The Pre-Raphaelites & the Oxford Museum

by Dr John Holmes

When Henry Acland told his friend John Ruskin that the Gothic architects Deane and Woodward had won the competition to build the new Oxford Museum, Ruskin was ecstatic. He wrote to tell the artist and designer Lady Pauline Trevelyan:

> *The main thing is—Acland has got his museum—Gothic—the architect a friend of mine—I can do whatever I like with it ... I shall get all the pre-Raphaelites to design one each an archivolt and some capitals—and we will have all the plants in England and all the Monsters in the museum.*

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded in 1848 by seven young artists—the painters William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and James Collinson, the sculptor Thomas Woolner, and the art critics Frederic George Stephens and William Michael Rossetti. Together they launched a revolution in the Victorian art world, insisting that art should show people the truth about the world around them, not just repeat the conventions of the old masters.

What is 'Learning more'?

'Learning more' presents a series of articles about the Museum and its collections. It is designed for older students, teachers, researchers, and anyone who wants to find out more about particular aspects of the Museum's work and its history.

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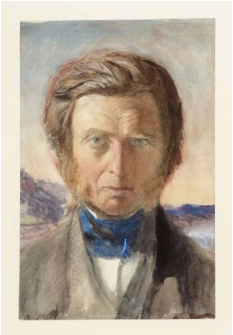
John Ruskin



Ruskin (right) was the leading art critic of his day and the champion of the Pre-Raphaelites.

With his encouragement, several artists got involved in the plan to design and decorate the new museum, working closely with the architects, masons and scientists to create a building that is a work of art and a vision of nature in its own right.

Science and the Arts

Pre-Raphaelite art was to be a form of investigation, a serious study on scientific lines. As Frederic George Stephens (left) put it:

> *The sciences have become almost exact within the present century. ... And how has this been done but by bringing greater knowledge to bear upon a wider range of experiment; by being precise in the search after truth? If this adherence to fact, to experiment and not theory,—to begin at the beginning and not fly to the end,—has added so much to the knowledge of man in science; why may it not greatly assist the moral purposes of the Arts?*

Nature in the Museum

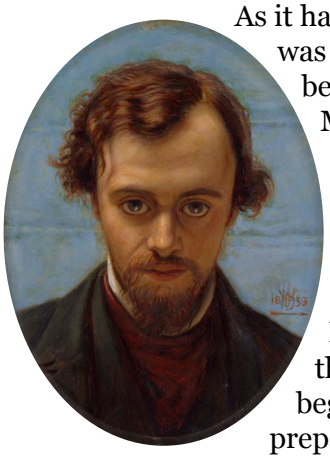
While the Pre-Raphaelites looked to science as a model for their art, the Oxford scientists looked to the Pre-Raphaelites for how to represent nature in the fabric of their new Museum. In a lecture on the Museum, Acland paid tribute to them:

We have sought to hinder all ornament, unless that ornament be free from vicious carelessness; and to stop all professing transcript of Nature, unless it be painstaking, sagacious, and honest. Herein, we owe just debt of gratitude to the young school of Artists, called, half in jest, Pre-Raphaelites.

Each piece of carving in the museum was to be carefully studied from nature. At the same time, like a scientist, the artist was to bring his own insight to bear. Together, the artists and scientists would create a vision of nature that was at once rigorously scientific and beautifully crafted.

The Pre-Raphaelites get involved

In December 1854, just after Acland told him the good news, Ruskin wrote back to say that he hoped 'to get Millais and Rossetti to design flower and beast borders'.



As it happened, Ruskin was no longer on the best of terms with Millais—his wife Effie had left him for the painter earlier that year—but he soon introduced Woodward to Rossetti (left), and the three of them began enthusiastically preparing for the building. Rossetti introduced Woodward and Ruskin to the sculptor Alexander Munro, who set to work designing several of the statues of scientists planned for the central court.

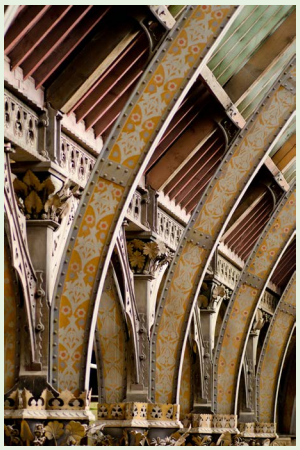
Over the next two years Rossetti would bring in two more sculptors from the very early days of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to work on the statues: Thomas Woolner, a founder member of the P.R.B., and John Lucas Tupper, whose sculptures took Pre-Raphaelite principles even further than the Pre-Raphaelites had themselves. Ruskin set to work making designs for the windows in consultation with Woodward, Rossetti and Munro, while Woolner took on designing the archway for the main door, first on his own and then in collaboration with John Hungerford Pollen. Pollen had been working with Woodward, Rossetti and Munro on another of their projects—the building and decoration of the Oxford Union Society debating chamber (now the Union library). Another of the team of young artists who worked at the Union, Richard St John Tyrwhitt, painted the murals in the geological lecture room (now the Director's office).

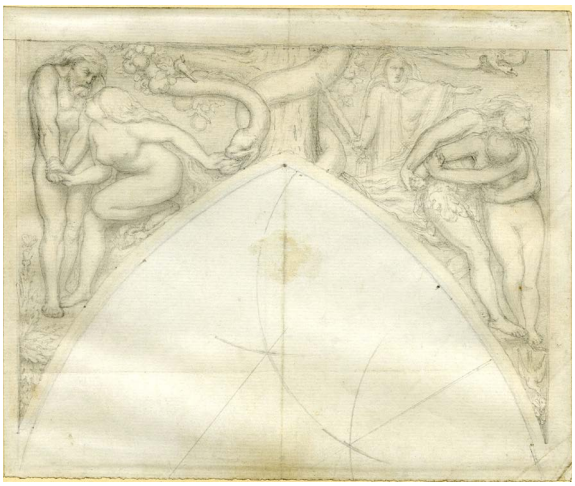
All told, nearly all the members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle were involved in the decorations for the Museum one way or another. Ford Madox Brown advised Woolner on his statue of Francis Bacon. Pauline Trevelyan, William Bell Scott and Lizzie Siddall worked on designs for the stonework. Holman Hunt, a good friend of Acland's, may well have put his old studio-mate Henry Hugh Armstead forward to carve the statue of Aristotle. Hunt and Woolner made a point of coming to Oxford for the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science when the Museum opened, while Stephens wrote a very favourable review of the Museum for Macmillan's Magazine, praising the capitals carved by the O'Shea brothers and their nephew Edward Whelan in the main court as 'infinitely above the level of similar modern works'. Unfortunately none of them commented on the 'Great Debate' between the Bishop of Oxford and T. H. Huxley over Darwin's theory of evolution if they heard it.

Sadly too, the story told by Georgina Burne-Jones, the widow of the painter Edward Burne-Jones, that Rossetti and William Morris had each carved a capital for the court is not true, but their contemporary William Tuckwell recalled later that Morris and Burne-Jones were among the Oxford students drawn to the beauty and originality of the Museum, and they went on to join Woodward, Rossetti and the others in decorating the Oxford Union.

Pre-Raphaelite art at the Oxford Museum

As well as being one of the most daring and influential buildings of the Victorian Gothic Revival, the Oxford Museum as a whole is one of the greatest Pre-Raphaelite works of art. Woodward and Acland embraced Pre-Raphaelite principles throughout the Museum. This can be seen in E. A. Skidmore's ironwork (right) and even more in the O'Sheas' beautifully vibrant and intricate stone carvings (left) modelled directly on specimens from the University's Botanic Gardens. [To read more about the architecture of the Museum and the carvings in the court, see the Learning More... articles on 'The architecture of the Museum' and 'The stonework of the Museum'.] There are also several places in the museum where you can see works by the Pre-Raphaelites themselves.

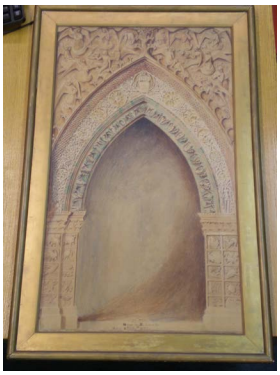




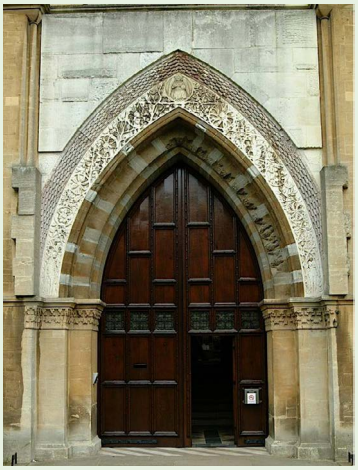
Thomas Woolner's original design for the entrance porch (British Museum)

1. The entrance arch, by Thomas Woolner and John Hungerford Pollen

Thomas Woolner (right) was given the job of designing the carving for the main entrance to the Museum. His original design (above), now in the British Museum, shows the Fall and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. This design was never used, perhaps because it put too strong an emphasis on the Bible and showed the pursuit of knowledge itself in a bad light.



The next design (left), drawn by John Hungerford Pollen, probably in collaboration with Woolner, still includes Eve, but its symbolism is more optimistic, representing the growth of knowledge up to an angel at the top of the arch, with more angels above in heaven. This was the design used in carving the arch itself, though it was never finished.



The entrance arch of the Museum today

But there were key changes. Adam, who is missing from the design, was reinstated for the carving itself. He is shown holding back a bloodhound, representing sin restrained by morality. Acland later claimed that the plants growing in curves up the sides of the arch were a symbol of evolution, but the presence of Adam and Eve show that, when the building was first built, it enshrined a Christian vision of nature as created by God. Even so, the angel at the top of the arch, who holds two books in the design, now holds one book and a living cell, showing that, while the Bible was still important to the Victorian scientists in Oxford, modern biology was an equal partner in the search for truth.

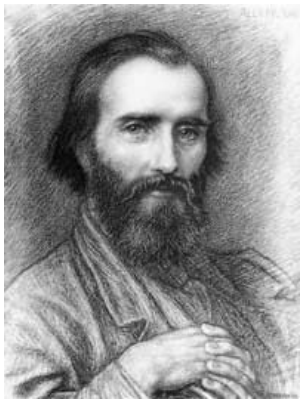
Ground-floor window designed by John Ruskin and carved by James O'Shea

2. Ruskin's windows

John Ruskin did several designs for the windows on the façade of the Museum. Ten of his working drawings are now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. The window on the left of the main entrance on the ground floor (see below left) was carved to Ruskin's finished design, now in Birmingham, by James O'Shea. O'Shea also adapted several details from Ruskin's drawings as they worked together on the window immediately above it (above).

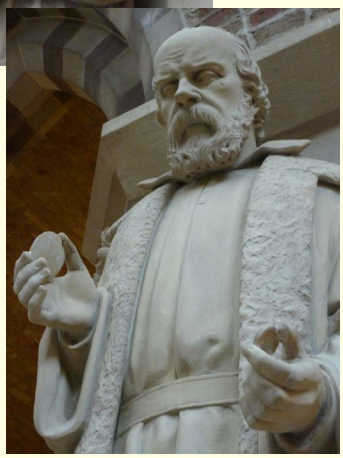
John Ruskin's sketch and design for a ground floor window. Now in the Ashmolean (above) and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (right)

3. The statues of scientists



Of the eighteen statues of scientists in the main court, the first nine were designed and carved by sculptors associated with the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Alexander Munro (left) carved the statues of Newton, Hippocrates, Leibnitz, Galileo, Watt and Davy; Thomas Woolner carved Francis Bacon; John Lucas Tupper carved Linnaeus; and Henry Hugh Armstead carved Aristotle. Woolner also carved the statue of Prince Albert after the Prince's death in 1861. [To read more about the scientists represented in the sculptures and the artists who carved them, see the 'Learning More ...' article 'The statues in the court'.]

Linnaeus by Tupper (left) and Aristotle by Armstead (right)

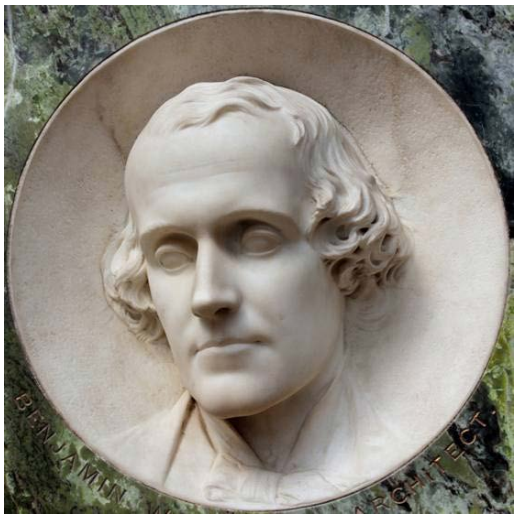


Statues of Bacon by Woolner (above) and Galileo by Munro (left)

None of these sculptors had much experience of full-scale public sculpture, so Woodward and Acland were taking a considerable risk in employing them. The risk paid off magnificently, as they laid the foundations for one of the finest collections of portrait sculpture in Britain and a unique group of statues of scientists. Two things mark out the Pre-Raphaelite sculptures from the other statues in the court. One is the remarkable detail of the carvings, especially on Tupper's Linnaeus and Woolner's Bacon. The other is how animated the statues are. Each scientist is captured in action. Bacon is explaining his empirical method, one of the foundations of the modern scientific revolution. Newton is contemplating the fallen apple, about to hit upon the theory of gravity. Leibnitz is looking up to the sky to check his observations against a star-chart. Galileo is putting two lenses together, working out how to use them to make a telescope. Each one of them is shown in the act of thinking, using their imaginations to do their science like the artists themselves.

4. Benjamin Woodward, by Alexander Munro

The architect of the Museum, Benjamin Woodward, was very ill with tuberculosis when it opened in 1860. He died the following year. As a tribute to him, Ruskin and Acland commissioned Munro to carve a monument to him. The result was a beautiful and haunting medallion portrait set in green marble (below). Munro was a master of this distinctive Victorian form of portraiture. In the portrait, Woodward looks back into this world from beyond the grave, a kindly and contemplative presence just out of reach.



Tyrwhitt's mural of the Mer de Glace glacier in the Museum Director's office.

5. Tyrwhitt's geological murals

Woodward originally intended to complement the carvings and ironwork of the Museum with mural paintings. In the end, the only murals painted were done by the Reverend Richard St John Tyrwhitt, a protégé of Ruskin's, in the geological lecture room. Although Tyrwhitt was an associate of the Pre-Raphaelites, his method of painting landscapes was very different. The Pre-Raphaelites, especially Hunt and Millais, believed that landscapes should be painted from nature in the open air. Tyrwhitt had not visited the places he wanted to paint—the Mer de Glace glacier in the Alps and the volcano Vesuvius—so instead he used photographs to prepare oil paintings and then reworked the subjects imaginatively and on a much bigger scale on the walls of the lecture room. Like the rock samples used for the columns round the court and the O'Sheas' botanical carvings, Tyrwhitt's murals contributed both to the Museum's scientific teaching and to its artistic vision.

