

millais

TATE BRITAIN, 26 SEPTEMBER 2007–13 JANUARY 2008

TEACHER AND STUDENT NOTES
DOWNLOADABLE FULL COLOUR A4 IMAGES WITH INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION,
DISCUSSION POINTS, LINKS AND ACTIVITIES

FOR USE IN THE GALLERY OR CLASSROOM

SUITABLE FOR TEACHERS OF KEY STAGE 3–5 AND OLDER STUDENTS

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BRITAIN

TATE

Introduction to Millais

John Everett Millais (1829 – 1896) is widely regarded as the greatest British painter of the nineteenth century and created many of the iconic images of the Victorian age. This exhibition at Tate Britain provides the first major survey of Millais's work in forty years, presenting the artist's most famous paintings, such as *Ophelia* (1851–2) and *Autumn Leaves* (1855–6), alongside lesser-known pieces and a wealth of drawings, prints and photographs. It charts the course of Millais's artistic development from his early academic studies and controversial Pre-Raphaelite works through to his society portraits and the remarkable landscapes that he produced towards the end of his life.

Millais was born in Southampton and from a young age showed a prodigious talent for drawing. His family moved to London to foster his artistic talent and at the age of 11 he became the youngest-ever student at the Royal Academy Schools. Here he met Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt, with whom he formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848. Inspired by the principles of realism and truth to nature, Millais painted some of his best-known works including *Christ in the House of his Parents* (1849–50) and *Mariana* (1851). In breaking with painterly conventions of the time, these and other Pre-Raphaelite works were seen as radical and received both criticism and praise. The Brotherhood dissolved in the early 1850s and Millais moved away from the meticulous brushwork of his previous work to a broader, more spontaneous style, creating works which achieved great popular acclaim.

Millais was remarkably successful in his lifetime, becoming part of the Victorian establishment, gaining wealth, a baronetcy and eventually the presidency of the Royal Academy. His commercial success attracted condemnation from critics, including John Ruskin, and perhaps led to his work being overlooked by art historians in the 20th century. Yet Millais's more famous works have proved enduringly popular with the public and are some of the most admired in the Tate Collection. Millais's work has had a huge impact on how we perceive Victorian culture today and by engaging with the ideas of gender, childhood, nationalism and artistic commercialisation within it we can explore a range of contemporary issues.

Visiting the Exhibition

Exhibition tickets for school groups of more than ten students are available in advance only at a cost of £4 per student and teacher (we ask for payment to be received two weeks before the visit). As tickets are limited it is essential to book well in advance.

To make a booking, please call the Education Bookings line on 020 7887 8888 or email education.bookings@tate.org.uk.

To avoid overcrowding in the exhibition, all groups with more than thirty students will be split and entry to the exhibition will be staggered at one-hour intervals.

You are welcome to use the Schools Area to have lunch or to use locker spaces; please book these at the same time as your exhibition tickets (there are a limited number of locker spaces and lunch slots available).

As all exhibitions at Tate Britain can get busy you cannot lecture in the exhibition rooms, but you can discuss works in a conversational manner in groups of no more than six students at a time. If possible, please brief your group before they enter the exhibition, and if you have a large group we recommend that you divide them into smaller groups and perhaps follow the suggestions in this pack.

About the Teacher and Student notes

This short pack is intended as an introduction to the exhibition and some of its themes and covers four works in depth, taking in the range of the show. It offers ideas and starting points for visiting teachers to use with all age groups, as well as for A-level and GCSE students to use on their own. Some of the activities or discussion points can be used as preparation for the visit, some are for use in the exhibition itself, and others are more suited to class work after your visit.

The works discussed are reproduced at A4 size so that you can print them out and use them as a resource in the classroom. The notes aim to give a few jumping-off points to explore not only the featured works but the exhibition as a whole.

Other Resources

In the exhibition there is an information leaflet and an audioguide which gives further information about the works on display. The exhibition catalogue is available in the Tate shop, which also has a range of books, journals, postcards and other related materials.

Websites

Tate Online www.tate.org.uk

Tate Schools and Teachers www.tate.org.uk/schoolsteachers



John Everett Millais *Christ in the House of His Parents or The Carpenter's Shop* 1849–50 Tate
Purchased with assistance from The Art Fund and various subscribers, 1921

Christ in the House of His Parents or The Carpenter's Shop 1849–50

Oil on canvas. 86.4 cm x 139.7 cm

Tate. Purchased with assistance from The Art Fund and various subscribers, 1921

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a supposedly secret society formed in 1848 in opposition to the standard teachings of the Royal Academy at that time. The members rejected the Academy's models of compositional harmony and light and shade and looked to art prior to the time of Raphael and the Renaissance for inspiration. In general their paintings were brightly coloured, evenly lit and highly detailed and dealt with literary and biblical subject matter.

Christ in the House of His Parents was one of the most notorious images created by a Pre-Raphaelite painter. It depicts a moment from Jesus' childhood when he injures himself on a nail in Joseph's workshop. A young John the Baptist fetches a bowl of water whilst Joseph and St Anne reach forward to comfort the child and an apprentice looks on. Mary kneels down in front of her son with a look of anguish on her face as though she recognises the ominous portent in this apparently mundane event. The drama of Jesus' adult life is hinted at through the arrangement of associative symbols and objects: the unfinished basket to the right symbolises the work that Jesus still has to do, the carpenter's tools speak of the crucifixion and the blood from the cut on his hand drops to his foot to mimic the wounds he will receive.

In keeping with the ideas of Pre-Raphaelitism Millais strove for detailed realism in this painting. He lived in a real carpenter's shop on Oxford Street for a short time and used friends and relatives as models for his figures. He engaged a grocer as the model for the musculature of a working man for his depiction of Joseph yet used his father's face, its high forehead symbolising intellect and wisdom. He also used sheep's heads from a butcher's shop to create the flock of sheep in the background and drew his own blood to find the right colour for the cut on Jesus' hand. The resulting image has a photographic quality and its all-encompassing detail continually draws the eye away from the central drama. Despite the ethos of detailed realism, Millais creates a strange juxtaposition of time and space as contemporary tools and a small patch of rural English landscape are transported into a scene that is supposedly set in Palestine many hundreds of years ago.

Millais's focus on realism caused great controversy and when *Christ in the House of His Parents* was first displayed at the Royal Academy it caused such debate in the press that Queen Victoria requested that the painting be brought to her so she could see it for herself.

Religious imagery was traditionally idealised and so audiences saw Millais's lack of beauty and serenity in his portrayal of the Holy Family as distasteful and shocking. In the journal *Household Words* Charles Dickens called the painting "mean, odious, repulsive and revolting" and described the figures of Jesus and Mary as "a hideous wry-

necked, blubbing red-headed boy" who has been "playing in an adjacent gutter" and "a kneeling woman so horrible in her ugliness that...she would stand out from the rest of the company as a monster in the vilest cabaret in France or the vilest gin-shop in England".

For discussion

- What is happening in the painting? How do you recognise the key characters in this story?
- Contrast this image of Jesus and Mary with other representations in art. What are the key differences? Which image do you prefer and why?
- This painting was seen as extremely shocking when it was first exhibited. Consider more recent works of art or exhibitions that have been seen as controversial and received lots of media attention, such as Martin Creed's *Work No. 277 The Lights Going On and Off* (2001), Damien Hirst's *Mother and Child, Divided* (1993) or Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1999). What makes a work of art shocking?

Activities

- Produce a detailed guide of all the symbols in *Christ in the House of His Parents* or another of Millais's Pre-Raphaelite pieces to help other viewers decipher the narrative in the painting. Visit <http://www.tate.org.uk/opelia/subject.htm> to see a detailed analysis of the symbolism in Millais's *Ophelia* (1851–2).
- In his early work Millais painted colours onto a background of wet white oil paint to make them appear brighter. Research his technique and try to mimic this style of painting. How easy is it to get the same effect of brilliant colour as Millais?
- Write positive and negative reviews on a shocking work of art, or hold a debate. Can you persuade others to see your point of view?



John Everett Millais *The Order of Release* 1746 1852–3
Tate. Presented by Sir Henry Tate, 1898

The Order of Release, 1746 1852–3

Oil on canvas, arched top. 102.9 cm x 73.7 cm

Tate. Presented by Sir Henry Tate, 1898

The Order of Release 1746 was painted not long after Christ in the House of His Parents but drew more appreciative audiences at the Royal Academy. It was one of a number of paintings through which Millais found greater approval based on the romantic theme of couples in difficult circumstances throughout history.

The Order of Release 1746 conveys much more than mere sentimentality and acts to personalise the realities of civil conflict. The scene is set in 1746 following the defeat of the Scottish Jacobite rebellion by the English at the Battle of Culloden and shows a woman securing the release of her husband from prison. This is not a happy family reunion: we do not know what the woman has had to go through in order to free her husband, but whilst her husband and child lean on her in exhaustion, her face betrays nothing of her own suffering. The balance of the composition works to illustrate the complex psychology of the situation and has a dramatic emotional impact: the woman appears extremely powerful as all the heads of the other characters incline towards her, a figure of upright strength. An additional layer of interest is added to this image by revealing the identity of the model for the wife: she was Effie Ruskin, and was to marry Millais in 1855, after the annulment of her loveless marriage to the critic John Ruskin. The end of her marriage to Ruskin caused a great scandal and Effie would be largely excluded from high society thereafter but she and Millais enjoyed a long life together and had eight children.

Effie's family lived in Perthshire and the landscape and history of Scotland would inspire Millais throughout his career. *The Order of Release 1746* expresses sympathy for the Scots as a subjugated group at this point in their history.

For discussion

- Contrast the characters in *The Order of Release 1746* with other representations of men and women in Millais's paintings. How do they vary? Can you draw any conclusions about the artist's attitudes to gender from his work? Do you think his is a typical Victorian view?
- The tradition of 'history painting' tended to be large-scale depictions of noble or heroic moments from classical or biblical stories or key historical events. Discuss how the scene depicted here differs from that tradition. Can you think of or find other works of historical, modern or contemporary art which consider a more personal view of historical events?
- Consider the impact that this conflict would have had on families then discuss the social, emotional and economic issues for families in a contemporary context of conflict, war or upheaval.

Activities

- Look at how all the different figures are standing and holding their bodies. Imagine this work is a still from a film. Can you imagine what has led up to this moment and what will happen after? Using role play, re-create the scene and then play out some possible scenarios for the following scenes.
- Explore poses and how relationships can be conveyed visually. Do some quick life sketches of models posed in ways that show their relationships. Now work in a more detailed way on their expressions and body language. What colours, objects or costumes would you add to your figure sketches to communicate the narrative and mood more clearly?
- Millais often used members of his family to represent different characters in his work. Select photographs of your friends and family or figures from public life and create a photomontage to represent characters in a well-known story. How does your selection affect how the story is read?



John Everett Millais *Bubbles* 1886
Reproduced by kind permission of Unilever PLC

Bubbles 1886

Oil on canvas. 107.5 cm x 77.5 cm

On long loan to National Museums Liverpool, Lady Lever Art Gallery

From the 1860s onwards Millais was to paint a number of 'fancy pictures', scenes set in a domestic, everyday environment where sentiment and mood takes precedence over narrative. Millais primarily used children in these paintings and they proved extremely popular, turning Millais into a household name.

By this time Millais had begun to emulate the looser, more painterly styles of Thomas Gainsborough and Joshua Reynolds and whilst he saw these fancy pictures as a serious development in his painting style he also enjoyed working in this genre, using his own children as models. He also found rapid commercial success with these depictions of childhood, taking advantage of the ready market for them and selling the copyright to printers and publishers who would then reproduce the work as affordable prints or as free supplements in magazines.

By the nineteenth century the concept of childhood as we know it today had begun to take shape and Victorian society was taking steps to restrict the use of child labour. Children were no longer seen as small adults but were instead seen as vulnerable and innocent and were often represented as being symbolic of hope and wholesomeness. *Bubbles*, originally called *A Child's World*, shows Millais's grandson William James solemnly contemplating a fragile soap bubble, an emblem of the transience of childhood. In some works the children have rather serious expressions on their faces but in others they appear more sentimentalised.

After it was successfully used as a supplement in the Christmas issue of the *Illustrated London News*, *Bubbles* and its copyright were bought by the chairman of Pears' Soap who used it in an advertisement to promote his product. This use of the image not only took advantage of the literal presence of soap bubbles in the scene but also drew on symbolic associations of children with purity and goodness.

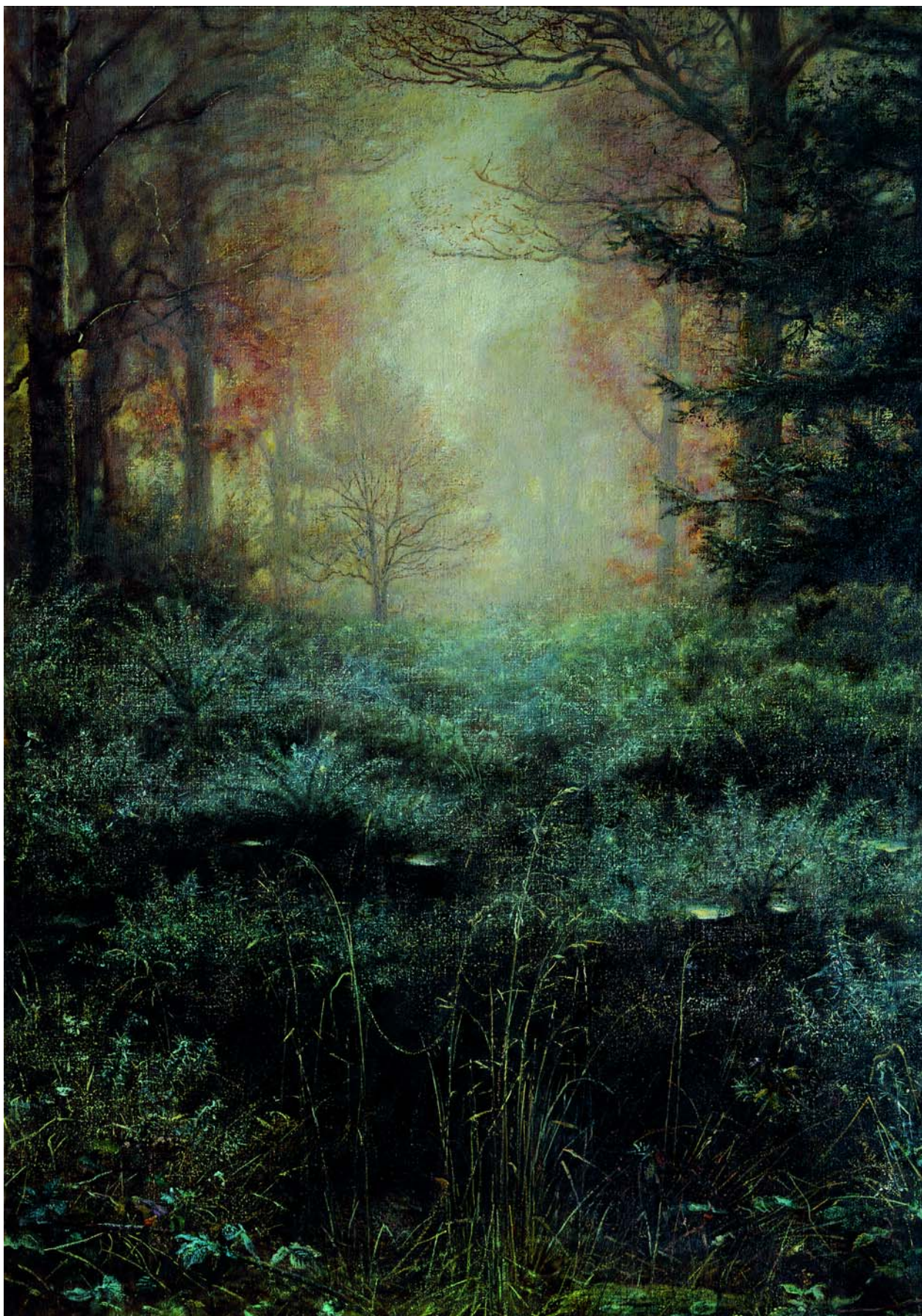
Millais's apparent consent for his artwork to be used in this way drew disapproval from a number of critics and the artist's son was to claim after Millais's death that his father was angered by Pears' treatment of the image. However it seems that, as with many aspects of his career, Millais attitude was pragmatic: enthusiastic about the idea of bringing art to as wide an audience as possible, his main concern was for quality control of the print.

For discussion

- Examine *Bubbles* as a depiction of childhood. What do you think about the way the boy is depicted? Why do you think this image was seen as appealing? How would you compare this child with images of children today from advertisements and the media?
- Compare the image of the boy here with the boy in *Christ in the House of his Parents*. How had Millais's approach to painting changed by 1886?
- Some people thought the use of Millais's painting in an advertisement meant the artist had 'sold out', though since he had sold the copyright he had no control over this. What do you think? Can you think of other examples of artists or musicians who have used advertising to reach a wider audience? Consider the work of artists such as Andy Warhol, Jenny Holzer and Takashi Murakami whose artwork uses the forms and conventions of advertising.
- How do you think Millais's grandson felt about this picture when he grew up? Consider occasions in childhood that families choose to record. How do you feel about images of yourself as a child?

Activities

- Make a collection of images of young people from newspapers and magazines. Using Photoshop or other graphics software, create two advertisements, one of which uses a positive image of children or childhood to promote a product and one of which plays on the negative image of young people to sell a product or idea.
- Try to draw, paint and photograph bubbles. What techniques can you use to capture their texture, colour and weight? How accurate do you think Millais's depiction of a bubble is?
- When *Bubbles* was used to advertise Pears' Soap a bar of soap was added to the picture. Pick a work of art and adapt it using collage or digital imaging to advertise a product. Does this 'spoil' the original artwork?



John Everett Millais *Dew-Drenched Furze* 1889–90
Reproduced by kind permission of Geoffroy Richard Everett Millais Collection

Dew-Drenched Furze 1889–90

Oil on canvas. 170.2 cm x 121.9 cm

Geoffroy Richard Everett Millais Collection

In the latter half of his life Millais spent his autumns and winters in Perthshire near his wife's family, to escape the bustle of London and indulge his passion for hunting and fishing. Never able to ignore his compulsion to paint he would also spend his time painting the surrounding countryside. Between 1870 and 1896 he produced a group of large landscapes, twelve of which have been brought together for this exhibition.

Although his painting style had moved on quite significantly, Millais still remained faithful to the Pre-Raphaelite principle of working from direct observation and worked outdoors throughout the painting process, in spite of the harsh weather conditions of the Scottish winter. The resulting paintings are a testament to a lifetime practising this close and painstaking mode of looking. In *Dew-Drenched Furze* Millais paints a clearing of dewy gorse, skilfully capturing the play of light on the glistening, spiky outlines of the plants. Although his Pre-Raphaelite attention to nature can still be seen in the meticulous detail of the vegetation in the foreground, the composition is drawn together by the way the background dissolves in a haze of warm sunlight and foliage. There is no central focal point and the scene is empty of human life. Yet this is not necessarily a bleak place and the scale and composition draw the viewer into the space. There is an atmosphere of calm to the scene as nature is elevated to something sublime and ethereal.

Having successfully established himself as both a narrative and portrait painter Millais's decision to work on a series of landscape paintings shows the breadth of his technical capabilities. Their large scale and dramatic perspective demonstrate his ambitious approach to the genre and the influence of JMW Turner can be seen in the use of colour and light. In turn comparisons can be drawn between the atmosphere of Millais's landscapes and those of European painters such as Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh.

In the 1800s Scotland became a popular retreat for London society and a number of Scottish estates were bought up by wealthy Englishmen for recreational hunting. Millais's late landscape paintings demonstrated an appreciation of the Scottish landscape, shared by many of his Victorian contemporaries, including Queen Victoria herself.

For discussion

- Look at a selection of Millais's Scottish landscapes. What links them together? Is there a particular mood to all the paintings? How does it make you feel? There are very few people in his landscapes. What effect does this have?
- Compare Millais's observation of nature in *Dew-Drenched Furze* with the foliage and plants which appear in his earlier works such as *A Huguenot*, *on St Bartholomew's Day* (1851–2) or *Ophelia* (1851–2).
- Improvements in transport in the 1800s increased tourism to Scotland. Compare Millais's paintings with representations of Scotland in current tourist brochures or on tourist information websites. Are there any similarities? What is different?

Activities

- Examine Millais's use of colour and light in the landscapes and try to create similar 'impressionistic' effects using pastels to evoke the mood of a scene.
- Millais had strong family links to Scotland. How would you choose to represent a place to which you have a strong emotional connection? What view would you choose to show, what colour palette would you use and would you include people in your landscape? Make sketches and take photographs of your chosen landscape to work from.
- Compare Millais's landscapes with those of Van Gogh and Claude Monet. Consider how they used paint and copy their brushstrokes. Create a work using the brush style and colours you prefer.