

The Lady of Shalott

Date: [1888](#)

Medium: [Oil on canvas](#)

Size: 153 x 200 cm

Location: [Tate Britain, London, UK](#)



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The Lady of Shalott is an 1888 [oil-on-canvas](#) painting by the English [Pre-Raphaelite](#) painter [John William Waterhouse](#). The work is a representation of a scene from [Lord Alfred Tennyson's 1832 poem of the same name](#),^[1] in which the poet describes the plight of a young woman (loosely based on [Elaine of Astolat](#), who yearned with an unrequited love for the knight [Sir Lancelot](#)) isolated under an undisclosed curse in a tower near [King Arthur's Camelot](#). Waterhouse painted three different versions of this character, in 1888,^[2] 1894^[3] and 1916.^[4]

According to legend, the Lady of Shalott was forbidden to look directly at reality or the outside world; instead she was doomed to view the world through a mirror,

and weave what she saw into tapestry. Her despair was heightened when she saw loving couples entwined in the far distance, and she spent her days and nights aching for a return to normality. One day the Lady saw Sir Lancelot passing on his way in the reflection of the mirror, and dared to look out at Camelot, bringing about a curse. The lady escaped by boat during an autumn storm, inscribing 'The Lady of Shalott' on the prow. As she sailed towards Camelot and certain death, she sang a lament. Her frozen body was found shortly afterwards by the knights and ladies of Camelot, one of whom is Lancelot, who prayed to God to have mercy on her soul. The tapestry she wove during her imprisonment was found draped over the side of the boat.

From part IV of Tennyson's poem: “And down the river's dim expanse

Like some bold seer in a trance,
Seeing all his own mischance—
With glassy countenance
Did she look to Camelot.
And at the closing of the day
She loosed the chain, and down she lay;
The broad stream bore her far away,
The Lady of Shalott.”

Tennyson's verse was popular with many of the Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters, and was illustrated by such artists as [Dante Gabriel Rossetti](#), [William Maw Egley](#), and [William Holman Hunt](#). Throughout his career, Waterhouse was preoccupied with the poetry of both Tennyson and [John Keats](#), and between 1886 and 1894 he painted three episodes from the former's epic. Although the painting is typically Pre-Raphaelite in composition and tone, its central framing, as well as the linear echoes between the leaves of the overhanging trees and the hair and creases of the lady's dress and tapestry,

betray formal and spatial elements borrowed from the earlier [Neo-Classical](#) style. It is typically Pre-Raphaelite in that it illustrates a vulnerable and doomed woman and is bathed in natural early-evening light.^[6] The lady is portrayed staring at a crucifix, which sits beside three candles. During the late nineteenth century, candles were often used to symbolise life:^[1] In this image, two have blown out. *The Lady of Shalott* was donated to the public by [Sir Henry Tate](#) in 1894.

Biography of John William Waterhouse

Painter of classical, historical, and literary subjects. John William Waterhouse was born in 1849 in Rome, where his father worked as a painter. He was referred to as "Nino" throughout his life.



In the 1850s the family returned to England. Before entering the Royal Academy schools in 1870, Waterhouse assisted his father in his studio. His early works were of classical themes in the spirit of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Frederic Leighton, and were exhibited at the Royal Academy, the Society of British Artists and the Dudley Gallery. In the late 1870s and the 1880s, Waterhouse made several trips to Italy, where he painted genre scenes.

After his marriage in 1883 to Esther Kenworthy, Waterhouse took up residence at the Primrose Hill Studios (number 3, and later, number 6).



Nino married Esther Kenworthy at St Mary's Church, Ealing, London

Photograph by Rob Cartwright

Future occupants of the same Primrose Hill studios would include the artists Arthur Rackham and Patrick Caulfield. Waterhouse painted primarily in oils, yet he was elected to the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolour in 1883, resigning in 1889. In 1884, his Royal Academy submission *Consulting the Oracle* brought him favourable reviews; it was purchased by Sir Henry Tate, who also purchased *The Lady of Shalott* from the 1888 Academy exhibition. The latter painting reveals Waterhouse's growing interest in themes associated with the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly tragic or powerful femmes fatales, as well as plein-air painting. Other examples of paintings depicting a femme fatale are *Circe Invidiosa*, *Cleopatra*, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and several versions of *Lamia*. In 1885 Waterhouse was elected an associate of the Royal Academy and a full member in 1895. His RA diploma work was *A Mermaid*. However, as this painting was not completed until 1900, Waterhouse offered his *Ophelia* of 1888 as his temporary submission (this painting was 'lost' for most of the 20th century--it is now in the collection of Lord Lloyd Webber).

In the mid-1880s Waterhouse began exhibiting with the Grosvenor Gallery and its successor, the New Gallery, as well as at provincial exhibitions in Birmingham,

Liverpool and Manchester. Paintings of this period, such as *Mariamne*, were exhibited widely in England and abroad as part of the international symbolist movement. In the 1890s Waterhouse began to exhibit portraits. In 1900 he was the primary instigator of the Artists' War Fund, creating *Destiny*, and contributing to a theatrical performance. The pictures offered to the War Fund were auctioned at Christie's. In 1901 he moved to St John's Wood and joined the St John's Wood Arts Club, a social organization that included Alma-Tadema and George Clausen. He also served on the advisory council of the St. John's Wood Art School where young and upcoming "neo Pre-Raphaelite" artists such as Byam Shaw numbered amongst his pupils.

Despite suffering from increasing frailty during the final decade of his life, Waterhouse continued painting until his death from cancer in 1917. From 1908-1914 he painted a series of paintings based upon the Persephone legend. They were followed by pictures based upon literature and mythology in 1916 (*Miranda, Tristram and Isolde*). One of his final works was *The Enchanted Garden*, left unfinished on his easel at his death, and now in the collection of the Lady Lever Art Gallery in Liverpool.

Very little is known of Waterhouse's private life - only a few letters have survived and thus, for many years, the identity of his models has been a mystery. One letter that has survived indicates that Mary Lloyd, the model for Lord Leighton's masterpiece *Flaming June*, posed for Waterhouse. The well-known Italian male model, Angelo Colorossi, who sat for Leighton, Millais, Sargent, Watts, Burne-Jones and many other Victorian artists, also sat for Waterhouse.

Waterhouse and his wife Esther did not have any children. Esther Waterhouse outlived her husband by 27 years, passing away in 1944 at a nursing home. Today, she is buried alongside her husband at Kensal Green Cemetery in north London. Waterhouse's great-nephew, Dr John Physick, has carried the

Waterhouse torch into the 21st century and has shared some of his memories of his family on this website.

More details about Waterhouse's life can be found in the monographs by Anthony Hobson, Peter Trippi, Aubrey Noakes and Robert Cartwright (unpublished research).

Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

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 *Persephone*, by [Dante Gabriel Rossetti](#).

The **Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood** (also known as the **Pre-Raphaelites**) was a group of [English painters](#), [poets](#), and critics, founded in 1848 by [William Holman Hunt](#), [John Everett Millais](#) and [Dante Gabriel Rossetti](#). The three founders were soon joined by [William Michael Rossetti](#), [James Collinson](#), [Frederic George Stephens](#) and [Thomas Woolner](#) to form a seven member "brotherhood".

The group's intention was to reform art by rejecting what they considered to be the mechanistic approach first adopted by the [Mannerist](#) artists who succeeded [Raphael](#) and [Michelangelo](#). They believed that the [Classical](#) poses and elegant compositions of Raphael in particular had been a corrupting influence on the

[academic](#) teaching of art. Hence the name "Pre-Raphaelite". In particular, they objected to the influence of [Sir Joshua Reynolds](#), the founder of the English [Royal Academy of Arts](#). They called him "Sir Sloshua", believing that his broad technique was a sloppy and formulaic form of academic Mannerism. In contrast, they wanted to return to the abundant detail, intense colours, and complex compositions of [Quattrocento](#) Italian and Flemish art.

The Pre-Raphaelites have been considered the first [avant-garde](#) movement in art, though they have also been denied that status, because they continued to accept both the concepts of [history painting](#) and of [mimesis](#), or imitation of nature, as central to the purpose of art. However, the Pre-Raphaelites undoubtedly defined themselves as a reform-movement, created a distinct name for their form of art, and published a periodical, *[The Germ](#)*, to promote their ideas. Their debates were recorded in the *Pre-Raphaelite Journal*.


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[\[edit\]](#) **Beginnings of the Brotherhood**



 Illustration by Holman Hunt of Thomas Woolner's poem "My Beautiful Lady", published in *The Germ*, 1850

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded in John Millais's parents' house on [Gower Street, London](#) in 1848. At the initial meeting, [John Everett Millais](#), [Dante Gabriel Rossetti](#), and [William Holman Hunt](#) were present. Hunt and Millais were students at the [Royal Academy of Arts](#). They had previously met in another loose association, a sketching-society called the Cyclographic Club. Rossetti was a pupil of [Ford Madox Brown](#). He had met Hunt after seeing his painting [The Eve of St. Agnes](#), which is based on Keats's poem. As an aspiring poet, Rossetti wished to develop the links between [Romantic](#) poetry and art. By autumn, four more members had also joined, to form a seven-member-strong Brotherhood. These were [William Michael Rossetti](#) (Dante Gabriel Rossetti's brother), [Thomas Woolner](#), [James Collinson](#), and [Frederic George Stephens](#). Ford Madox Brown was invited to join, but preferred to remain independent. He nevertheless remained close to the group. Some other young painters and sculptors were also close associates, including [Charles Allston Collins](#), [Thomas Tupper](#), and [Alexander Munro](#). They kept the existence of the Brotherhood secret from members of the Royal Academy.

[\[edit\]](#) Early doctrines

The Brotherhood's early doctrines were expressed in four declarations:

1. To have genuine ideas to express;
2. To study Nature attentively, so as to know how to express them;
3. To sympathise with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parodying and learned by rote;
4. And, most indispensable of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues.

These principles are deliberately non-dogmatic, since the Brotherhood wished to emphasise the personal responsibility of individual artists to determine their own ideas and methods of depiction. Influenced by [Romanticism](#), they thought that freedom and responsibility were inseparable. Nevertheless, they were particularly fascinated by [medieval](#) culture, believing it to possess a [spiritual](#) and creative integrity that had been lost in later eras. This emphasis on medieval culture was to clash with certain principles of [realism](#), which stress the independent observation of nature. In its early stages, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood believed that their two interests were consistent with one another, but in later years the movement divided and began to move in two directions. The realist-side was led by Hunt and Millais, while the medievalist-side was led by Rossetti and his followers, [Edward Burne-Jones](#) and [William Morris](#). This split was never absolute, since both factions believed that art was essentially spiritual in character, opposing their [idealism](#) to the [materialist](#) realism associated with [Courbet](#) and [Impressionism](#).

In their attempts to revive the brilliance of colour found in Quattrocento art, Hunt and Millais developed a technique of painting in thin [glazes](#) of pigment over a wet white ground. They hoped that in this way their colours would retain jewel-like transparency and clarity. This emphasis on brilliance of colour was in reaction to the excessive use of [bitumen](#) by earlier British artists, such as Reynolds, [David Wilkie](#) and [Benjamin Robert Haydon](#). Bitumen produces unstable areas of muddy darkness, an effect that the Pre-Raphaelites despised.

[\[edit\]](#) Public controversies

The first exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite work occurred in 1849. Both Millais's *Isabella* (1848–1849) and Holman Hunt's *Rienzi* (1848–1849) were exhibited at the Royal Academy, and Rossetti's *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* was shown at the Free Exhibition on Hyde Park Corner. As agreed, all members of the Brotherhood signed works with their name and the initials "PRB". Between January and April 1850, the group published a literary magazine, *The Germ*. [William Rossetti](#) edited the magazine, which published poetry by the Rossettis, Woolner, and Collinson, together with essays on art and literature by associates of the Brotherhood, such as [Coventry Patmore](#). As the short run-time implies, the magazine did not manage to achieve a sustained momentum. (Daly 1989)



Christ In the House of His Parents, by John Everett Millais, 1850.

In 1850 the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood became controversial after the exhibition of Millais's painting [Christ In The House Of His Parents](#), considered to be [blasphemous](#) by many reviewers, notably [Charles Dickens](#) (Dickens considered Millais' Mary to be ugly. Interestingly enough, Millais had actually used his sister-in-law Mary Hodgkinson as a model for the Mary in his painting). Their medievalism was attacked as backward-looking and their extreme devotion to detail was condemned as ugly and jarring to the eye. According to Dickens, Millais made the Holy Family look like alcoholics and slum-dwellers, adopting contorted and absurd "medieval" poses. A rival group of older artists, [The Clique](#), also used their influence against the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Their principles were publicly attacked by the President of the Academy, Sir [Charles Lock Eastlake](#).

However, the Brotherhood found support from the critic [John Ruskin](#), who praised their devotion to nature and rejection of conventional methods of composition. He continued to support their work both financially and in his writings.

Following the controversy, Collinson left the Brotherhood. They met to discuss whether he should be replaced by Charles Allston Collins or [Walter Howell Deverell](#), but were unable to make a decision. From that point on the group disbanded, though their influence continued to be felt. Artists who had worked in the style still followed these techniques (initially anyway) but they no longer signed works "PRB".

[\[edit\]](#) Later developments and influence



[Medea](#) by Evelyn De Morgan, 1889, in [quattrocento](#) style

Artists who were influenced by the Brotherhood include [John Brett](#), [Philip Calderon](#), [Arthur Hughes](#), [Gustave Moreau](#), [Evelyn De Morgan](#), [Frederic Sandys](#) and [John William Waterhouse](#). [Ford Madox Brown](#), who was associated with them from the beginning, is often seen as most closely adopting the Pre-Raphaelite principles.

After 1856, [Rossetti](#) became an inspiration for the medievalising strand of the movement. His work influenced his friend [William Morris](#), in whose firm [Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.](#) he became a partner, and with whose wife [Jane](#) he may have had an affair. Ford Madox Brown and [Edward Burne-Jones](#) also became partners in the firm. Through Morris's company the ideals of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood influenced many interior designers and architects, arousing interest in [medieval](#) designs, as well as other crafts. This led directly to the [Arts and Crafts movement](#) headed by William Morris. Holman Hunt was also involved with this movement to reform design through the [Della Robbia Pottery](#) company.

After 1850, both Hunt and Millais moved away from direct imitation of medieval art. Both stressed the realist and scientific aspects of the movement, though Hunt continued to emphasise the spiritual significance of art, seeking to reconcile religion and science by making accurate observations and studies of locations in [Egypt](#) and [Palestine](#) for his paintings on biblical subjects. In contrast, Millais abandoned Pre-Raphaelitism after 1860, adopting a much broader and looser style influenced by Reynolds. William Morris and others condemned this reversal of principles.

The movement influenced the work of many later British artists well into the twentieth century. Rossetti later came to be seen as a precursor of the wider European [Symbolist](#) movement. In the late twentieth century the [Brotherhood of Ruralists](#) based its aims on Pre-Raphaelitism, while the [Stuckists](#) and the [Birmingham Group](#) have also have derived inspiration from it.

The [Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery](#) has a world-renowned collection of works by Burne-Jones and the Pre-Raphaelites that, some claim, strongly influenced the young [J.R.R. Tolkien](#),^[1] who would later go on to write his novels, such as [The Hobbit](#) and [The Lord of the Rings](#), with their influence taken from the same mythological scenes portrayed by the Pre-Raphaelites.

In the twentieth century artistic ideals changed and art moved away from representing reality. Since the Pre-Raphaelites were fixed on portraying things

with near-photographic precision, though with a distinctive attention to detailed surface-patterns, their work was devalued by many critics. Since the 1970s there has been a resurgence in interest in the movement.