Franz Winterhalter’s 1846 portrait of Queen Victoria and her family provides a wonderful emblem of British society in the mid-nineteenth century – strong and stable. All this was about to be turned upside down, however, by a small group of very young men who challenged these values, and challenged too, the kind of art represented by Winterhalter in this painting.

But who were these daring young men? They were all students at the Royal Academy Schools studying art. Millais, aged 19, was the youngest. He was hugely talented and had been admitted to the Schools at the age of 11. Holman Hunt was a little older and more robust, but the leader was Dante Gabriel Rossetti, mercurial, half-Italian, energetic, and subversive. Their principal grievance was the dull teaching of the Academy where, with very little personal tuition, they were obliged to repetitively copy casts of ancient statuary. So setting themselves up against this
regime they formed a group, a so-called Brotherhood, modelled on the communities of the medieval monastery. So it became the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

They also quarrelled with the wider contemporary art world. Modern art seemed to have become stale, commonplace and derivative. Popular art was dominated by the anecdotal and the sentimental, and the world of high art by the academic.

For example, W. P. Frith specialised in huge panoramas of middle class life, full of incidents and stories represented here by *Derby Day* (1856). The sentimental school can be represented by Thomas Webster's *The Village Choir* (1846), an image of an idyllic, harmonious rural society created for the fantasies of an urban audience.

But the greatest source of resentment for the Pre-Raphaelites was the powerful domination of formal academic art. Charles Lock Eastlake's *Christ Lamenting over Jerusalem* (1846) is a good example. This was what was called 'history painting.' Considered the noblest form it attracted the greatest artistic prestige. In this painting, Eastlake, President of the Royal Academy, has created a cool, emotion-free world, populated by noble, god-like figures all derived from the work of the High Renaissance artist Raphael Sanzio.

Everywhere in Europe Raphael's influence was enormous, and each of Eastlake's figures is carefully posed in a recognisable Raphaelesque manner to reflect a world untroubled by strong emotions but radiant with the reassurance of the Christian faith.

I want to pursue the Pre-Raphaelite response to prevailing conditions in the art world in three ways – the Ideological, the Technical and the Ontological.

First, the ideological. What was the source of Pre-Raphaelite ideas on art? Early in their association the group discovered a set of engravings of medieval wall paintings from Pisa published in 1812 by the Italian, Carlo Lasinio. The Pre-Raphaelites got hold of a copy of Lasinio's work and were amazed by it. They were particularly struck by *The Triumph of Death*, a painting dating from the early 14th century, a characteristic medieval morality piece depicting the ways in which death can
arbitrarily strike the unthinking.

In one section there is a musical party. Everything is simplified, flattened. A group of young people sit on a wall. The trees in the orchard and the grass are all highly stylized, but the meaning is clear.

Above two of the people fly two angels. They gesture downwards to a young couple beneath them. The couple are unconscious of the fact that they have been selected for imminent death. From the left hand side, darkly and dramatically, sweeps the angel of death complete with his deadly scythe.

Rossetti took this dramatic moment and translated it into quite a different context—Ecce Ancilla Domini (1850) —depicting the annunciation of Christ by the Angel Gabriel. Like the Angel of Death, Gabriel sweeps in from the left bringing with him not a scythe, but a lily. Meanwhile the Virgin Mary cowers on a bed fearing this intrusion into her privacy. Though the consequences are different, in both the engraving and Rossetti's painting, the spirit world breaks violently in upon the human world.

Adopting medieval, not modern, perspectival conventions Rossetti increases the drama of his event. The bed, instead of being flat, tips up and pushes the Virgin Mary uncomfortably forward. The picture is full of unease and anxiety. Gabriel, large and imperious, is almost arrogant like a young man forcing his way into the bedroom of a timid girl. This is recognizably an Annunciation, but at the same time it could equally be a representation of sexual harassment.

I now want to touch on the technical innovations brought about by the Pre-Raphaelites.

While Rossetti was pursuing new ways in which medieval art might be used in modern painting, John Everett Millais, the most technically skilled of the Pre-Raphaelites, turned his attention to representational accuracy. Like the other Pre-Raphaelites he felt that art had lost its way in the creation of vague, conventionalized
forms. For his famous representation of Shakespeare's Ophelia, he worked on the figure and the setting separately. For the setting he spent day after day on the banks of a river in Surrey, painstakingly recording every leaf of every flower. Back in London he bought an old-fashioned wedding dress for his model – Rossetti's mistress Elizabeth Siddal – and persuaded her, for authenticity's sake, to lie for hours in a bath of water.

Millais also turned his attention to one of the most popular of Victorian genres – religious painting. Biblical painting (a branch of History Painting) was an established genre in Victorian art. W. C. Dobson's *Holy Family* provides an image of Mary and Joseph (possibly on their way to Egypt) lovingly watching over the central figure of the mild and beautiful Christ child. This picture conveys a view of early Christianity as essentially benign, benevolent and noble. It also resembles my first picture of Queen Victoria in that like that one it draws on sentiments about the centrality of the family to British life.

But how did Millais approach this same subject? *Christ in the House of His Parents* was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1850. In contrast to the serene, idealized figures of popular religious art, Millais used friends and family as models. This is a picture of ordinary people at work, surrounded by everyday objects but painted with intense concentration and skill.

A storm of protest followed its appearance. 'Ugly,' 'diseased,' 'vile' and above all 'blasphemous' were the words used by critic after critic when they saw it at the Academy exhibition.

The attack on the 21-year-old Millais was led by the most famous writer in the English-speaking world – Charles Dickens, for whom this painting represented a vicious attack on British art, progressive British culture and above all British religious beliefs.

Such was the hysteria generated by this and other Pre-Raphaelite works, that this
would undoubtedly have been the end of Pre-Raphaelitism, had it not been for the
intervention of one man. John Ruskin was the most influential art critic in Britain.
He had seen Pre-Raphaelite work, and warmed strongly to their naturalism. It was a
clash of Titans: Dickens versus Ruskin. Ruskin triumphed and the Pre-Raphaelites
survived. Ruskin preached the virtues of realism and accuracy in art. For him,
representation was a moral issue. Inaccuracy in art, he claimed, was immoral while
accuracy of drawing and colour were ethically and even religiously superior.

And it was in its use of colour that Pre-Raphaelite work was so revolutionary.
Millais's The Blind Girl of 1856 provides a remarkable example.

Two female beggars, probably sisters, sit on a bank after a shower of rain. The
erlder is blind (see the label 'Pity the Blind' around her neck). But the whole picture
is profoundly sensuous. The girl on the left feels the wet grass with her right hand.
The sense of touch. On her lap is an accordion that she uses to beg money from
passers-by. The sense of sound. But it is her blindness, and the sense of sight that
is so prominent because her state of darkness contrasts with the vivid colours that
surround her and most especially with all the colours of the rainbow behind her.

Finally there are the ontological changes introduced by the Pre-Raphaelites in their
willingness to take on controversial, difficult, and challenging subjects. Subjects
which were often not considered decent, decorous or acceptable in high art circles.

This was particularly the case in their treatment of subjects that dealt with gender
issues.

Holman Hunt's The Awakening Conscience (1853) is one of those and Rossetti's
unfinished painting Found (1853) is another. Such pictures dealing with the sexual
irregularity, prostitution, promiscuity and adultery within Victorian society were
common with the Pre-Raphaelites. But Rossetti was no social realist. Nevertheless,
it was his work that sustained this ontological face of the movement right up to his
death in 1882.
This is best exemplified in the radiant beauty of his painting, *Bocca Baciata* (1860). The title means ‘the kissed mouth’ and comes from the Italian writer, Boccaccio. It is a picture of Rossetti’s mistress Fanny Cornforth dressed as a Renaissance concubine or *meretrice* as an emblem of the sexual delight he has with her. It is sensual, luscious and inviting, and speaks of the way in which sexual pleasure is never worn out, never exhausted.

In painting after painting, Rossetti went on to explore the part played by the libido in human life and this is perhaps one of the greatest legacies of the Pre-Raphaelite contribution to Victorian culture. In a painting like *Bocca Baciata* Rossetti offered a challenge to the visual, technical, moral and social imperatives embodied in my first slide, Winterhalter’s picture of Queen Victoria. In this way Rossetti and his Pre-Raphaelite Brothers took the safe, serene, yet complacent aspects of Victorian life and turned them upside down.