

## **THOMAS FARRER AND THE PRE-RAPHAELITE MOVEMENT IN AMERICA**

by  
Lawrence B. Siddall

The Pre-Raphaelite movement in American art was brief, lasting only ten years from about 1857 to 1867. It appeared quickly on the horizon and then virtually vanished. In that short time, however, the movement made a significant impact. Yet little is known about it today. “It is a largely forgotten chapter in American Art”.<sup>1</sup>

What most defined this movement was the desire to revolutionize art in America and establish an aesthetic that was based on the principle of truth in nature as found in the writings of John Ruskin, the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century British critic, writer and artist. Ruskin wrote: “The word truth, as applied to art, signifies the faithful statement, either to the mind or senses, of any fact of nature.”<sup>2</sup>

While some of the artists associated with this movement called themselves Realists or Naturalists, most preferred the term Pre-Raphaelite because they saw their cause as similar to that of the Pre-Raphaelite artists in England who also wanted to change the course of art, in their case rejecting the traditional and rigid standards of the Royal Academy. The British artists, too, had been strongly influenced by the writings of Ruskin and took the name Pre-Raphaelite because they believed that true art existed only in Italian painting prior to Raphael.

One difference between the British and American movements was the fact that the British artists had a preference for figural painting, whereas the Americans focused more on landscape, still-life and what was called the nature study (as distinct from a sketch). In addition, the medieval themes depicted in many of the British paintings did not have the same appeal to the Americans. “Technically, Pre-Raphaelitism in America meant a

heightened meticulousness and specificity in detail in rendering observed, as opposed to ‘composed’ nature.”<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Charles Farrer, who was to become a leading figure in the Pre-Raphaelite movement in America, was 19 when he arrived in New York City in 1857 from London. The third of four children, he was born on September 16, 1838, at 22 Gresse Street, one block from the British Museum. His father and grandfather were both artists and also named Thomas.\*

Farrer’s formal training began at the Working Men’s College in London where he took landscape classes with John Ruskin and figural drawing with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who helped found the British Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848. This training would have a significant influence for the rest of Farrer’s life.

\*\*\*\*\*

Interest in the Ruskinian aesthetic among American artists preceded Farrer’s arrival, however. The two volumes of Ruskin’s book, *Modern Painters*, published in 1843 and 1846, were widely read by American artists. William James Stillman (1828-1901), a student of Frederic Church, met Ruskin in 1850 on a trip to England and was among the first Americans to see British Pre-Raphaelite art. He is considered by some to be the first Pre-Raphaelite artist in America.

In 1855, Stillman founded *The Crayon*, one of the first art publications in America. In promoting Ruskin’s ideas, *The Crayon* frequently published excerpts of his writings, as well as articles by British Pre-Raphaelite artists. The following year, Stillman turned over

---

\*According to Stephanie Wiles, records on the Farrer family are kept by Stephen Farrer, P.O. Box 138, Amersham, Buckinghamshire, HP6 6UB, UK. E-mail: [gentree@telinco.co.uk](mailto:gentree@telinco.co.uk). See Bibliography.

the editorship to his friend and colleague, John Durand, son of the artist Asher Durand. *The Crayon* continued to be published until 1861.

Another significant event in 1857 was the exhibition of contemporary British art that included works by several Pre-Raphaelite artists. With stops in New York, Philadelphia and Boston, the exhibition created great interest. Stillman was involved in its organization, and while he complained that some of the works were not worthy of display\*, the exhibition was considered a success in bringing British art before the American public.

\*\*\*\*\*

While Farrer became best known for his landscapes and still-lives, in his early years he produced a number of figural pencil drawings. His *Self- portrait Sketching* (circa 1859) is a fine example of his skill and the Pre-Raphaelite emphasis on attention to detail. The scene shows Farrer in the home of a cabinetmaker's family with whom he lived for several years after his arrival in New York.

Farrer spent the summer of 1860 back in London, where he devoted his time to copying works by J.M.W. Turner. His interest in Turner was undoubtedly inspired by Ruskin's admiration for Turner. Farrer's copies were popular in America and provided extra needed income.

---

\* On Stillman's list was the entry by the only woman artist, Elizabeth Siddal, fiancée of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, one of the organizers of the exhibition. He chose not to show any of his own work.

Upon returning in the fall of 1860, Farrer had his first exhibit at the National Academy of Design.\* In 1861, he began teaching the women's drawing class at The Cooper Union. The following year he exhibited for the first time at the Brooklyn Art Association.

By this time Farrer had become well acquainted with several artists who shared his belief in the Ruskin aesthetic and who would become the most actively involved in the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Five artists, in addition to Farrer, now 22, made up this inner circle.

John William Hill (1812-1879), 48, was born in London where his father was an engraver. The family emigrated to Philadelphia in 1819 and then moved to New York in 1823, eventually settling in Nyack. While his work initially reflected a traditional style, he soon adopted a Pre-Raphaelite approach through his relationship with Farrer and after reading Ruskin's books. He eventually passed his enthusiasm on to his son.

John Henry Hill (1839-1922), 21, studied with his father and likewise was strongly influenced by Farrer. He exhibited for many years at the National Academy and the Brooklyn Art Association, specializing in watercolours and etchings.

Charles Herbert Moore (1840-1930), 20, was also a close friend of Farrer's and was influenced by Ruskin. He began studying drawing at the age of thirteen and within a few years he was selling his work to two art dealers in New York. Beginning in 1860 he exhibited at the National Academy and the Brooklyn Art Association. Early in his career Moore modelled his landscapes after the Hudson River School artists, but soon became a convert to the Ruskinian approach.

---

\* The National Academy of Design was founded in 1826 by artists in New York in reaction to the traditional European values that were promoted by the American Academy of Fine Arts. Its first president was Samuel F. B. Morse, artist and inventor of the Morse code.

Henry Roderick Newman (1843-1917) was the youngest of the group. In 1845, his family moved from Easton, New York to New York City, where his father was a physician. He initially followed his father in studying medicine, but turned to art at 18 after his father's death in 1861. He eventually specialized in watercolour. He was influenced most by Farrer, through whom he received a teaching position at the Cooper Union in 1865.

William Trost Richards (1833-1905), 27, was born in Philadelphia where he first worked as a designer and illustrator for an ornamental metal fabricator. In addition to his friendship with Farrer, whom he met in 1862, he was also influenced by the writings of Ruskin. He was best recognized for his landscapes and watercolours.

During the discussions and correspondence between these artists that took place at this time, thoughts of organizing in some way were often expressed. However, the beginning of the Civil War in 1861 occupied much of their attention and distracted them from taking any action. In fact, Farrer himself served in the Union army for a short time in 1862.\*

\*\*\*\*\*

In January 1863, a meeting was held at Farrer's studio at 32 Waverley Place in New York to discuss the formation of an organization. The following month, The Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art was formalized. In all, there were twenty-six members, with John William Hill elected president. In addition to Farrer and the elder

---

\* Farrer's younger brother Henry (1843-1903) followed him to New York in 1862. Although influenced by his brother, he was not a strict follower of the Pre-Raphaelites. He became a leading watercolourist and, along with John Henry Hill, was a pioneer in the revival of etching in America. He died in Brooklyn at the age of sixty. His life and work is also extensively covered by Stephanie Wiles. See Bibliography.

Hill, founding members included John Henry Hill and Charles Moore. William Trost Richards became a member later in 1863, followed by Henry Roderick Newman in 1864.

The main objective of the Association was to inform the public about its work and influence other artists. To facilitate this goal, the Association founded the journal *The New Path*. The first issue was published in May 1863. In its second issue, Farrer contributed an article, “A few Questions Answered,” in which he wrote: “We hold that the primary object of Art is to observe and record truth, whether of the visible universe or of emotion...”<sup>4</sup> *The New Path* continued to publish for two and a half years, with a total of twenty-four issues, until December 1865.

In promoting the goals of the Pre-Raphaelite artists, *The New Path* published articles that reflected the principles advocated by Ruskin. Other articles were often dismissive of artists outside the movement, including well-known Hudson River School painters who were seen as not being true enough to nature in detail, plus the fact that they usually completed their outdoor sketches in the studio.

The magazine’s primary editor and also a frequent contributor was the critic Clarence Cook, also a founding member of the Association. While he was supportive of the Pre-Raphaelite cause, he could be a harsh critic when it came to reviewing exhibitions and didn’t spare any artist, including Farrer, whom he liked and knew well. An 1849 graduate of Harvard College, Cook was also the art critic for the New York *Tribune* from 1862 to 1869, one of the first art critics in the country.

A common criticism by other critics and artists was that the Pre-Raphaelites were merely copying facts of nature. One critic wrote that the Pre-Raphaelites didn’t paint the truth, rather “barren externalism and dry-bones literalism.”<sup>5</sup> Another critic was the

influential James Jackson Jarves, who was influenced by Ruskin and first wrote about the Pre-Raphaelites in his book *Art Studies*, published in 1860. While usually complimentary, he also noted that “Pre-Raphaelitism robs art of her poetry in order to give the literal facts of nature.”<sup>6</sup> Referring specifically to Farrer and Moore, Jarves wrote that while he admired their work, “their art relies too much on topographical exactitude of representation and too little on the sentiment of nature or on the language of color.”<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the Pre-Raphaelites had their defenders. The *Boston Daily Advertiser*, for example, wrote that *The New Path* “is the only periodical in the country that ventures to have an independent opinion about art.”<sup>8</sup>

However, for an artist to closely follow the Ruskinian principles that *The New Path* promoted required both careful attention to detail and working outdoors. Few artists outside the group had the necessary patience or motivation. Even those who were devoted to the cause admitted it was difficult. In a letter to Farrer, his friend Charles Moore wrote that his work was going very slowly, and even after working all summer his painting was only half finished. “It is faithful, but I am not sure if it is successful.”<sup>9</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

In 1864, Farrer married Anne McLane, an artist from Brooklyn who was also a member of the Association.\* They spent the summer of the following year in Northampton, Massachusetts, boarding in the home of Colonel. J.B. Parsons. Eight oil landscapes were completed during this stay, one of which, *A View of Northampton from the Dome of the Hospital* (Figure 1), is well-known. In one scholar’s opinion, it is

---

\* Information about women artists associated with the Pre-Raphaelite movement is limited and sketchy at best. One name that appears frequently is Margaret J. McDonald, one of Farrer’s best students who had a successful career. Another is Fidelia Bridges who left New York to study with William Trost Richards in Philadelphia and became well-known.

“arguably the masterpiece of his career...It is the largest and most complex picture Farrer undertook...It is the quintessential Pre-Raphaelite painting in its faithful transcript of what Northampton looked like at a specific time of the year; the space is artificially contrived to fit the panorama onto the canvas and there is a strong two-dimensionality that develops from the decision to transcribe every detail of the setting.”<sup>10</sup>

Reviews in the local newspaper were complimentary, noting especially the atmospheric quality of the work, but critical of the painting’s lack of compositional unity.

When his friend Charles Moore saw the painting, he told Farrer it was not worthy of him. A reviewer in *The New Path* noted that while he liked the painting, “...it was a disappointment rather than a delight...We cannot but feel less hopeful of Mr. Farrer’s future as a landscape painter.”<sup>11</sup>

In looking at Farrer’s landscapes today, what one finds appealing “is precisely the naïve and static quality that contemporary critics disliked...This two-dimensional and almost decorative sensibility remained a characteristic of Farrer’s painting throughout the 1860s.”<sup>12</sup>

Farrer also produced several still-lives during the summer of 1865 that were privately exhibited in the Parsons’ home. A reviewer in the Northampton *Free Press* wrote: “There was a large number of fruit pieces, presenting an exceedingly attractive appearance. High colouring is a peculiarity of the school of artists to which Mr. Farrer belongs, and these fruit paintings are therefore among the most attractive of his productions.”<sup>13</sup>

Farrer and his wife spent the winter in nearby Ashfield, Massachusetts, where Farrer taught at the Ashfield Academy. It was there that he began his friendship with Charles

Eliot Norton, the noted Harvard educator (and friend of Ruskin's), who had a summer home in Ashfield. \*

In the beginning, the Association and *The New Path* promoted Farrer as the artist who best exemplified the objectives of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. However, he had his detractors, particularly when it came to his landscapes, and such criticism in all likelihood influenced Farrer to focus on still-lives. Because of Farrer's mixed reviews, *The New Path*, in its final edition, saw Charles Moore as the best Pre-Raphaelite representative.

\*\*\*\*\*

The last major Pre-Raphaelite exhibition was the 1867 National Academy of Design show. Farrer exhibited eight works, a few landscapes but mostly still-lives. Charles Cook had little positive to say about the landscapes. Writing in the *New York Tribune*, he was critical of the artist for "having little sense of beauty, lacking a feeling for colour, and rarely treating his subject tastefully."<sup>14</sup>

What generated as much excitement in the art world that year was the exhibit at Yale University to commemorate the opening of Street Hall, the school's new art building. Of added significance was the fact that the building was designed in Gothic Revival style by the Pre-Raphaelite architect, Peter Bonnet Wight.\* Over one-third of the objects shown were by Pre-Raphaelite artists. Farrer had the most entries, with twenty. The Pre-Raphaelite works, like the building itself, were considered avant-garde and received wide attention from the press, whose critics were generally positive. In one of his reviews,

---

\* It was during the stay in Northampton and Ashfield that the Farrers' son was born, the first of six children.

\*Wight was a founding member of the Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art and a major figure in the revival of Gothic architecture in America.

Cook observed that there were signs of change within the Pre-Raphaelite movement as evidenced by a greater diversity and individuality among the artists.

\*\*\*\*\*

As the Pre-Raphaelite movement drew to a close, its artists followed divergent paths over the following years.

John William Hill continued in the Pre-Raphaelite tradition and for years was a frequent traveller throughout New York and New England, painting mostly watercolour scenes of major cities. When Hill died in 1879, a memorial exhibition was held at the Brooklyn Art Association.

John Henry Hill became noted for his contribution to the revival of etching in America and in 1867 published 27 etchings in *Sketches from Nature*. In 1868 and 1870 he travelled out west as a staff artist with a geologist friend who was head of a government survey team. He went to Europe for a year in 1878, following an itinerary proposed by Ruskin.

In 1871, Charles Herbert Moore gave up an active career as a landscape painter to accept a teaching position at Harvard at the invitation of Charles Eliot Norton. Taking a leave of absence in 1876, Moore went to England where he met Ruskin with whom he worked and travelled. Moore eventually became the first director of Harvard's Fogg Art Museum, founded in 1905. His academic success was unusual for his not having a college degree.

Henry Roderick Newman also continued the Pre-Raphaelite tradition, but mostly abroad. He moved to Europe in 1870, eventually settling in Florence. He met Ruskin in 1879 and in 1883 married a wealthy Englishwoman with whom he travelled extensively.

William Trost Richards came to be the best-known proponent of Pre-Raphaelite art and the best-remembered by later art historians. He influenced many artists, mainly in Philadelphia, and eventually acquired an international reputation.

Thomas Farrer returned to live in England from 1869 to 1871, and permanently settled there the following year at the age of 34. One can only speculate the degree to which his decision to leave America was influenced by negative reviews from the critics. He continued to exhibit mostly landscapes and watercolours over the next twenty years in galleries and venues such as the Royal Academy in London and in New York at the National Academy. His visits to America were also no doubt motivated by a desire to see his eldest son Charles and his brother Henry. Farrer's style changed significantly as he focused less on detail and more on atmospheric effect. In this he was strongly influenced by his new interest in works by J.M. Whistler. Farrer died in London on June 16, 1891 at the age of 53. His wife Anne survived him by 42 years; she died in 1933.

\*\*\*\*\*

This paper has provided only a glimpse of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in America, and within its limited scope has focused on just one of its artists, Thomas Charles Farrer. While he was not considered as the movement's best artist, he was nevertheless its spiritual leader. Farrer, like his colleagues, produced a significant body of work, but much of what he and others created has been lost. Of the 246 works that have been attributed to Farrer, only 40 can be located today.

A variety of factors contributed to the movement's demise. From a practical point of view, the requirements to produce the kind of detailed work that lived up to the Pre-Raphaelite standards were exceedingly demanding and time-consuming; often it meant

spending long hours outdoors, frequently in the hot sun. Given the length of time required to complete a work, it was simply difficult for an artist to make a living.

Another contributing factor was the movement's lack of success in winning over critics and the art public. This failure was due in large part to a perceived "lack of emotional expressivity, heightened by obsessive detailing in landscape and still-life."<sup>15</sup> There was also the fact that while many of these works were stunning examples of truth to nature, they were often small in size and lacked the dramatic quality of larger, more conventional paintings.

\*\*\*\*\*

In recent years there has been renewed interest in the American Pre-Raphaelites and from time to time one of their works comes to light. In 2002, the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum in South Hadley, Massachusetts, hosted an exhibition of landscape painting, *Changing Prospects: The View from Mount Holyoke*. In the course of research, Farrer's painting, *Mount Holyoke* (Figure 2) was discovered in a New York art gallery and is now among the Museum's permanent collection. Dated 1865, the painting was completed during Farrer's stay that year in nearby Northampton. As stated in the exhibition catalogue's preface, Mount Holyoke, with its panoramic view of the Connecticut River valley below, "has been a tourist destination as well as an inspiration for artists and writers for almost two centuries."<sup>16</sup> In contrast to Thomas Cole's well-known dramatic painting of the view from the summit,\* Farrer depicted the view from below and arranged "the boat, train and mountain house hotel in the centre of his composition."<sup>17</sup>

---

\* *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)*, 1836. Cole's painting was loaned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and held a prominent place in the exhibition.

In this writer's opinion, *Mount Holyoke* is one of Farrer's finest works that represents the American Pre-Raphaelite tradition. The soft blues and whites of the sky, together with the browns and greens of the foliage that are reflected in the mirror-like water, create a tranquil and emotionally satisfying scene that perfectly exemplifies the principles of meticulous attention to detail and fidelity to nature.

**Lawrence Siddall lives in Amherst, Massachusetts. His e-mail address is lsiddall@crocker.com.**

#### REFERENCES

1. Linda Ferber, In Linda S. Ferber and William H. Gerds, *The New Path: Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites*. 1985, p. 9.
2. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 1873, p. 87.
3. William Gerds, In Linda S. Ferber and William H. Gerds, *The New Path: Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites*. 1985, p. 40.
4. Quoted by David Howard Dickason, *The Daring Young Men: The Story of the American Pre-Raphaelites*, 1953, p. 75.
5. Quoted by Linda Ferber in Ferber & Gerds, p. 31.
6. Quoted by William Gerds, op. cit., p. 40.
7. Quoted by William Gerds, op. cit., p. 40.
8. Quoted by Linda Ferber, op. cit., p. 23.
9. Quoted by Linda Ferber, op. cit., p. 28.
10. Stephanie Wiles, *Between England and America: The Art of Thomas Charles Farrer and Henry Farrer*, 2001, p. 67.
11. Quoted by May Brawly Hill in Ferber & Gerds, op. cit., p. 165.
12. Stephanie Wiles, op. cit., p. 66.
13. Quoted by William Gerds, op. cit., p. 65.
14. Quoted by William Gerds, op. cit., p. 68.
15. William Gerds, op. cit., p. 54.
16. Marianne Doezema, In Marianne Doezema, Ed. *Changing Prospects: The View from Mount Holyoke*. 2002, p. 7.
17. Susan Danly, "Mount Holyoke: The Grandest Cultivated View in the World." In Marianne Doezema, Ed. *Changing Prospects: The View from Mount Holyoke*, op. cit., p. 26.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Casteras, Susan B. "The 1867-58 Exhibition of English Art in America: Critical Responses to Pre-Raphaelitism." In Linda S. Ferber and William H. Gerdts, *The New Path: Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites*. Exhibit Catalogue. Brooklyn Museum Brooklyn, NY, 1985

Danly, Susan. "Mount Holyoke: The Grandest Cultivated View in the World." In Marianne Doezema, Ed. *Changing Prospects: The View from Mount Holyoke*. Exhibit Catalogue, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, MA, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2002.

Dickason, David Howard. *The Daring Young Men: The Story of the American Pre-Raphaelites*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 1953.

Ferber, Linda S. "Determined Realists: The American Pre-Raphaelites and the Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art." In Linda S. Ferber and William H. Gerdts, *The New Path: Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites*. Exhibit Catalogue. Brooklyn Museum Brooklyn, NY, 1985

Gerdts, William H. "Through a Glass Brightly: The American Pre-Raphaelites and Their Still-Lives and Nature Studies." In Linda S. Ferber and William H. Gerdts, *The New Path: Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites*. Exhibit Catalogue, Brooklyn Museum. Brooklyn, NY, 1985,

Hoppin, Martha J. "The Connecticut Valley in Art" In *Arcadian Vales: Views of the Connecticut River Valley*. Exhibit Catalogue, George Walter Vincent Art Museum, Springfield, MA. 1981.

Langmuir, Erika and Norbert Lynton. *The Yale Dictionary of Art and Artists*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000.

Renn, Melissa. "Charles Hert Moore and the Teaching of Art at Harvard." In *The Last Ruskinians: Charles Eliot Norton, Charles Herbert Moore, and Their Circle*. Exhibit Catalogue, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, MA, 2007.

Ruskin, John. *Modern Painters*, Vol. I. Fourth Edition, J. W. Lovell Company, New York, 1873.

Wiles, Stephanie. *Between England and America: The Art of Thomas Charles Farrer and Henry Farrer*. Doctoral dissertation, City University of New York, 2001.

Amherst, Massachusetts  
February, 2012

This article was originally published in the *Pre-Raphaelite Society Review*, Spring 2012.  
[www.preraphaelitesociety.org](http://www.preraphaelitesociety.org)