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William Morris (1834-96), DAY: ANGEL HOLDING A SUN, c. 1862-64. Watercolor and pencil on paper, 14 x 18 inches. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; gift of the Houston Alumnae Chapter of Delta Delta Delta Sorority. Photo © Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas.

Back to the Future

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The Inklings who gathered in Oxford during troubled times—in the European wreckage of the “Great War” and with a second destructive war looming on the horizon—returned to the past in order to make sense of their present moment. C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and their friends “were more at home in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance [than in the present],” Corbin Scott Carnell reminds us, “but the very depth of their immersion in the past gave them a useful perspective on the present which presentists ironically lack.”¹

Given that our culture in the United States is so future-oriented and neglectful of the past, it seems astonishing to us that these Christians would turn for their inspiration to legends and art that are hundreds of years old. Yet this is how the Inklings’ imaginations were awakened and hearts attuned to create the powerful works of literary art that hold us today with their mystery and instruct us with their insight.

The Inklings’ sort of “back to the future” travel through pre-modern cultures to gain a new perspective on their present situation was presaged a generation earlier in the visual and plastic arts of a group of English artists who called themselves the “Pre-Raphaelites.” William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, whose work is represented here, led the second phase of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. They learned about the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) when they met as undergraduate students at Exeter College, Oxford University, in 1853. They studied the works and artistic philosophies of three young painters, William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), John Everett Millais (1829-1896), and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), who had founded the PRB in September 1848 with the hopes of restoring British art to the Italian style of painting practiced before the age of Raphael (1483-1520).

Frustrated with their instruction at the Royal Academy in London, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood longed for the simplicity of form, pure local color, and scientific perspective that had characterized Florentine painting in the fifteenth century. They inscribed their first paintings, exhibited in 1849, with the secret initials “PRB.”

In 1856 Morris and Burne-Jones met Rossetti. Although inspired by the first generation of PRB members, Morris and Burne-Jones took the Broth-

erhood in a different direction. Instead of the simple, shadowless forms of the 1840s when the Pre-Raphaelite artists were inspired by their study of renaissance engravings, the 1850s became a time of more natural forms, sharp focus, and brilliant colors which were highlighted by being painted on a white ground.²

This use of white background may be seen in *Day: Angel Holding a Sun* by William Morris (p. 38). This watercolor and pencil work was a design for a stained glass window. The image looks very medieval, not only in its religious subject matter, but in its artistic form. The flattened perspective, noticeable in the angel's feet and hands, and the reduced color palette—regal blue and luminous gold paints that are used throughout the image—remind us of Byzantine mosaics.

Morris's "passionate devotion to the Middle Ages" did not end with his paintings. In his later political writings "Morris often contrasted the social organization of the Middle Ages with the present condition of England, which led him to advocate a complete reform of industrial society, and found in them a distant perspective from which to criticize the industrial society of England."³

Though the Pre-Raphaelite artists were fascinated with medieval subject matter—including tales of heroic knights, beautiful princesses, and wicked dragons—they did not slavishly mimic medieval artistic styles. This is evident in Burne-Jones's treatment of the legend of St. George and the Dragon, where the colors are more vibrant and varied (in part because of the brilliant new pigments available to artists in the nineteenth century) and the foreground figures are more natural and three-dimensional than in medieval paintings (cover and p. 42).

The legend of St. George, the fourth-century Christian martyr who was chosen a thousand years later to be the patron saint of England, has long inspired the moral imagination of artists. St. George and the Dragon was a popular subject in fifteenth-century Florentine painting and sculpture. Donatello is but one artist who uses the story to demonstrate a new method of relief sculpture on the base of one of the niches of Orsanmichele in Florence.⁴ All the art guild members walked by this niche to attend meetings within the building, so it strongly influenced the sculptor's contemporaries as well as the Pre-Raphaelite artists four hundred years later.

Like Donatello, Burne-Jones pushes the action to the foreground. George shoves the sword into the dragon's mouth in our space rather than in the midground as in early fifteenth-century painting. The heightened drama and the placement of the event in the viewer's space are not elements of a medieval style; these techniques belong to the Mannerist style of the mid-sixteenth century. To complement the dramatic action, the artist employs a vivid color palette of deep greens for the middle plane and rich blue in the distance. These intense colors are also in the Mannerist style.

Though both Morris and Burne-Jones entered Oxford University with the intention of becoming Anglican priests, they came to believe that their contribution to social reform in England should be through art rather than the priesthood.⁵ With some friends they founded Morris, Marshall, Faulker & Co. (later called Morris & Co.) to develop textiles, carvings, metal-work, paper hangings, and windows for churches. Burne-Jones designed amazing stained glass windows for churches all over England, but among his best-loved works are windows in the chapel of Christ Church College, Oxford University. It is these luminous windows, along with beautiful arts and crafts throughout the churches and homes of Oxfordshire, that would inspire a later generation of medievalists, the Inklings.

NOTES

1 Corbin Scott Carnell, "The Inklings and the Twentieth Century: Did They Back Away?" *Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society*, 5:12 (1974), 4.

2 Julian Treuherz, "Pre-Raphaelitism," *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online* (Oxford University Press, accessed January 28, 2004), <http://www.groveart.com>.

3 Richard W. Oram, "William Morris and His Circle," (Online Exhibition of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, accessed March 11, 2004), <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/online/morris/>.

4 Charles Avery, "Donatello," *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online*, (Oxford University Press, Accessed March 15, 2004), <http://www.groveart.com>.

5 "William Morris," (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1911, accessed March 11, 2004), http://22.1911encyclopedia.org/M/MO/MORRIS_WILLIAM.htm.



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