

INTRODUCTION

In 1964, in the Italian edition of his *History of Art Criticism*, the Italian art historian Lionello Venturi peremptorily stated: 'la critica è concorde nel non riconoscere valore d'arte né ai preraffaelliti, né alla setta dei "primitifs", né ai puristi, né ai nazareni, né al "Gothic revival"'.¹ At that time nineteenth-century medievalism and neo-Renaissance in the arts were not only out of fashion, but were viewed by many as the epitome of *fin de siècle* bad taste, a conservative mindless eclecticism which harked back to an ideal past rather than projecting itself towards the future. Although this misconception has been addressed in the past decades there is still a widespread tendency to view the development of Modern European art as firmly rooted in the aesthetic and stylistic example of the French urban avant-garde. With the exception of Britain, which in the past three decades has witnessed an intense critical and historical scrutiny of the Victorian era, relatively little is known about nineteenth-century art in most of the major European countries; studies have been conducted at local or national level, and the issue of inter-European artistic and cultural influences has been partially examined in studies addressing the influence of French art, and the Impressionist and Realist movements in particular.

The 1984 Tate Gallery exhibition on the Pre-Raphaelites was the starting point for the critical revaluation of the members of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and their successors which has changed our view of the Victorian art world.² However, although much has been written on the foreign influences on British art and especially on the fascination of British and Pre-Raphaelite artists with Italy, less is known about the reception of British art abroad and its impact on the art and aesthetics of other countries. The links between Pre-Raphaelite and Continental art, and the influence of Pre-Raphaelitism on the wider European context, have not been widely recognized. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the later movement which stemmed from it, which we label as Pre-Raphaelitism, have been viewed as an isolated English phenomenon, instead of part of the tradition of European nineteenth-century art. In their reassessment of the movement, Susan Casteras and Alicia Craig Faxon have attempted to correct the balance by placing Pre-Raphaelitism in its historic, European context.³ Their book, however, followed a pattern already established by twentieth-century scholars, focusing on the link between English and French art, which, in this case, was extended to include Belgian art. Similarly, a more recent exhibition at the Tate Gallery on Pre-Raphaelite art in the age of Symbolism, though widening the picture of the influence of the English movement abroad to include the work of Swiss Symbolist artists, was still biased towards the French art world. Only one Italian painting, by the Divisionist Gaetano Previati, was displayed, and the catalogue made only a passing reference to the impact of Pre-Raphaelite art in Italy. This situation is unsatisfactory since, as will become apparent in this study, in the 1880s and 1890s there

was a pronounced interest in Pre-Raphaelitism among Italian artists and writers on art and literature which had a marked impact on their own work.

If one turns from Anglo-Saxon to Italian twentieth-century studies one finds a similar gap in the literature. Analyses of the impact of Pre-Raphaelite and English art on Italy are also very limited and although the question of the influence of Pre-Raphaelitism has been partially addressed in various articles on the Italian poet and writer Gabriele D'Annunzio and his interest in the Pre-Raphaelites, they lacked the broader scope of a study of the influence of the movement on Italian writers and artists. Since the early 1960s Italian art historians have devoted attention to the late nineteenth century and have carried out extensive research on the Macchiaioli painters⁴ and *Divisionisti*.⁵ Rossana Bossaglia, in her fundamental study of Italian art nouveau, highlighted the interest of Italian artists in Pre-Raphaelite art and the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement.⁶ Gianna Piantoni and Anna Maria Damigella focused their attention on the Roman art world, pointing to the influence of English Pre-Raphaelitism.⁷ More recently, in her study of Italian Symbolism, Damigella discussed the influence of Pre-Raphaelitism in Rome and northern Italy and its relevance in the theoretical framework of the Italian Symbolists.⁸ So far, however, there has been no attempt to analyse the relationship of English Pre-Raphaelitism to Italian art in any systematic way.

There are a number of reasons. First, outside Italy there is still a widespread conviction that following the disorientation in Napoleonic times and the critical years of the Risorgimento, the visual arts in Italy failed to produce any exponent of European stature — with the obvious exception of Canova. Moreover, nineteenth-century Italian art is still viewed as the art of the Macchiaioli and, though there is an awareness of Italian Divisionismo, it was only after the publication of the Futurist Manifesto in 1909 that Italy seems to have reappeared on the European art scene and has thus been given proper critical attention. Finally, a further matter which I would like to stress is the insularity of art historical studies, which, by and large, still tend to focus on national schools and rarely venture beyond the boundaries of the visual arts. However, in any analysis of *fin de siècle* cultural, literary, and artistic production it is fundamental to adopt an interdisciplinary approach and, as I intend to show, this is particularly important in the case of the influence of English Pre-Raphaelitism, which was itself an eminently interdisciplinary movement.

At the present stage of research some fundamental questions are still unanswered and their relevance has been overlooked: what were the phases and the actual extent of the literary and critical interest in English Pre-Raphaelite art in Italy; and, most importantly, was there an Italian Pre-Raphaelite movement which responded to this widespread interest? The aim of this book is to suggest an answer to these questions by investigating the missing link between Pre-Raphaelitism and Italian art and culture in the late nineteenth century: what that influence was; how it was transmitted; and how it was manifested. What follows is an analysis of the influence of the English movement not only in terms of the impact of Pre-Raphaelitism on Italian art, but also the interrelationships between English communities in Italy and Italian artists, critics, and writers on art and literature who were interested in the English movement and the English Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic milieu.

Chapter 1 focuses on the complex relationship between Italy and Britain in the nineteenth century, and is also a general introduction to Italian Ottocento painting, the development of the English Pre-Raphaelite movement, and the critical response to Pre-Raphaelitism in Italy. Chapter 2 seeks to place Anglo-Italian relations and the critical reception of the Pre-Raphaelites in context by considering a number of Italian and British personalities who had a prominent role in spreading knowledge of Pre-Raphaelitism. I shall look in particular at the way in which Italian writers and reviewers acquired their knowledge of Pre-Raphaelite art and focus on the intellectual and cultural milieux of Venice, Florence, and Rome while analysing the pattern of Anglo-Italian relations of the intellectual and social elites of these cities. The Roman Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic milieu will be the focus of Chapter 3. Here attention is given to the pronounced phenomenon of Anglomania, which characterized the capital city in the 1880s and early 1890s, and to the works of Gabriele D'Annunzio, in order to determine the nature of his contacts with Pre-Raphaelitism and to establish a chronology for his awareness of the movement. In particular, I shall investigate the specific influence of Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the way in which their type of feminine beauty influenced D'Annunzio's imagery. The last two chapters concentrate on the Italian art world. Chapter 4 focuses on the Italian landscape painter Nino Costa, his English friends, patrons, and the reception of his works in Britain. Then follows a detailed study of two artists' societies founded by Costa: the Etruscan School, which provides a basis for a discussion of Costa's ideas on art; and the *In Arte Libertas* movement and its contribution to the birth of Italian Pre-Raphaelitism. The last chapter concludes the analysis of the influence of Pre-Raphaelitism in Italy by looking at the visual arts. Here I analyse the works of a number of artists as a response to literary and critical interest in Pre-Raphaelite art and discuss the actual existence of Italian Pre-Raphaelitism.

One of the main problems which I have encountered in approaching such a broad and understudied subject is that little is known of the major Italian figures involved in this movement. No detailed biographical sources exist for the major critics who helped to diffuse knowledge of Pre-Raphaelitism in Italy and for most of the artists. One of the common problems when analysing textual and artistic influence is that single details can be of immense importance in their contemporary setting. By using new biographical research to recreate the contemporary network of critics, writers, artists, and collectors or patrons it is possible to construct a picture. One needs to know whom people met, what they read, what they thought. This critical approach has been widely used in order to provide a background analysis of intellectual history. In this respect, while stressing the originality of my research, I should like to express my debt to the works of Mario Praz, who has defined the path in the study of Anglo-Italian cultural relations. From a methodological point of view his attention to *petite histoire* and obscure and apparently remote connections has certainly informed my own work and has inspired me to attack my subject in unexpected places.⁹

The aim of this study is to challenge the current map of Italian late nineteenth-century art in order to see whether between Divisionism, Symbolism, Art Nouveau, and Futurism there is a place for Italian Pre-Raphaelitism.

Notes to the Introduction

1. Lionello Venturi, *Storia della critica d'arte* (Turin: Einaudi, 1964), p. 175. This was originally published as *History of Art Criticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1936).
2. *The Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. by Leslie Parris, exh. cat., London, Tate Gallery (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1984).
3. *Pre-Raphaelite Art in its European Context*, ed. by Susan P. Casteras and Alicia Craig Faxon (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995).
4. From the point of view of painting technique the Macchia movement, from the Italian for 'dot' or 'stain', was a precursor of Impressionism. It developed in the 1850s and 1860s in Tuscany. The Macchiaioli opposed the traditional style and technique of the academy, opting for a looser style which captured the impression of figures and landscapes.
5. Italian Divisionismo was a version of Neo-Impressionism which developed in Milan in the late 1880s and 1890s. Like their French counterparts, the Divisionisti used a technique of painting in which pigments were not mixed on the palette but applied in the small areas of unmixed pigment on the canvas so that they combined 'optically' in the vision of the spectator.
6. Rossana Bossaglia, *Il Liberty in Italia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1968). See also her *Il Liberty: Storia e fortuna del Liberty italiano* (Florence: Sansoni, 1974).
7. *Aspetti dell'arte a Roma*, ed. by Dario Durbè, exh. cat. (Rome: De Luca, 1972).
8. Anna Maria Damigella, *La pittura simbolista in Italia 1885–1900* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981).
9. 'It is not by the direct method of a scrupulous narration that the explorer of the past can hope to depict that singular epoch. If he is wise, he will adopt a subtler strategy. He will attack his subject in unexpected places.' Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1918; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 9.