. 232-241

Ironwork was increasing in popularity and was showcased at the Great Exhibition of 1851. As Chairman of the Royal Commission, Prince Albert oversaw the building of Crystal Palace for the 1851 Great Exhibition.<sup>2</sup> This showcased the different styles available in ironworks at the time. Iron was popular in architecture and ornamentation was a way to add personalized detail. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth century a vigorous cast iron industry grew up in England, but at the same time the wrought ironwork declined in quality.<sup>3</sup> While ironwork was popular, there was a backlash against it among craftsmen and an emphasis on individual expression and personalized craftsmanship. 'With the Pre-Raphaelites, Morris acquired that craving for liberty of thought and artistic creation for all, which became the distinctive features of his character throughout his life.'<sup>4</sup> Morris as he developed his views and firm professed the belief and connection between workers and their environment believing there was a societal and political value on creative endeavors over mass production and manufacturing. Red House indicates the combination of the craftsmanship valued by the Pre-Raphaelites and the technological advancements available at the time.

At the same time of the iron advancements, the Arts and Crafts movement had a powerful influence on taste in Britain. 'Concepts such as 'truth to materials' and 'good craftsmanship' were the basis for most critiques of design, and an uncritical belief that handiwork is inevitably best has supported a tide of craft activity which continues unabated.'<sup>5</sup> While the country grappled with the increasing ability to make elaborate iron structures, many artists like the Pre-Raphaelites attempted to maintain individual expression in their works and resist industrialization. Though some like Pugin resisted the technological influence and new possibility of iron and mechanization, others revered its powers of production, communication and potential for artistry. 'Ornamentation addressed the perceived loss of meaning in the use of iron in utilitarian public buildings.'<sup>6</sup> Even in the details at Red House, this combination of technological influence and artistry was clear.

'The most important development of the fifteenth century was the influence of architectural design upon blacksmith's work. The florid detail of fifteenth-century Gothic was perhaps better suited for execution in metal than in stone. Some idea of the possibilities of the new style and the new methods can be gained from the tomb railing with its buttresses, pinnacles, written finials and panels of pierced tracery.'<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Marsden, Gordon. *Victorian Values: Personalities and Perspectives in Nineteenth Century Society* Textbook Binding 20 Jul 1998 pp.116

<sup>3</sup> English Wrought-Iron Work. Victoria and Albert Museum Read Books Ltd. London, UK. Apr 16, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Silva, Maria Cândida Zamith | FLUP – CETAPS (Portugal). William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites <http://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/12624.pdf> Accessed 2 February 2017

<sup>5</sup> Evans, Stuart. "The Arts and Crafts Movement by Elizabeth Cumming and Wendy Kaplan; William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain by Charles Harvey and Jon Press" *Journal of Design History* Vol. 6, No. 1 (1993), pp. 57-62 Oxford University Press on behalf of Design History Society Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1315937> Accessed: 09-01-2017

<sup>6</sup> Dobraszczyk, Paul. *Iron, Ornament and Architecture in Victorian Britain: Myth and Modernity, Excess and Enchantment* Routledge; New edition edition (June 18, 2014) pp 25

<sup>7</sup> Cooper, Nicholas. "Red House: Some Architectural Histories." *Architectural History*, Vol. 49 (2006), pp. 207-221 SAHGB Publications Limited <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40033823> Accessed: 09-01-2017

The most striking points of Red House include the ‘novelty of using brick on its own, its stylistic freedom and the functionality of its plan.’<sup>8</sup> The origins of the Arts and Crafts movement rest in the decorating and furnishing of the house and Morris’s firm. Red House was not the landmark it is today until Morris established his reputation as an artist. ‘Red House was the outcome of Morris's growing passion to be up and doing things to change the domestic art of England. Its building and furnishing served to clarify his ideas and bring to the point of definite enterprise 'the manufacture on a reasonable and artistic basis every article for domestic use.’<sup>9</sup> Working with architects and artists with whom he would have a longstanding partnership, Morris created the house with a particular image in mind and to express certain ideals.



Ethan Doyle White. The Red House in Upton, Bexleyheath, Greater London

‘In fact, there are several indications that Webb and Morris sought quite consciously to break up the closed inner circle of the Victorian family... The original kitchen is down a passage a short way from the dining-room and has a capacious window looking west onto the garden, a friendly feature typical of the Red House; at the time it was built servants were usually hidden in the basement or a concealed wing.’<sup>10</sup>

Deliberate handmade details and personal touches exemplify the focus on craftsmanship of the time in Red House. This was a deliberate departure from the rigid formality found elsewhere in Victorian lifestyle and the structure found in new technology like ironwork. Paintings of the time also exemplified craftsmanship and

<sup>8</sup> Cooper, Nicholas. “Red House: Some Architectural Histories.” *Architectural History*, Vol. 49 (2006), pp. 207-221 SAHGB Publications Limited <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40033823> Accessed: 09-01-2017

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Evans, Stuart. ‘The Arts and Crafts Movement by Elizabeth Cumming and Wendy Kaplan; William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain by Charles Harvey and Jon Press’ *Journal of Design History* Vol. 6, No. 1 (1993), pp. 57-62 Oxford University Press on behalf of Design History Society Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1315937> Accessed: 09-01-2017

exemplified a personal connection to the work against the backdrop of technological advancement. The function of the house is clear through its architecture just as the emotions of the artist and story behind the painting is clear in William Holman Hunt's portrait of well-known character from Bocaccio's Decameron and John Keats' poem, *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*. In Red House, there is an 'integration of structure and ornament and a logical expression of plan and indicate the craftsman's importance.'<sup>11</sup> Throughout the house there is a revival of simplicity that shows the ornamentation even in ironwork is not preferable to simple structure. The house it is said is Gothic in principle rather than in style showing the structure and simplicity of Gothic design without the explicit architectural details. 'The outsides of Webb's houses are extremely simple, relying for their effect on materials, colour and mass.'<sup>12</sup> The less is more approach was in direct conflict with developing technology of the time and ornamentation in ironwork as the exhibition and individual businesses offered details in interior and exterior architecture. Morris instead stayed true to the personal reflection and individual craftsmanship that is relatable to the public on a personal level.

'Morris rediscovered the artistic conscience, the most essential of all qualities in art. So when, in 1936, Nikolaus Pevsner published the book that probably first introduced many readers to Red House - the first edition of *Pioneers* - it was to a public that was already prepared. Pevsner's starting point was Morris's concern to combine appearance and functionality through the recognition that art is not something set apart from everyday life but is relevant to every aspect of life, and hence to the lives of everyone.'<sup>13</sup>

This combination of private and work life is new for the Victorian era and allows freedom in the personal life to explore labour and ambitious pursuits outside the home. In allowing the spheres to mix, the distinctions otherwise made in work and home life no longer apply so dramatically. 'Pevsner proceeded to describe how it was on the continent that the implications of such teaching would be translated into an acknowledgement of the virtues of engineering, of good industrial design and machine production.'<sup>14</sup> As the mass production systems in England became more pervasive and for convenience, affordability and style, the public took interest in this, the societal ideals encouraging handicraft and separation between home and work needed to integrate new ideas and incorporate change or become separated and irrelevant.

<sup>11</sup> Cooper, Nicholas. 'Red House: Some Architectural Histories.' *Architectural History*, Vol. 49 (2006), pp. 207-221 SAHGB Publications Limited <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40033823> Accessed: 09-01-2017

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Marsh, Jan. 'William Morris & Red House' *The Guardian*. 26 July 2003. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2003/jul/26/art.architecture>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

In Red House, which was famous only after Morris gained renown, the windows and roof were all derived from architects Butterfield and Street<sup>15</sup> and that brick was the local material, but the round windows could be seen as ‘unfoliated tracery circles and that rooms had been dark and medievalizing, furnished with the Gothic furniture designed by Webb, with stained glass and a minstrels' gallery.’<sup>16</sup> These mixed genres and styles indicate the change happening in England at this time and the effort made in architecture and art to reflect changing societal values. As the rigid formality of Victorian life gave way to technological advancement, individual expression became paramount. For Morris and all who followed him, Red House was a symbol of this newfound freedom of expression. ‘It was indeed a dream house’, wrote Thompson, ‘but rich and elaborate, the reverse of light and clarity.’<sup>17</sup> With each detail he added, he made a conscious statement about how he wanted to live and how he wanted to be perceived.

Unlike much of Victorian domestic architecture, Red House is unpretentious with simple solid construction and red brick. There are gothicising details such as red brick arches and porches and, inside, construction is frankly revealed by means of uncovered wood lintels and exposed beams. Huge pinnaced newel-posts rise from the staircase and stained glass was designed for the windows and porches and, inside construction is frankly revealed by means of uncovered wood lintels and exposed beams. Huge pinnaced newel posts rise from the staircase and stained glass was designed for the windows in the hall. According to Georgina Burne Jones, this little with its beautiful high roofed brick swell in the center summed up the feeling of the whole place.<sup>18</sup>

While there are new details indicating a new era, there are also Victorian high Gothic ideals shown in construction of the personalized home. ‘Red House has been talked of as a revolutionary building, but it is a part of the High Victorian school of Modern Gothic with a strong element of Romanticism in its design.’<sup>19</sup> As an example of Morris’ design work, it was a departure from traditional PRB values and started the Arts and Crafts movement leading to Aesthetic movement ideals of beauty. The use of Victorian elements show the house’s place in architectural history, but the way they are combined with the Gothic elements being suggested instead of explicitly focused on throughout the construction show Morris’ effort to distinguish himself and personalize the building. Still, it has been considered a Victorian Modern Gothic building due to many of its predominant elements as explained by Fiona MacCarthy in her 1994 biography of Morris. ‘A house which was complicated and dense, not so different in character from Pugin's elaborately Gothic interiors of a decade before.’<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Banham, Joanna and Jennifer Harris. *William Morris and the Middle Ages: A collection of Essays Together with a Catalogue of Works Exhibited at the Whitworth Art Gallery, 28 September-8 December 1984.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p.46

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p.47

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

While he incorporated advancements in architecture, Morris was careful not to be swept up into any one movement so that like other architecture of this time, his house stands unique to its own movement and incorporates many types of design. In 1977 Mark Girouard saw them as having common origins in contemporary tastes and circumstances as the Queen Anne movement.<sup>21</sup> Because of this mix of design techniques, incorporation of technology and reliance of craftsmanship, it cannot belong to any one style but expresses the divergent thoughts of the day and Morris' personal artistic beliefs. Red House is extremely influential in the Arts and Crafts movement and remains a study of the integration of modern architecture and personal poetic design.

As far back as 1930 John Betjeman had written an article in the *Architectural Review*, in which he praised Red House's novelty and wrote that, "Arts and Crafts" is now a term of ridicule but the movement may give a hearing in England to Le Corbusier'. Betjeman's first book, *Ghastly Good Taste* (published in 1933) is polemic rather than history, but in a genealogical table at the end he identified in bold type what he called 'the thin stream of life and vigorous influence for the good', which started from William Morris.<sup>22</sup>

Pre-Raphaelite painters responded to the technological advances in a similar way as the Victorian architects, emphasizing personal connections in their art and telling stories of human nature. They also used natural scenes and models they knew well to tell their own story as well as the one of a character in their paintings. For example, Hunt chose his wife for a model for many pieces. 'Prior to marrying Fanny Waugh he had been involved with his principal model, Annie Miller. His portrait of Isabella used her as a model.' Choosing women he knows and not professional models allows the painting to say as much about the artist as his personal life as it does the story being depicted. 'Hunt's preference for depicting the women with whom he was emotionally and physically close, a tendency which would continue over the years, is exemplified in his *Awakening Conscience* from 1851-1853. In Florence, Hunt decided to set up a studio and to continue to work. It was there that he started a painting entitled *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*.'<sup>23</sup> By choosing a model he knows and working in Florence within a community of artists, Hunt transforms the well known story of Isabella into a tale of his own romance with his model and friendship with other artists. He regretted during this time that no picture of Fanny had been done in Florence in 1866 and indeed did not finish *Isabella* until he returned to London in 1868.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Evans, Stuart. "The Arts and Crafts Movement by Elizabeth Cumming and Wendy Kaplan; William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain by Charles Harvey and Jon Press" *Journal of Design History* Vol. 6, No. 1 (1993), pp. 57-62 Oxford University Press on behalf of Design History Society Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1315937> Accessed: 09-01-2017

<sup>22</sup> Cooper, Nicholas. "Red House: Some Architectural Histories." *Architectural History*, Vol. 49 (2006), pp. 217 SAHGB Publications Limited <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40033823> Accessed: 09-01-2017

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Igra, Caroline. "William Holman Hunt's Portrait of Fanny: Inspiration for the Artist in the Late 1860s. *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 65. Bd., H. 2 (2002), pp. 232-241



*Isabella and the Pot of Basil.* William Holman Hunt English, 1827-1910. 1868. Oil on Canvas. Delaware Art Museum.

In looking at the leaning pose of his model, Hunt encourages the viewer to wonder about her mood and immediately involves the viewer in her story of woe. ‘At this early time, in October 1866, Hunt had described Isabella as a delicious subject that he expected to keep him happy in the period of his detainment in Florence.’<sup>25</sup> She was a complex character who could personify life circumstances beyond her story and relate to societal norms of any time. Hunt related her to his personal circumstances and took many years to finish the details of this painting as his circumstances changed. Much like the construction of *Red House*, it was a collaborative effort and included many stops and starts as new ideals were considered and new details were added. ‘The character of Hunt's Isabella changed along with the personal life circumstances of its creator. The painting evolved from being an illustration of a literary theme to another memorial to Fanny.’<sup>26</sup> While he started with another model for the piece in Florence, he continued the painting back in England with Fanny in mind. His personal woe is seen on the face of the model and Isabella’s story is used to tell a more personal tale of his own circumstances.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Igra, Caroline. “William Holman Hunt's Portrait of Fanny: Inspiration for the Artist in the Late 1860s. *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 65. Bd., H. 2 (2002), pp. 232-241

'As Judith Bronkhurst has suggested, this picture gradually became not only a celebration of the love Hunt had experienced during his year long marriage, in the sensuality of the figure of Isabella, but also an expression of the anguish of his bereavement.<sup>9</sup> The subject of the picture was chosen from a poem by Keats that is based on a tale from Boccaccio's Decamerone about a woman who had been destroyed by her love for a man.'<sup>27</sup>

The forlorn gaze and desperate clinging of the model to the large pot predominantly set in the middle of the room show the focus of the piece on what's inside of the pot. The adoring look and warm embrace of the pot also show the contents symbolize Isabella's love for her lost lover. 'Thus the subject of this painting is notable primarily because of the inevitable connection it has to the bereft artist. Hunt too was suffering from the loss of his beloved. He used the painting of Isabella to express his grief, altering the figure and facial features originally chosen and replacing them with those of Fanny.' The interior space is cluttered showing the complexity of both Hunt's personal story and that of Isabella's. There are hidden meanings throughout the piece that would have been signals to the public at the time. The white dress shows her intent to marry the deceased and the size of the pot conceals a head large enough to share a marriage bed. The embrace around a wood podium shows the reliance on Arts and Crafts architecture. The absence of any ironwork or industrialized production shows the focus on the individual in this portrait and human emotion instead of impersonal technological advancement. As in Red House, the architectural detail expresses the feelings of the person who designed it and illustrates a particular story personal to them and universal emotional themes without staying loyal to any single architectural style. The birth of the Arts and Crafts movement is evident in the decorations on the windows and wood panels creating design in the interior.

John Ruskin's comments were pivotal to the public and defined the art world in the early 1850s. Artists including Morris and Hunt exhibited an interest in John Ruskin's tenet that a 'love of detailed realism must be reconciled with a need to make a painting depict unseen truths of the spirit.'<sup>28</sup> The portrait of Isabella does this as it draws out our own feelings of loss and empathy for this subject.

'The wedding of scientific detachment, analysis and objectivity, to an intense, immediate and subjective emotional response would achieve a form of sacred realism. James H. Coombs suggests that for Hunt the individual fact conveyed in the canvas had to body forth or symbolize a more important reality, in this case, the essence of the figure depicted. Hunt's stylistic treatment of the memorial to his wife well exemplifies this effort to illustrate such universal truths.'<sup>29</sup>

As in the personalized details of the architecture in Red House, the details of the

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Waithe, Marcus. "The Stranger at the Gate: Privacy, Property, and the Structures of Welcome at William Morris's Red House." *Victorian Studies*. Vol. 46, Indiana University Press No. 4 (Summer, 2004), pp. 567-595

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

painting show universal truths to which the artist and the public could relate. A story such as Isabella's is a perfect catalyst for a discussion of well known feelings and sentiments. Similarly, Red House needed not only its architecture but the work of Morris to bring attention to the house and allow the public to relate to it in the way that the artist did. Morris' poems, interior patterns and paintings help the public relate to the details of the house and bring the house out of its own world and into the public consciousness. With the painting of Isabella, Hunt shows a single woman figure enclosed in a space but also exemplifies his own loneliness.

'Isabella is a depiction of a single female within an interior. The universal meaning of this focus might be... the woman inside single figures of women within an enclosed space or room which embodies their psychological and moral condition. A closer look at the cluttered and suggestive spaces which enclose the figures in the paintings mentioned above seems to support this notion.<sup>30</sup>

The interior of the Red House and the conflicting architectural details within became more powerful and meaningful after Morris received acclaim. Similarly the public viewing Isabella's portrait, this popularity shows that despite the theme of loneliness, through the arts, the public can be invited into this space to understand the emotions depicted. Were Isabella in the background and the viewer not invited to gaze upon her head on sharing in her grief, and at the same time relating to the grief of the artist, she would seem more lonely in the room. Before Morris was well known the house may not have had the same power to transform the architectural landscape in a personal way. The cluttered look of the room in which Isabella stands in Hunt's portrayal is reminiscent of the red brick ornament on Red House. However, the simple line of Isabella's white gown also reminds us of the simple design and function of the house. Besides being a remarkably innovative architect he was also a renowned industrial designer, whose tile panels, stained glass windows and exquisite pieces of furniture (mostly applied in churches and official buildings) owe much to the works of William Morris.<sup>31</sup> Morris' Red House and Hunt's Isabella show a departure from technological advancement and a focus on personal expression but still incorporate societal changes inherent in their time in Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite Britain. Even though these are departures from architectural developments around them, they bring further meaning to the use of ironwork and were instrumental in encouraging ornamentation in the ironwork as a means of combining craftsmanship and technology to maintain personal expression within industrialization and mass production.

<sup>30</sup> Igra, Caroline. "William Holman Hunt's Portrait of Fanny: Inspiration for the Artist in the Late 1860s. *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 65. Bd., H. 2 (2002), pp. 232-241

<sup>31</sup> Silva, Maria Cândida Zamith| FLUP – CETAPS (Portugal) William Morris and the PreRaphaelites <http://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/12624.pdf> Accessed 2 February 2017

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