The Aesthetic Movement

The Aesthetic Movement began in France with Théophile Gautier at the end of the 19th century. It was a reaction against the materialism and the strict moral code of the bourgeoisie. Its main principle was “art for art’s sake”, according to which art shouldn’t have any moral purpose, but was an end in itself and aimed at the contemplation of beauty. So artists weren’t interested in political and social issues, but isolated themselves in an ideal world of art and beauty.

In England, the main theorist of the Aesthetic Movement was Walter Pater. His books became very famous among the young artists. He rejected religious faith, he thought that life should be lived “as a work of art”, and that man’s primary aim was the experience of pleasure.

This was a subversive message, in contrast to the strict moral code of the Victorian middle-classes. Differently from the previous generation, the Aesthetes didn’t criticize contemporary society, but simply avoided it. They didn’t want to mix with the masses and despised the ugliness of contemporary industrial society.

They believed that art shouldn’t have any didactic or moral aim.
Decadent Art and Aestheticism in Europe

There are similarities between the works written by artists in different parts of Europe at the end of the 19th century. Aestheticism was also called “Decadentism”.

The first writer who described a “decadent artist” was the French novelist Huysmans. Des Esseintes, the protagonist of his novel A rébours, is a typical bohémien. He is disgusted by the vulgarity of modern life and decides to live alone and devote himself to the cult of beauty and pleasure.

Similarly, Dorian Gray, the protagonists of Wilde’s novel The Picture of Dorian Gray, is a typical dandy who wants to transform every experience of his life into an aesthetic experience, following only beauty and pleasure.

Also Andrea Sperelli, protagonist of the novel Il piacere by D’Annunzio, makes of his life a work of art, surrounding himself with beautiful objects and thus marking his superiority from the masses.

Main features of their literary language: evocative use of the language of the senses, excessive attention to the self, hedonistic attitude, perversity in subject matter, disenchantment with contemporary society, absence of didactic aim.
The Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood

The origins of the English Aesthetic movement can be traced back to the **Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood**. It was a group of painters who wanted to go back to the purity and simplicity of the Italian art of the 13th and 14th centuries, before Raphael. They rejected the academic taste and the ugliness of the contemporary industrial world.

Its main representatives were: William Hunt, John Millais, **Dante Gabriel Rossetti** and his follower **Edward Burne-Jones**, and also **William Morris**, who founded the **Arts and Crafts movement**. His firm designed and manufactured different objects for interior design, rejecting the products of the new industrial machinery and reviving handicraft and simple decoration.
Dante Gabriel Rossetti

D.G. Rossetti was born in London, he was the son of an Italian intellectual. He founded the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood with a group of other artists but from the late 1850s he created a more individual art, now generally known as symbolism. Rossetti’s works are noted both for their religious symbolism and for their sensual atmosphere. The women on his paintings always have a distant, melancholic look which expresses at the same time purity and sensuality.

La Ghirlandata, 1873, Oil on Canvas. Guildhall Art Gallery, Corporation of London.
La Ghirlandata, 1873, Oil on Canvas. Guildhall Art Gallery, Corporation of London.
La Ghirlandata: in the middle of the picture there is a beautiful young woman with blue eyes, red hair and a pale complexion. She’s playing a harp. The instrument is decorated with blue wings and a garland made of roses and honeysuckle.

In the background there are two angels’ faces and the composition appears to be crowded. Rossetti described it as “the greenest picture in the world”. In fact the woman is dressed in green and surrounded by green plants. The woman combines an expression of entrancement with an intense sensuality, in a dreamy atmosphere.

Rossetti always put some symbols in his paintings: here the blue wings on the harp are symbolic of the flight of time and the flowers suggest sexual attraction.
William Morris (1834 – 1896)

William Morris was educated at Oxford University and then apprenticed to an architect. In 1861 he formed a decorating firm with D.G. Rossetti, E. Burne-jones and other pre-Raphaelite painters. They advocated the renewed use of handicraft and simple decoration in reaction to industrial machinery. The firm designed and manufactured different objects for interior designs: stained glass, hand-painted tiles, tapestries, wallpapers, rugs and carpets.

In 1875 Morris became the sole director of the firm and its name was changed to “Morris and Co.”
William Morris’ main motifs were leaves, flowers, fruit and birds, arranged following curved lines. He did experiments in the use of natural vegetable dyes. He mainly drew his subjects from nature. The repeat pattern recurs in wallpapers, chintzes and tapestries and creates a sensation of movement and complexity. Morris’s natural images have a symbolic connotation. For example the rose bushes symbolise beauty constantly menaced by decay and death, fruits are symbols of temptation, desire, passion and loss.

Morris pursued an ideal of art in which the maker derived pleasure from his work and was able to convey the same pleasure to the viewer, while he rejected the alienating work in the assembly lines of the new factories. One of his most famous maxims is: “have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful”. 