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Introduction

“ART IN AMERICA HAS BEEN PURSUED ON WRONG PRINCIPLES . . . NEVER TO THIS day has an American painted a line that could be construed into a reproach to American Slavery. . . . And yet, what a work of Art might have been accomplished if there had been a man with a warm heart, and a clear brain, and a skillful pencil, to seize the golden opportunity!”¹ The American Pre-Raphaelites published these impassioned words in their journal, *The New Path*, in January 1864, as the Civil War raged. The editorial is unprecedented as a collective political statement by a group of American artists, architects, scientists, and critics. In prose both incisive and vehement, the American Pre-Raphaelites indicted the nation’s painting, sculpture, and architecture as reflecting and fostering a culture “infected” by the “sin of slavery” and “moral cowardice.”²

During the years of their collaborative association, the American Pre-Raphaelites sought to seize “the golden opportunity” that they had identified by executing paintings, designing buildings, and publishing criticism that married principles of social equity with truth to nature. They were united by a nexus of commitments, devoted to the writings of the British critic John Ruskin, to the painterly and compositional priorities of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and to advancing cultural and political reform through art and architecture. In contrast to their more prominent colleagues in the New York art world, the artists later labeled the Hudson River School, the American Pre-Raphaelites established themselves as eloquent critics of slavery and antebellum American society.

Detail of fig. 3

The American Pre-Raphaelites were the United States' first group of artists to formally band together. Founding the Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art in 1863, the group authored articles of organization—a de facto manifesto—and established mechanisms of governance, a publishing arm, and a platform that sought to educate the taste of the American public. The Association eventually assembled nearly thirty members.³ Its core group, however, comprised the founders and their close associates: architects Peter Bonnett Wight and Russell Sturgis, Jr.; critic and writer Clarence Cook; scientists Clarence King and James Gardiner; and painters Thomas Charles Farrer, Charles Herbert Moore, John William Hill and John Henry Hill (father and son), William Trost Richards, and Henry Roderick Newman. Believing the “union of the Arts is necessary for the full development of each,” the Association argued that the “close connection between Architecture, Sculpture and Painting” allowed those arts to find “their highest perfection” and “greatest glory.”⁴

This book's focus mirrors the integrated objectives of the American Pre-Raphaelites themselves by engaging the range of their output across media, including painting, drawing, photography, and architecture, as well as art criticism and scientific reports. Because American Pre-Raphaelite paintings and watercolors do not overtly depict slavery, manumission, or war, it can be difficult to identify political messages within their imagery. To apprehend the extent of the American Pre-Raphaelites' pictorial and political interventions, we must situate their visual productions within the context of their comprehensive and interdisciplinary agenda—which aimed at nothing less than a radical displacement of established modes of landscape painting, in addition to a reformation of American architecture and criticism.

Although formally incorporated as the Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art, the group's members referred to themselves by a variety of titles, as Ruskinians, Realists, and, most notably, as “Pre-Raphaelites,” an appellation also employed by contemporary reviewers.⁵ The label indicated their aspiration to produce work with the reformist zeal that characterized the early productions of the British Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and signaled to their American audience that their project was not untested. Like the Brotherhood, American Pre-Raphaelite artists renounced established academic traditions governing subject selection and pictorial composition. In pursuing a meticulously executed realism in painting and naturalistic sculptural carving in architecture, the American Pre-Raphaelites followed the examples of the Brotherhood and actively promulgated Ruskin's aesthetic doctrines on American soil. While the terms “Ruskinian” and “Pre-Raphaelite” carried sometimes overlapping but often distinct meanings in the British cultural conversation, in the United States they were synonymous, referring to the minute transcription of botanical and geological elements. In this sense, the Association's artists followed key stylistic choices made by British Pre-Raphaelites, but rejected the London artists' preoccupations with medieval, biblical, and Shakespearean narratives and the compositions of Quattrocento Italian art in favor of landscapes, nature studies, and still lifes of modest dimensions.

The British Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had formed in 1848 with the goal of reviving techniques and styles found in Italian art before the later works of Raphael. The Brotherhood believed that reintroducing the vibrant palette, angular linearity, and flattened surfaces they saw in the work of fifteenth-century Italian painting would herald a reformation of contemporary British art and society. One of the Brotherhood's strikingly modern innovations, however, and one that their American counterparts emulated, was that each object pictured, whether it was a human figure, a lily, or a goat, had been painstakingly rendered from direct observation. In translating these practices across the Atlantic, the Americans embraced the realist rather than the revivalist elements of the Pre-Raphaelite project, deploying its principles to upend existing traditions of landscape painting in the United States. Though neither architects nor scientists were among the Brotherhood's founding members, both professions were represented at the formation of the Association, facilitating from the outset the unification of painting, sculpture, and architecture and engagement with the increasingly rigorous discourse of scientific empiricism.

A vital factor in the American movement's success was the arrival of Thomas Charles Farrer, a British expatriate artist, in New York in 1858. Farrer had witnessed three of the central initiatives of the British movement, including realism in painting, a concerted effort to teach drawing to artists and workers, and a sustained campaign to erect Gothic Revival structures in which painting and sculpture converged. Farrer had attended the Working Men's College in London, where he was a student of Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The experience also provided him an opportunity to observe such visiting faculty as Edward Burne-Jones and Val Prinsep as they mobilized under Rossetti's leadership to paint the murals on the bare walls of the Oxford Union, an important Gothic Revival structure. Spurred by Farrer, the American movement adopted many of the strategies that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had developed heuristically over a decade, including a posture of dissent, at once genuine and performative, against prevailing artistic traditions and political conditions. Esteemed predecessors were necessarily condemned. Artistic and political protest were linked. While British Pre-Raphaelite painters William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais attended the Chartist demonstration in London in April 1848, Wight and Sturgis took sustained political action on behalf of the nascent Republican Party.

The American Pre-Raphaelites' decision to model their most potent strategies after the British experience also extended to their publication. In their Articles of Organization, the American Pre-Raphaelites determined "to conduct a journal or magazine for general circulation, containing critical notices and essays, with any matter that may tend to advance the cause."⁶ In the United States, there had been a direct precedent for the Association's publishing organ, *The New Path*, in *The Crayon*, the first American periodical devoted to the arts. But in conceiving their journal, the Association also intently followed the example of two short-lived magazines associated with British Pre-Raphaelitism, *The Germ* and *The Oxford and Cambridge*

Magazine.⁷ Published by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1850, *The Germ* addressed in print many of the issues that the Brotherhood engaged in their paintings, fulfilling the role—as *The New Path* did for the Americans—of a manifesto. Comprising fiction, poetry, essays, reviews, and etchings, *The Germ* encouraged the production of “pure transcripts and faithful studies from nature . . . seeking after originality in a more humble manner than has been practiced since the decline of Italian Art in the Middle Ages.”⁸ The journal also championed progressive reform in Victorian culture through a return to medieval art practices and social organization. *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, published in 1856 and edited by William Morris and William Fulford, initially absorbed the influence of *The Germ*’s artistic progressivism and eventually expanded its own platform to include what Thomas J. Tobin has described as “a proto-socialist call to action on behalf of the under-represented and oppressed.”⁹ While *The New Path* did not advocate for direct political mobilization, the American Pre-Raphaelites understood from the earliest days of their Association that their movement would require a publication that blended aesthetic and political protest, and that could confront the “general contagion” that catalyzed their founding.¹⁰ Their journal ultimately evolved into one of the most substantive, if eclectic, American art publications of the era. From its pages, the American Pre-Raphaelites promulgated holistic dissent from traditions of academic painting, endeavoring “to educate the public to a better understanding of the representative Arts,” calling for “complete and faithful study of Nature,” and advocating for the construction of secular Gothic Revival structures that were purpose-built for the display of both Pre-Raphaelite painting and sculptural carving.¹¹

An Egalitarian Opticality

The American Pre-Raphaelites were inspired not only by Ruskin’s aesthetic prescriptions, but also by his increasingly pointed cultural and economic critiques that linked the condition of a nation to the condition of its art. The group was convinced that mainstream antebellum art and architecture, executed by “men who did not strike slavery when strokes were needed,” as they wrote in *The New Path*, had produced a society “beset on all sides by old-time prejudice and obstinate ignorance.”¹² In response, the American Pre-Raphaelites waged what they deemed was a “most uncompromising war against all deception and untruth.”¹³ In painting, this revolt was expressed through the repudiation of idealized landscape representation that, they averred, had long disguised a moral corruption threatening the promise of their nation’s democratic experiment. One of the group’s most audacious innovations was their application of an all-over mimesis. Borrowed from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, this approach, in which foreground and background objects were presented with startling clarity, had aligned the British group’s technical execution with its political dispositions. Fundamental to this alignment of the formal and ideological were strategies that made visible the labor of the artist. The Brotherhood composed their canvases with

a profusion of minute brushstrokes, conspicuously rendered with vibrant pigments that announced the group's resistance to academic mandates that called for tonal equilibrium. In her reading of these techniques, Elizabeth Prettejohn has explained how the Brotherhood's multiple strategies for attaining unprecedented pictorial precision elevated a painting "apparently without political content," such as John Inchbold's *In Early Spring: A Study in March* (fig. 1), into a cognitive "blueprint for a better society, one in which the fragile primrose is not subordinated to the mighty tree."¹⁴

The American Pre-Raphaelites imported to the United States the Brotherhood's spatial innovations, bold palette, and arduous facture. Pre-Raphaelite technical methods, applied to representations of the American landscape, carried a progressive political charge in the United States as they had in Britain. The American landscape genre was already heavily freighted by competing political, social, and economic interests, including campaigns to preserve virgin wilderness and to legitimize westward settlement. Against this backdrop of dramatic tensions, American Pre-Raphaelite painters innovated a new type of landscape painting. They rejected the formulas of picturesque composition as well as its Romantic and expansionist associations adopted by the previous generation of American artists, including Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, and Frederic Church. Those painters found it culturally resonant and commercially rewarding to present America as a new—if conflicted—Eden. The American Pre-Raphaelites, skeptical of artistic conventions that extolled the New World's paradisiacal status, instead pursued exacting mimesis that they understood as the sole means to unleash the spiritual and liberative energies that inhered in the natural world.

The American Pre-Raphaelites deployed their paintings and journal to challenge the long-standing landscape conventions that shaped and regulated the viewer's experience. The legacy of seventeenth-century European masters such as Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa, mediated through British paintings and prints, had already been absorbed and adapted by a previous generation of American artists. But in the view of the American Pre-Raphaelites, the hierarchy of genres and the demands for stylistic conformity with well-established doctrines of the beautiful, the picturesque, and the sublime repressed radical expressions of truth. Their movement renounced traditional spatial configurations, formulaic entry points, forced perspective, and pathways that lured the eye through a composition, devices upon which mainstream American landscape painters consistently relied, visible in such works as Thomas Cole's *View on the Catskill—Early Autumn* (1836–37, fig. 2). The American Pre-Raphaelites understood such visual paradigms as inherited schema that sustained the illusion that the viewer could inhabit and take cognitive possession of the pictured, and, by extension, the physical landscape.¹⁵ In *The New Path*, the American Pre-Raphaelites took the extraordinary step of arguing that contemporary painters who embraced the templates of the picturesque were complicit in an act of visual domination that reinforced a political ethos condoning enslavement. "The moral atmosphere at home has been deadly to all high aspiration or achievement," they contended. "We utterly deny the value of the



FIG. 1. John William Inchbold, *In Early Spring: A Study in March*, exhibited 1855. Oil on canvas, 20 $\frac{7}{8}$ \times 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (53 \times 35 cm). Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, UK.

FIG. 2. Thomas Cole, *View on the Catskill—Early Autumn*, 1836–37. Oil on canvas, 39 × 63 in. (99.1 × 160 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



greater number of Academic laws, believing that they and the Academies which made and uphold them have done harm, and only harm.”¹⁶

There is no evidence to suggest that the idealized productions of nineteenth-century mainstream landscape painters intentionally bolstered the institution of slavery. Nearly all the prominent artists impugned by the American Pre-Raphaelites supported the Union cause. Works by such artists as Church, Sanford Gifford, and Martin Johnson Heade, particularly in the early 1860s, have long been understood to offer multivalent metaphors about the impending Civil War. Once fighting began, several well-publicized canvases, including Church’s *The Icebergs* (1861, Dallas Museum of Art) and *Our Banner in the Sky* (1861, Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection), were read as tacitly or explicitly buttressing the North’s efforts.¹⁷ But painted allegories that reflected popular sentiment constituted insufficient social and political interventions and were, for the American Pre-Raphaelites, active agents of injustice. The movement lamented the lost opportunity to condemn slavery through visual art: “What a splendor of fame, with what consciousness of desert, might have been won by him who should have held this infamy up for our loathing

and our tears of burning shame, in marble or on the canvas.”¹⁸ The American Pre-Raphaelites believed that landscape painting, rightly conceived and executed, could propel the abolitionist cause, and that artists who relinquished this obligation, who participated in promoting the national mythos of righteous expansion, were guilty of abetting slavery’s perpetuation.

The urgent aesthetic and political issues at stake in American Pre-Raphaelite painting animate Charles Herbert Moore’s *Hudson River, Above Catskill* (1865, fig. 3). The canvas exposes a complex relationship between the artist and the works of earlier and contemporary American landscape painters. In Moore’s depiction of a small strip of the Hudson riverfront, painted the month the Civil War ended, he records “every beautiful pebble,” “with equal exactness,” while responding to the grief and anxiety imposed by the national conflict.¹⁹ Moore presents the river’s rocky bank littered with antipicturesque detritus. With the precision of a geologist, he renders fragments of rocks with such specificity that they are identifiable as the shales and carbonates that underlie the Hudson River at Catskill. Scattered bones and the remnants of an equine skull have been deposited next to a rib bone, and, next to that, a red apple. A small rowboat, emptied of its oars, appears as if it has recently been dragged onshore. Moore’s stranded boat introduces contemporary associations with abandoned vessels, often read during the period as emblems of the foundered ship of state, connoting, as David C. Miller has written, “fears for and even a loss of faith in the American corporate enterprise during and following the Civil War.”²⁰ Patricia Junker persuasively extends this argument to her reading of Moore’s work, which she interprets as a “private memorial” to Lincoln, assassinated that April.²¹ She asks, “Is that haunting absence of an oarsman that we feel in Moore’s painting the dead Lincoln, and the oar-less boat the ship of state?”²²

Hudson River, Above Catskill holds this allegorical reading in dynamic tension with its insistence on its extemporaneous origin. Moore’s unusual assemblage privileges the Pre-Raphaelite allegiance to faithful transcription over the aesthetic and moral compromises that he found in grandiose, idealized landscapes and viewed as the price of a false compositional harmony. The artist’s primary endeavor is to treat his chosen Catskill landscape as still life, as a collection of disparate objects, rather than as unified into a grand Claudean vision. The profusion of botanical, biological, and geological residua, each the product of a discrete observation, conflates the generative act of the artist with the taxonomic discipline of the scientist. But Moore’s commitment to realism did not exempt him from producing imagery that mourned the war’s human carnage. While endowing his work with psychological freight, selecting and painting landscapes that were permeable to political readings, Moore remained steadfast to the American Pre-Raphaelite project of rendering seemingly uncomposed natural settings with what this book claims is American Pre-Raphaelitism’s signature egalitarian opticality.

The American Pre-Raphaelites developed their egalitarian opticality in paintings that refused compositional conventions endorsing rank, class, power, and possession, elevating the humble while eschewing the monumental. Prior to the formation of the Association, Farrer had announced his political commitments through pictorial

content in early figural works, several of which incorporated likenesses of the abolitionist John Brown.²³ In landscapes and nature studies produced after the American Pre-Raphaelites' formal association, Farrer and his colleagues eliminated overt political imagery from their work and instead deployed organizational strategies and painterly techniques to propound their reformist priorities by linking them to new habits of perception. Paintings that rejected picturesque arrangement, the American Pre-Raphaelites believed, and that were completed with meticulous verism, could promote an epistemic shift in art that would in turn foster egalitarian values. Apprehending a work that was executed according to Pre-Raphaelite prescriptions, such as *Hudson River, Above Catskill*, would condition viewers to see with an "enfranchised eye," according to Brotherhood painter William Holman Hunt.²⁴ Viewers who embraced art based on principles of pictorial democracy—in which each painted object is accorded equal attention—would more likely nurture a progressive and transformative vision of society.

Moore's chosen subject was painted in open defiance of established American landscape conventions. In picturing the bank of the Hudson in Catskill, a site made famous by Cole, one of the nation's most revered artists, Moore challenged the standing of Cole and his followers. *Hudson River, Above Catskill* asserts that these northeastern locales were not the proprietary domain of a cadre of New York-based painters who had monopolized them for the preceding forty years. Because their movement grew out of New York, American Pre-Raphaelites could hardly avoid the scenery of the Hudson River Valley, Catskills, Adirondacks, and Connecticut River Valley. Their rebellion would be expressed not through their selection of sketching grounds, but through their aesthetic and stylistic choices.

In an early issue of *The New Path*, the American Pre-Raphaelites announced the difference between their project and that of their more famous predecessors. The Association referred to the work of mainstream landscape painters as "sentimental, dreamy and struggling after that it calls the ideal," and their own work as a second school of art, "hard-working, wide awake, and struggling after the real and true."²⁵ There is, however, no monolithic form of realism that encompasses all the styles of the American Pre-Raphaelites. Each artist, while internalizing his own reading of Ruskin and engagement with the British Pre-Raphaelites, possessed an idiosyncratic sensibility that blended American and British influences. Yet the American Pre-Raphaelites were united in their belief that realism was the only method of painting that could fulfill Ruskin's imperative to preserve a visual record of geologic, natural, and human history; it was consonant with the increasing emphasis on scientific accuracy; and it was the indispensable corrective to America's "spiritual obesity," specifically to the grandiose settings and idealized representations of academic landscape painters.²⁶

FIG. 3. (overleaf) Charles Herbert Moore, *Hudson River, Above Catskill*, 1865. Oil on canvas, 10 1/8 × 16 in. (25.7 × 40.6 cm). Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, TX, 2003.9.





The architect Russell Sturgis clarified this ideological cornerstone of the Association in an article, “The Conditions of Art in America.” He elucidated a working definition for the realism practiced by the American Pre-Raphaelites: “Realism . . . is the desire and effort to see everything visible as it truly and essentially is, and to conceive of everything not visible as it might be. . . . It is the effort to avoid affectation, academical laws, and prescribed formulas, and to work for the disciplined natural sense of right alone.”²⁷ Sturgis’s statement demonstrates that the American Pre-Raphaelites had internalized Ruskin’s valorization of the unique agency of sight as it apprehends “the pure facts” of nature.²⁸ Sturgis pushes his argument from the perceptual into the realm of the moral: optical integrity in the creation of art is an essential precondition to truth.

The radicalism of American Pre-Raphaelite painting lay in the violation of the landscape genre’s traditional spatial relationships and application of hyperrealist facture. Pre-Raphaelite architects, by contrast, articulated the movement’s agenda by employing the materials, ornamentation, and redemptive semantic of Gothic forms. The American Pre-Raphaelites believed there was a direct linkage between the imperatives to depict landscape realistically and to construct naturalistic forms in architecture; both led back to the teachings of Ruskin. Beauty in both arts, he argued in *Modern Painters III*, depended on the apprehension and imitation of the unified forms apparent everywhere in nature, and not on a display of the artist’s subjectivity.²⁹

The American Pre-Raphaelite architects adopted Ruskin’s romanticizing posture toward the status and effectiveness of medieval guilds as a form of social organization and a generative setting for artistic creativity. In *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin argued that in Gothic architecture one could find the communal principles necessary for any civic expression of a high order. He traced the degradation of British culture, art, and politics to the arc of industrialization that the nation had, in his view, suffered since the late eighteenth century, resulting in the diminution of the worker’s role and value. Gothic Revivalism had the potential not only to restore the great building and design accomplishments of the Middle Ages, but to return the worker to a position of autonomy and dignity, necessary conditions to inspire individual and collective creativity.

The Association’s architects Wight and Sturgis similarly concluded that medieval designs offered a dynamic paradigm to address their own nation’s contemporary architectural demands. As Wight wrote in *The New Path*, “There is no reason therefore to doubt that if one is thoroughly acquainted with the needs of the present time, and masters the principles of the medievalists, he will be able to commence at a point only a little anterior to where they left off and his work will approach perfection according to the skill and knowledge of the mind that controls it.”³⁰ The invocation of the Middle Ages, for the American Pre-Raphaelites, as for Ruskin, constituted an assertion of the best properties of aesthetic imagination, including heightened perception and the privileging of bold color and natural forms. Medieval history offered a living past, characterized by a profusion of artistic expression made possible by communal bonds

antithetical to the paucity of spirit, commercial aggrandizement, and social alienation that the group feared had beset the American experiment.

Within a half decade, Association members had made their mark in multiple arenas of American culture beyond painting, including art collecting, exhibition design, public and private architectural commissions, nationally and internationally circulated newspapers and journals, and higher education. Considering these activities as part of a broad interartistic enterprise allows us to recover the painted, architectural, and critical achievements of the American Pre-Raphaelites from the margins of nineteenth-century culture and situate them within vital transatlantic discourses on art, slavery, pedagogy, and politics.

Genealogies

American Pre-Raphaelitism received its earliest institutional recognition in 1985. The Brooklyn Museum mounted *The New Path: Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites*, curated by Linda Ferber and William Gerdts. The show and catalogue presented a wide sampling of American Pre-Raphaelite paintings and drawings, and narrated, for the first time, the story of the Association's founding, its proselytizing of Ruskinian doctrine in the United States, and its revolt against the era's mainstream landscape painters. Reviewers recognized the curators' major achievement of having "rescued the movement—most of its works still unlocated—from near-oblivion."³¹ Ferber and Gerdts wrote of the "particularly maddening" dilemma that the American Pre-Raphaelites had presented to art historians: that the locations of many paintings and watercolors by Association members mentioned in contemporary letters and reviews were unknown. Fifteen years seeking lost work led to the important exhibition at Brooklyn. In the decades following the show, the curators' hope that their "exhibition [would] provide information and stimulus to bring . . . lost works to light" was realized.³² The present study has significantly benefited from the identification and attribution of American Pre-Raphaelite works made in the intervening years.

In their catalogue, Ferber and Gerdts, as well as contributors Kathleen Foster and Susan Casteras, harnessed primary sources that remain crucial to any examination on the topic today.³³ The exhibition and catalogue raised important issues that scholars of American art, in the years immediately following, were compelled to address in their histories of nineteenth-century American landscape painting. Responses to Ferber and Gerdts included attempts to assimilate American Pre-Raphaelitism into a broader narrative, homogenizing its contributions and thus diluting the significance of its legacy. The most notable critical reaction to the Brooklyn Museum's show was by the curators of *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School*, led by John Howat at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1987. In his catalogue essay, Kevin Avery countered the assertion of Ferber and Gerdts and argued that the work of the American Pre-Raphaelites did not represent innovation, much less a radical initiative. Instead, Avery contended, the American Pre-Raphaelites provoked a meaningful

dialogue over the value of paintings completed out of doors while simultaneously encouraging increased interest among the era's artists in rendering nature with greater fidelity. Avery took the position that the American Pre-Raphaelite standard of truth to nature had been "reflected to a greater or lesser degree in Durand's art and aesthetic . . . and it was especially visible in the art of Church."³⁴ Overlooking the American Pre-Raphaelites' social and political interventions, Avery concluded that the aesthetic concerns and pictorial techniques adopted by the group's artists had been established in the United States the decade before the founding of the Association in 1863.

The American Pre-Raphaelites' clamorous presence in the nineteenth-century New York art world was recognized by Angela Miller in *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (1993). Miller separated the contributions of the American Pre-Raphaelites, who represented the "extremes of radical pleinairism," from those of popular contemporary landscape painters, who executed sketches and studies in nature, but completed largely invented compositions in their studios. Filled with "oedipal rage" for Cole and "struggling for an independent voice," the American Pre-Raphaelites, in Miller's account, were motivated by "a contrary impulse . . . to emphasize the foreground," as opposed to the distant vistas and recessional space associated with prospect or picturesque views.³⁵ But this aspect of the American Pre-Raphaelites' enterprise was neither its only nor its most notable project. Miller demonstrated how representations of northeastern locales by Cole, Church, and Durand, and later South American and western scenes by Church and Albert Bierstadt, were imbued with social and political content that served "the multiple and shifting needs of nationalist sentiment."³⁶ *Painting Dissent* explores how the American Pre-Raphaelites wrestled with these same tensions. As the first cohort of artists in formal association working in the United States, they put forth interdisciplinary proposals to effect social, cultural, and political reform that were ultimately far more ambitious in scope than the primarily visual output of their better-known contemporaries.

In 2007, the Fogg Art Museum organized *The Last Ruskinians: Charles Eliot Norton, Charles Herbert Moore, and Their Circle*, which accepted the major claims of the Brooklyn exhibition but interrogated the narrative surrounding the movement's dissolution.³⁷ Curated by Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., and Virginia Anderson, *The Last Ruskinians* centered on Norton, first professor of history of the fine arts at Harvard, and Moore, who, at Norton's invitation, became Harvard's first drawing instructor in 1874. One of Stebbins's and Anderson's most salient additions to the scholarship was their argument that, following the disbandment of the Association, the Ruskinian pedagogical model, through the teachings of Moore, was transmitted to a second generation of American painters who worked into the early twentieth century.³⁸

In 2019, the American Pre-Raphaelite artists received renewed attention in the exhibition *The American Pre-Raphaelites: Radical Realists*, guest curated by Linda Ferber at the National Gallery of Art on the occasion of the bicentenary of Ruskin's birth. The exhibition showcased a large oeuvre of American Pre-Raphaelite painting

and drawing, a significant portion still privately held, including many works that had not been located at the time of the Brooklyn show. Essays in the accompanying catalogue investigated dimensions of American Pre-Raphaelite imagery unaddressed in the earlier display. For instance, Barbara Gallati examined how Association painters inserted allegorical references into otherwise uncomposed landscapes, and Mark Mitchell considered the American Pre-Raphaelite still-life project within the larger history of the genre in the nineteenth-century United States. The essay I contributed to the National Gallery's catalogue, "Abolitionism and the American Pre-Raphaelite Experiment," highlighted a vital dimension of the Association, comprehensively discussed here: the American Pre-Raphaelites' productive embrace of dissent, and their mission to "stir up strife," "breed discontent," and "pull down unsound reputations."³⁹

Contours of Dissent

This book is the first to examine the nature and development of the American Pre-Raphaelites' transatlantic dialogue. Beyond acknowledging the importance of Ruskin's doctrine of "truth to nature" and the eponymous affiliation with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, past scholarship has largely left unexplored the influence of British textual and visual sources on the development of American Pre-Raphaelitism. By employing an Atlanticist perspective, I argue that the American Pre-Raphaelite movement challenges the dominant narrative of nineteenth-century American painting. That historiography has traditionally advanced the view that the new nation's cultural, spiritual, and commercial aspirations were formally expressed in the landscape imagery of the Hudson River School. I demonstrate how the American Pre-Raphaelites disrupt this account. By importing British models of theory and praxis, the movement generated public debate over the merits and deficiencies of idealized landscapes. The American Pre-Raphaelites' vehement participation in these period conversations revises our understanding of the often-antagonistic forces at play in picturing America during the nineteenth century's most turbulent decades.

This study also considers the ominous shadow cast over the Association's inaugural moment in January 1863, just weeks before the passage of the Draft Act, which subjected all the young men present to conscription. Of the Association's core members, only Farrer, a British expatriate, enlisted in the Union army. It is not known whether the others formally purchased commutations or hired substitutes, a common practice, but their limited financial resources may well have made this course unavailable.⁴⁰ Two of the Association's scientist members, Clarence King and James Gardiner, ventured west, joining the California Geological Survey in 1863. Clarence Cook and John Henry Hill both conveniently planned trips to England to view the works of J.M.W. Turner and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood during the war years. This behavior, especially in light of the devoutness of the group's religious faith, and the nature of their subsequent expressions of dissent, should not be understood solely as a strategy to avoid the battlefield. It should also be distinguished from the

more familiar term, coined in the eighteenth century, “conscientious objection”; it may be more reasonably construed as “conscientious evasion,” a concept of political resistance set forth by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1971).⁴¹ Characterized by covert disobedience, conscientious evasion suggests personal reflection and modesty often absent from more public displays of dissidence, a posture also reflected in the humble natural motifs in American Pre-Raphaelite imagery. Their decision to abstain from service, however, neither undermines the sincerity of their abolitionist, pro-Union views nor diminishes the conviction with which they advanced a movement to oppose cultural norms that they believed were long complicit in oppression. Indeed, their most aggressive collective struggle to alter the aesthetic taste of the American people occurred during the war years. The group aligned the North’s campaign on the battlefield with their own efforts to defeat the cultural hegemony persistently on display in the galleries of the National Academy of Design. “Wonderful revolutions are going on at present,” Moore wrote in *The New Path*. Not only “physical wars between nations,” but “mental wars . . . producing far more serious results: they are shaking the dogmas of men to their very foundations.”⁴²

Comprising four chapters and an epilogue, this book is organized around key figures whose careers emblemize both Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics and the reformist aspirations that endowed the movement with intensity and momentum. I consider the contributions of the Association’s artists, architects, critics, and scientists, and feature members whose Civil War–period output was in active dialogue with contemporary British art and criticism. Though he never crossed the Atlantic, Ruskin is a leading protagonist throughout this study. His writings on painting, architecture, and political economy were consumed voraciously by the American Pre-Raphaelites and often quoted in *The New Path*. Several members maintained personal correspondence with him, visited him in England, and followed his suggested European travel itineraries. These relationships were facilitated by Norton, Ruskin’s American friend, who became a leading patron of the American Pre-Raphaelites. As the United States’ first professor of art history, as coeditor of the *North American Review*, the nation’s first literary magazine, and as Ruskin’s closest confidant and executor, Norton is a pivotal character in the history of art and political reform in the nineteenth-century United States. He, too, reappears in each chapter as a figure who linked the movement to deeper intellectual traditions, held it to higher standards of aesthetic discourse, and provided its members with financial support as well as painting and architectural commissions.

The roles of the patrons of American Pre-Raphaelitism and Gothic Revivalism in the United States are crucial to understanding the movement’s trajectory. Most integral were Norton and his friend and colleague at Yale, Daniel Coit Gilman, a professor of political geography at the Sheffield Scientific School. Though Gilman is less well known, he was among the most respected educators and public intellectuals of his era. After years promoting the sciences at Yale, a vital member of the group who raised the status of scientific study at the college level, Gilman became the founding president of Johns Hopkins University and pioneered graduate education across the

sciences and humanities. Both Norton and Gilman were indispensable spokesmen within elite circles on behalf of the movement, leveraging the standing of Harvard and Yale to legitimize the Association's message and projects. Reinserting these major figures into what has been considered a minor movement elevates the status of American Pre-Raphaelitism within the history of nineteenth-century American art. Further, recognizing the formerly unknown roles played by Norton and Gilman in the expansion of American Pre-Raphaelitism has opened new avenues for research. Norton's and Gilman's archives have not been mined in previous considerations of the movement. Correspondence between the American Pre-Raphaelites and their supporters recovers the network of contacts that gave rise to the Association and reveals how its members tapped patrons with cosmopolitan sophistication, academic credentials, and prestigious institutional affiliations.

The theoretical schema of Pierre Bourdieu, in which the matrix of institutional power and aesthetic essentialism is profitably dissected, provides a useful methodology for examining the unique collocation of "agents" that converged and attempted to enact the American Pre-Raphaelites' agenda. Specifically, Bourdieu's elucidations of cultural capital and agents within the field of cultural production assist our understanding of how the founding members of American Pre-Raphaelitism, and their patrons, with their disparate economic, educational, and social backgrounds, assembled into a coherent and, for a short time, powerful aesthetic and political movement. While Bourdieu's notion of structural homologies across class has explanatory power with respect to the formation of the Association, this book argues that the support the American Pre-Raphaelites' patrons offered the movement served not only to preserve and grow their financial and cultural capital. Instead, a shared conception of dissent—expressed most fervently in a hatred of slavery and mercenary greed—generated affinities between the American Pre-Raphaelites as cultural producers and the more dominant class represented by their patrons. One objective of this book is to reconstruct how the movement advanced causes in which its leading patrons and artists had mutual vested interests, and to identify the value of a dissenting visual realism in a moment of national schism.

As respected professors and public intellectuals with substantial wealth, Norton and Gilman possessed broader platforms from which to pursue social distinction than those offered by the American Pre-Raphaelite movement. Nevertheless, they ardently supported the Association. The clustering of mutual interests energized players within the overlapping fields of art, science, education, and politics, particularly during the fraught years of the war. Such a dynamic is recognizable within Bourdieu's schema of the site of cultural production. He explained, "The fact remains that the cultural producers are able to use the power conferred on them, especially in periods of crisis, by their capacity to put forward a critical definition of the social world, to mobilize the potential strength of the dominated classes and subvert the order prevailing in the field of power."⁴³ While the landscape paintings and nature studies of the American Pre-Raphaelites may not at first glance represent the most

politically charged of artistic enunciations, the collaborative and subversive energy of the Association's aesthetic and imagery, their architecture, and their critical writings, once placed into the hands of their socially skilled and culturally well-capitalized patrons, carried "a critical definition of the social world."

An invocation of Bourdieu's sociology of the arts, particularly as it aligns the interests of the patron class with the avant-garde aspirations of its artist-practitioners, risks advancing an excessively generous characterization of the true motives of powerful patrons. It can be presumptively acknowledged that both Norton's and Gilman's support of American Pre-Raphaelitism and Gothic Revivalism served in some measure to preserve and grow their economic and political capital. And yet, I eschew Michel Foucault's construct of "power-knowledge" and Bourdieu's related formulations, which portray virtually all acts of political liberalism or solidarity with the less fortunate as little more than socially encoded displays performed to preserve established hierarchies.⁴⁴ Rather, I build upon more recent scholarly investigations pursued by intellectual historians, including Leslie Butler, Linda Dowling, and Mark Rennella, in order to assert that figures such as Norton and Gilman developed a vital alliance between visual and political reform, while unceasingly promoting their campaigns against slavery, corrupt politics, and imperialist incursions.⁴⁵ Previous characterizations of Norton as the leading exemplar of the "genteel tradition" too easily dismiss nineteenth-century reformers as ignoring Gilded Age America's key economic and political issues, particularly the clash between rapidly emerging capital and the labor required to sustain industrial development.⁴⁶ But Norton's and Gilman's involvement in the abolitionist cause—which comprised the most politically radical activities of their era—places them within the most progressive movements of their time. Within the realm of the arts, Norton's and Gilman's patronage practices can be interpreted as endorsing the genuine reformist objectives of the American Pre-Raphaelites. As Patricia Hills has written, "One way to control the art of the country was to patronize those artists whose art expressed 'the great national interests.'"⁴⁷ Yet Norton and Gilman consciously chose to avoid patronizing artists such as Bierstadt or Thomas Moran, whose idealized landscapes, in yoking concepts of terrain and expansion with the pursuit of individual and national wealth, would have constituted a more lucrative and socially advantageous collecting strategy than did their purchases of the diminutive nature studies and small-scale landscapes of the American Pre-Raphaelites.

The Movement in Context

The following chapters proceed chronologically. Chapter 1 begins around 1850, with William Stillman's first trip to England and meeting with Ruskin, while chapter 4 ends in the first half of the 1870s, with John Henry Hill launching an alternative vision of the American West, one Pre-Raphaelite in sensibility. Of all the individuals under examination in this book, Stillman has received the most scholarly attention for his journalistic, photographic, and diplomatic activities. But his contributions

to the development of a robust American Pre-Raphaelite movement have not been documented. A significant corpus of unpublished correspondence reveals how he fostered the movement's ultimate cohesion; moreover, contemporary accounts linked Stillman's efforts in the 1850s to those of the Association in the 1860s. When *The New Path* began publication in 1863, no less an authority than Norton himself reviewed the journal in the *North American Review*, recognizing the importance of placing the American Pre-Raphaelites in a lineage that had been initiated in the United States during the previous decade. Norton praised the journal's "intrinsic merits," asserting that "in truth there has been no discourse or criticism upon matters of Art in America so valuable as its pages contain, since the essays by Mr. Stillman in the earlier volumes of 'The Crayon.'" ⁴⁸

Scholarship on Stillman has tended to look at his output retrospectively and through the lens of his *Autobiography of a Journalist*, published one year before his death in 1901. By contrast, I engage his paintings directly. Stillman himself modestly believed that he "influenced some of my contemporaries and gave a jog to the landscape painting of the day."⁴⁹ But his actual achievement was far greater. His paintings were in conversation with his early photographs, and in both media he offered influential models of realism for the American Pre-Raphaelites of the 1860s. Documents and correspondence untangle the intricate twists of Stillman's relationship with Ruskin. They reveal the British critic's mentorship and doctrinal authority, his role as arbiter of aesthetic and moral truth; but they also unveil the crisis—at least in the view of his American disciples—brought about by Ruskin's ethical betrayal during the Civil War. Previously presented primarily as a journalist, or even a "dilettante" and "amateur," Stillman appears here as a fundamental catalyst of the Association's aesthetic and political agenda.⁵⁰

Key to a reconceptualization of the American Pre-Raphaelites through the lens of their political ideology generally, and specifically with respect to their abolitionism, is the group's leader, Thomas Charles Farrer, the subject of chapter 2. Farrer's arrival in New York galvanized the movement. His enrollment at the Working Men's College as a student of Ruskin has been noted, as the artist announced his educational pedigree on some of his early drawings, signing them "Drawn by Ruskin's pupil" (see fig. 70).⁵¹ But Farrer's participation in another art program in London has been previously unknown. Before he joined Ruskin's class, Farrer was a student at the Government Schools of Design, a program similarly targeted to the working classes, but with divergent pedagogical aims and ideological investments. This chapter examines the lessons he absorbed in classrooms at both the Government Schools and the Working Men's College and argues that it was in the United States that Farrer synthesized these otherwise discordant practices to develop a singular American Pre-Raphaelite style.

Farrer's ideals of political justice were nurtured during his art training at the Working Men's College, whose founders advocated on behalf of the laboring classes by offering educational opportunities previously reserved for the wealthy.⁵² Farrer brought these values to the United States, encountering the heated polemics over the

extension of slavery, which had been abolished across the British Empire in 1834.⁵³ Shortly after his arrival in New York in 1858 and subsequent to his enlistment in the Union army in 1862, Farrer executed drawings and paintings that picture the mobilization of Union troops, Union war heroes, and leading abolitionists. But it was in landscape painting that Farrer found a platform from which he could criticize the current state of his adopted country's politics and art. His most accomplished paintings confront and repudiate the legacy of another British-born landscape painter, Thomas Cole, and reveal how Farrer grappled with ethically picturing the young nation at the moment when its ground served as the site of separatist conflict.

The progressive politics of the American Pre-Raphaelites cannot be fully grasped without recognizing the critical contributions—both ideological and aesthetic—of the Association's architects Peter Bonnett Wight and Russell Sturgis, Jr., the subjects of chapter 3. For the American Pre-Raphaelites, Gothic Revival architecture was an especially powerful conduit of political ideas, in large measure owing to the associations that Ruskin had bound to medieval guilds, which, he argued, granted craftsmen independence and respect. Lamenting the absence of egalitarian values in American culture, Wight and Sturgis envisioned new architectural landscapes, populated with secular Gothic structures, that could edify their morally bankrupt society. The architects' conviction that their country could "rise again with increased glory" by "reviv[ing] that which is lost and dead," can be gleaned from their wartime and post-bellum designs in the Italian Gothic Revival style, including the National Academy of Design, the Yale School of the Fine Arts (now known as Street Hall), and Sturgis's proposed design for a Civil War memorial at Harvard.⁵⁴ The patronage of Norton and Gilman is central to this discussion, as both professors arranged exhibition and publishing opportunities for members of the Association in conjunction with architectural commissions. Wight followed Ruskin in the critic's belief that "the prosperity of our schools of painting and sculpture . . . depends upon that of our architecture."⁵⁵ To that end, two of Wight's most important commissions during the Association's tenure were the National Academy's and Street Hall's purpose-built galleries, where his American Pre-Raphaelite colleagues exhibited their work and achieved their aspiration to unite painting, sculptural carving, and architecture. Their mission was thus impressed into the built environment of New York and New Haven, making permanent the convictions they expressed in their writing and painting.

Street Hall's inaugural exhibition in 1867 would be the last collective endeavor of the American Pre-Raphaelites, with ten members participating in various activities, including designing the building, contributing paintings for exhibition, and hanging the show. In 1868, however, a smaller subset of the original Association came together again, this time in the West, for a decidedly different collaboration. Chapter 4 examines the scientist members of the Association, Clarence King and James Gardiner, and their partnership with their American Pre-Raphaelite colleague the painter John Henry Hill. There is abundant literature on the geologist Clarence King, topographer James Gardiner, and their command of the Geological Exploration of

the Fortieth Parallel. None, however, considers the roles of King and Gardiner as founders of an Association dedicated to the arts. I argue that the presence of trained scientists within the Association had a marked effect on the group's commitment to linking scientific and aesthetic empiricism as a powerful force for social transformation. The chapter focuses on the second season of the Fortieth Parallel Survey in 1868, when King employed Hill, whose participation as the survey's staff artist has long been overshadowed by the well-documented imagery produced by Timothy O'Sullivan, the survey's photographer. The watercolors that Hill produced on the survey—modest in scale, dispassionately empiricist—reveal a mode of picturing the American West alternative to that of better-known survey artists Bierstadt and Moran, who championed narratives of territorial expansion and Manifest Destiny. Hill's work reveals that an allegiance to Ruskinian and Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics offered the artist a set of tools that could reframe the goals of a government survey. American Pre-Raphaelitism, when transported to the West, subverted the jingoistic and commercial propaganda that dominated many postbellum representations of the American landscape.

The Ruskin Dilemma

From the moment of their founding, the American Pre-Raphaelites sealed what in essence became a Faustian pact between Ruskin and their movement. The consequences of this pact, addressed in each chapter, would have profound ramifications in the ensuing years. In exchange for the aesthetic and political inspiration that Ruskin offered his American acolytes, which in turn provided a corona of intellectual authority in the United States, the movement would enjoy a short-lived burst of productivity and standing that would come at a high cost to its sustainability and success. Ruskin's imprimatur was considered indispensable, a position made clear by the editorial decision to publish a letter from him in *The New Path's* first issue, in which the critic reassured his American followers that he had not abandoned the principles on which they were building their Association. By 1863 rumors were circulating on both sides of the Atlantic that Ruskin had experienced "an entire change of views and renunciation of old opinions, accompanied with the most poignant regrets for the delusions into which the author of *Modern Painters* had led so many well-meaning people."⁵⁶ One public charge had been levied in 1861 by an anonymous reporter in London writing for the *New-York Commercial Advertiser*: "Ruskin, while showing me one of this [Pre-Raphaelite] School upon the wall of his dressing-room, confessed that he did not look at it with the same idea which had at first attracted and perhaps blinded him."⁵⁷

The New Path eagerly provided Ruskin a forum to quash these reports: "I believe, at this moment, the Pre-Raphaelite School of painting, (centered in England, but with branches in other countries,) to be the only vital and true school of painting in Europe." In his letter he restated his passion for the "secret power" of Turner and his "contempt" for Claude, and dispatched the notion that his beliefs were under stress

or had shifted over the years. “It is seldom that falsehoods are so direct, pure, and foundationless as those which you have given me this opportunity of contradicting.”⁵⁸

Despite temporarily empowering the American Pre-Raphaelites, Ruskin’s statements of unqualified support for his past opinions did not address the complexities and tensions that he had been negotiating since the late 1850s. By 1863, though unknown to his American followers with the exception of Norton, Ruskin was in considerable emotional and intellectual turmoil on multiple fronts. While this turmoil may not have undermined the edifice of his aesthetic beliefs, Ruskin was disturbed that the Evangelism he had imbibed as a boy no longer sustained his understanding of the world’s spiritual, social, or aesthetic needs. His experience of nature had also been altered, now encompassing its inevitable attritions and death—“even the mountains are not what they were to me,” he lamented in 1858.⁵⁹ Ruskin was disappointed in what he perceived as the wavering of the British Pre-Raphaelites’ devotion to their initial agenda. By his lights, they had deviated from their commitment to verisimilitude, particularly in their representations of nature, as they indulged an obsession with the sensuous expression of legends and the female form.

The American Pre-Raphaelites, however, had internalized a prophetic Ruskin largely untroubled by the doubts that came over him in the years leading up to the formation of the Association. His letter to *The New Path* confirmed that he shared the surge of optimism that attended the birth of their mission. It sanctioned the Americans to go forth with the certitude that Ruskin’s name and the deeply held convictions they shared with him would offer a protective penumbra under which their movement could flourish. But as Ruskin simultaneously pursued what he believed was his most noble calling—to offer solutions for the disastrous tenets of accepted political economy—he was also driven to articulate positions that would have punishing consequences for the American Pre-Raphaelites.

Ruskin’s most objectionable views and vituperative expressions, especially as they pertained to his American followers, were not apparent in his early years as social critic. Little could have prepared the reader of *Unto This Last* for some of the pronouncements Ruskin would make in a series of articles he wrote for *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1862 and 1863. Ruskin had published *Unto This Last* in 1860 as essays in the *Cornhill Magazine* that have long been understood as an indictment of the evils of laissez-faire capitalism propounded by his rival John Stuart Mill. Yet a close reading of *Unto This Last* reveals many of the paternalistic predicates that would ultimately undergird the more overtly offensive arguments of Ruskin’s later essays in *Fraser’s*. In his earlier *Cornhill* essays, the economic relationships that Ruskin dissects include those of the master-servant, officer-soldier, and merchant-worker, all of which involve some monetary remuneration and do not depend upon physical coercion. Each requires, Ruskin makes clear, the subordinate’s abdication of judgment to the will of the master. Most significantly, Ruskin introduces what he perceives is the foundation of just labor relations: not fair compensation, but affection. “The largest quantity of work will not be done by this curious engine for pay. . . . It will only be done when the motive force, that

is, the will or spirit of the creature, is brought to its greatest strength by its own proper fuel: namely, by the affections.”⁶⁰ In the context of the United States, however, where the dominant economic engine was linked to the institution of slavery, the notion of “affection” between a master and his laborer could not be successfully transplanted.

Two years later, in *Fraser’s*, in his “Essays on Political Economy, being a sequel to papers which appeared in the ‘Cornhill Magazine,’” Ruskin abandons the measured tone of *Unto This Last* and makes his most strident pronouncements in support of slavery, directly alienating not only abolitionists, but much of the American progressive movement. All of Ruskin’s moral equivalences between slavery and other forms of authoritarian and paternalistic labor relations broke down under the weight of his straightforward enunciations: “If, however, by slavery, instead of absolute compulsion, is meant the purchase, by money, of the right of compulsion such purchase is necessarily made whenever a portion of any territory is transferred, for money, from one monarch to another: which has happened frequently enough in history.”⁶¹ If Ruskin was making a point about the justification of servitude by reference to historical precedents, he did little to disguise his specific contempt for the American abolitionist movement, further inviting denunciation by his most ardent followers. “The republican institutions in America” are a “failure” and “the greatest railroad accident on record.”⁶² Both in theoretical terms and specifically in the American context, each of Ruskin’s postulates seems to become more objectionable. In a repugnant crescendo, Ruskin writes, “it is better and kinder to flog a man to his work, than to leave him idle till he robs,” and with a certainty akin to biblical conviction he asserts, “The fact is that slavery is not a political institution at all, but an inherent, natural, and eternal inheritance of a large portion of the human race.”⁶³ Such displays of authoritarian reasoning would blur for the American Pre-Raphaelites the boundaries between the inspirational in Ruskin’s unprecedented fusing of art, morality, and the broader culture, and what had descended, they believed, into a stream of unscrupulous bile that ultimately invited public condemnation of their enterprise.

Ruskin would continue to hold these views a decade later, choosing to republish the four *Fraser’s* essays in 1872 as *Munera Pulveris*. Though limited scholarly attention has been paid to the “Essays on Political Economy,” Ruskin’s arguments and rhetoric follow a tradition that included the writings of Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, and Charles Kingsley. Far from being either unorthodox or visionary, Ruskin was adopting a common trope that regarded campaigns for abolition as a squandering of the political will necessary to confront domestic issues related to industrialization and the seemingly inevitable poverty it created in its wake.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, the conventions of his discourse and method aside, Ruskin’s antipathy for abolition and apologia for slavery were visible both in his published work of the 1860s and in his private correspondence. Stillman and the critic William Michael Rossetti, brother of the Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, exchanged letters about Ruskin’s “absurd . . . defence of slavery” in *Fraser’s*, wondering “where our friend’s north pole has got to.”⁶⁵ Within days of the Association’s founding in January 1863, weeks after the

Emancipation Proclamation was issued, Ruskin wrote one of several letters to Norton that prompted a breach in their friendship: “As soon as I’ve got a house I’ll ask you to send something American—a slave perhaps. I’ve a great notion of a black boy in a green jacket and purple cap—in Paul Veronese’s manner.”⁶⁶

Over the next two years, it became increasingly impossible for the American Pre-Raphaelites to accept the fact that their aesthetic and moral prophet had raised the unrivaled eloquence of his voice in the role of Confederate sympathizer. In the following chapters I examine how each of the American Pre-Raphaelites under consideration reckoned with Ruskin’s assertions of authoritarian and proslavery dogma. This book proceeds from the thesis that the movement, inconceivable without the early succor of Ruskin’s reputation and ideas, could not survive the taint of ethical instability and treachery that he stamped onto the public face of American Pre-Raphaelitism.

“The True School”

As followers of Ruskin, as vociferous rivals of the era’s established landscape painters, and as published critics of national culture and politics, the American Pre-Raphaelites occupied a far more conspicuous role in American art than has previously been recognized. Their dynamic presence in period accounts complicates the dominant narrative of what was considered mainstream art in the nineteenth century, a historiography long monopolized by studies of those artists whose paintings were hung, year after year, “on the line” at the National Academy. The prominence of those Academicians has contributed to both scholarly and popular misperceptions that such painters as Cole, Durand, Church, and their followers, in the century’s middle decades, organized into a cohesive school. Indeed, several scholars have observed that the label assigned to painters associated with Hudson River locales was applied, retrospectively and pejoratively, in the 1870s. But the American Pre-Raphaelites’ role in defining their rivals as the “Hudson River School” in the historical imagination has never been considered.⁶⁷ Perhaps ironically, in spite of their near invisibility in histories of nineteenth-century art, the American Pre-Raphaelites had the most determinative impact on the manner in which the period’s mainstream painting has been documented and understood.

It was the American Pre-Raphaelites, and not a Hudson River School, that attained recognition as a unified faction. Persuading Americans to “turn their backs upon the rubbish of the past” was one of their central objectives.⁶⁸ The American Pre-Raphaelites cast the rejected artists as a “school,” and thereby initiated the enduring misconception that Cole, Durand, and their followers possessed a shared mission. From its earliest issue in May 1863, two months before Gettysburg, *The New Path* abounds with references to “old King Cole and his school,” “the school of Durand and Cole,” and, most pointedly, to the “old fogies.” By recycling exhausted picturesque conventions in their depictions of the Hudson Valley over forty years, these artists,

the American Pre-Raphaelites believed, had committed a “great national sin,” “apparently, leagued together by a silent compact to utter no word of remonstrance, rebuke or complaint . . . towards the sin of slavery.”⁶⁹

Though the painters whom the American Pre-Raphaelites targeted had never formally joined together, contemporary critics like those for the *New York Times* and *The Round Table* stood up for the maligned artists as if they were a collective.⁷⁰ The notion was reified during the 1870s, when the label “Hudson River School” was employed by several critics in print. Though there is no consensus on the individual who coined the sobriquet, Clarence Cook, *The New Path’s* founding editor, has long been among the most prominent contenders.⁷¹ The American Pre-Raphaelites succeeded in creating a lasting impression of their foes. An article, “Two Phases of American Art” (1890), published in the popular *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, helped to calcify the narrative of a “band of artists, all men representative of their period, who gathered in the Catskills in answer to Cole’s summons.” The second phase was presented as “that band of American pre-Raphaelites who entered into their work with characteristic force and enthusiasm.”⁷²

The American Pre-Raphaelites should be recognized as passionate opponents of the artistic and political status quo. They shared the conviction that works of art forged by acts of devoted, even fanatical, mimesis could alter both perception and consciousness through the truthful depiction of nature. Denouncing their predecessors, the American Pre-Raphaelites attributed to them the collective failure of perpetuating an idealized, and thus sanitized, vision of America. Those artists, argued the American Pre-Raphaelites, whose false and overwrought landscapes participated in promoting the national mythos of Manifest Destiny, were complicit in extending the nation’s stain of compromise in their representations of the American narrative. Instead, the Association’s painters and architects cultivated an acuity of vision sustained by unstinting exertions that they understood as prerequisite to truth, in which the arts of realistic painting and sculptural naturalism could converge. Defiant in their refusal to be implicated in the moral evasions of artistic precedent, the American Pre-Raphaelites produced strikingly innovative works predicated on their unshakable belief that aesthetic and sociopolitical dissent were inextricably allied in the pursuit of democracy.

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