

Humanistic Aestheticism also known as The Aesthetic Movement in the late 19th Century - not to be confused with Renaissance Humanism in Art in the 14th - 17th Century, was purely "Art for Art's sake".

The movement (1860-1900) was created to escape the ugliness and materialism of the Industrial Age; focussing on producing art that was beautiful as opposed to having a deeper meaning.

"Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world."

Oscar Wilde, 1890

The idea being Art didn't have to teach a lesson, draw parallels or promote some moral emotion - nor did it have a narrative; more so it was to create a "Cult of Beauty" - audiences of the time found Aesthetes work very hard to read because of the change away from the prior norm.

Individual Aesthetic artists drew inspiration from a variety of cultures and periods. They found beauty in Renaissance painting, ancient Greek sculpture and East Asian art and design, especially Japanese prints. This rich eclecticism is one of the Aesthetic Movement's most intriguing characteristics.

These new Aesthetic artists included romantic bohemians such as **Dante Gabriel Rossetti**, **William Morris** and **Edward Burne-Jones**; maverick figures such as **James McNeill Whistler**, then fresh from Paris and full of 'dangerous' French ideas about modern painting; avant-garde architects and designers such as **E.W. Godwin** and **Christopher Dresser**; and the 'Olympians', the painters of grand classical subjects who belonged to the circle of **Frederic Leighton** and **G.F. Watts**.

Today Aestheticism is acknowledged for its revolutionary renegotiation of the relationships between the artist and society, between art and ethics, and between the fine and decorative arts, all of which prepared the way for the art movements of the 20th century.

"If you want a golden rule that will fit everybody, this is it: have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful."

William Morris, 1880

KEY POINTS

Core Focus: Formulated by figures like Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, this movement argued that art should be judged by its beauty rather than its moral, political, or social utility.

Visual Characteristics: Emphasis on sensuality, symbolism, decorative harmony, ebonised or gilt wood, and Japanese-inspired design (blue-and-white porcelain).

Key Figures: Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, James McNeill Whistler, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Aubrey Beardsley.

Philosophy: Promoted "art for art's sake" (*l'art pour l'art*) and treated the individual's life and style as an artistic medium itself.



James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, 1862

"flinging a pot of paint in the public's face"

This painting caused a sensation when it was exhibited after being rejected from both the Salon in Paris (the official annual exhibition) and the annual exhibition at the Royal Academy in London. The simplistic representation of a woman in a white dress, standing in front of a white curtain was too unique for Victorian audiences, who tried desperately to connect the painting to some literary source—a connection Whistler himself always denied.



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *La Ghirlandata*, 1873

Meaning "the garlanded lady", the piece is generally understood to be the "embodiment of love and beauty." Different from Rossetti's earlier Pre-Raphaelite paintings, this image features a softening of line indicative of what has been described as the artist's sensual phase, a style that has more in common with painters of the Aesthetic movement.

The model for the central figure is Alexa Wilding, whom Rossetti painted multiple times. Wilding was one of three models (the others being Jane Morris and Lizzie Siddal) who inspired the artist's vision for a new standard of beauty. Wilding's large, well-defined eyes and lips, and lush red hair point to an inherent sensuality in the work. Her appearance marks a distinct contrast to the petite facial features traditionally considered to be a marker of beauty by the Victorians. Rossetti also exalted his model's luxurious auburn hair, a trait associated with sexual licentiousness in Victorian England, as beautiful and alluring. Rossetti's red-haired beauties became an important motif of Aestheticism, with variations appearing in Aesthetic paintings as well as in the streets of London, as dying one's hair with henna became increasingly fashionable.



[Link for Vimeo](#) to watch V&A's "The Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900"



James Whistler, Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room, 1876-77

Shipping magnate Frederick Leyland invited interior architect Thomas Jekyll to design a dining room for his London home that would both compliment a painting in situ by Whistler entitled *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (1863-65) and display the patron's collection of blue and white porcelain. Unable to finish the commission due to illness, Jekyll was soon replaced with Whistler, who was asked to put finishing touches on the room. Whistler, however, interpreted this as *carte blanche* and completely redesigned the space as he saw fit. He covered the walls with turquoise blue and golden murals, painted the ceiling gold, and adorned it with a design of blue peacock feathers (a typical Aesthetic motif). Whistler later explained, "I just painted on. I went on - without design or sketch - it grew as I painted. And toward the end I reached [...] a point of perfection." Whistler's finished room, as he described it, embodied "harmony in blue and gold."

Leyland, however, was not impressed when he discovered the liberty Whistler had taken. The two argued extensively over the artist's compensation. Infuriated, Whistler apparently returned to the room and painted a mural of two male peacocks fighting - an allusion to the artist's and patron's falling out. Whistler dubbed the panel "Art and Money; or, the Story of the Room."

The Peacock Room is recognised as the most important example of Aestheticism applied to interior design in order to create an inspirational environment. Such Aesthetic rooms elevated interior design to the realm of fine art. Its simplified, silhouetted forms, rich glazes, and reference to distinctly Japanese motifs, such as the peacock and bamboo, also make it an important example of the Anglo-Japanese style.



Edward Burne-Jones, The Golden Stairs, 1880

Created for the Grosvenor Gallery's exhibition in 1880, *The Golden Stairs* is the Burne-Jones painting that most closely fits the ideals of the Aesthetic movement. Although many of the artist's paintings do include narrative content and moral messages, in *The Golden Stairs* he eschews this to create a composition entirely based on aesthetics. Each of the women walking down the elegant sweep of the golden stairs is wearing a similarly classicised gown, and each is proportioned to be tall and slim, echoing the shape of the painting itself. The figures' dresses are subtly different, providing decorative details that keep the viewer's eye interested but not overwhelmed. Each also carries a different musical instrument as they rhythmically descend stairs that have been described as a visual reference to musical scales. Undoubtedly a nod to Walter Pater's famous assertion that "all the arts aspire to the condition of music," the original title of the painting was *Music on the Stairs*.



Albert Moore, A Garden, 1869

Albert Moore was influenced by Japanese art. He produced decorative and subtly coloured pictures. He focuses on the colour, texture and movement of draped fabric on the woman's costume. Art critic Sidney Colvin said Moore's subjects were 'merely a mechanism for getting beautiful people into beautiful situations.' Moore used the flower-like symbol at the bottom of the picture as a signature.



Multiple Artists/Makers: Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company, Trellis, 1864

This was William Morris's first wallpaper design, conceived in 1862 shortly after the formation of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, and Company. The pattern communicates an essential naturalism, weaving a vine-like rose bush through a trellis. The imagery was inspired by a trellised rose in Morris's garden at the Red House, Bexleyheath, Kent. The architect Phillip Webb, who designed the latter house, also collaborated here by designing the blue jays. Delays in production meant that the pattern became the third that the company offered for sale, in 1864. Here, a grey trellis, pink roses and blue birds are printed against a cream ground. The company also offered variation with blue or grey backgrounds from 1868.



George Frederic Watts, Hope, 1886

Hope is a **Symbolist** oil painting by the English painter George Frederic Watts, who completed the first two versions in 1886.

Radically different from previous treatments of the subject, it shows a lone blindfolded female figure sitting on a globe, playing a lyre that has only a single string remaining. The background is almost blank, its only visible feature a single star. Watts intentionally used symbolism not traditionally associated with hope to make the painting's meaning ambiguous. While his use of colour in Hope was greatly admired, at the time of its exhibition many critics disliked the painting. Hope proved popular with the Aesthetic Movement, who considered beauty the primary purpose of art and were unconcerned by the ambiguity of its message.



Charles Ricketts RA, Illustration for Cupid and Psyche, 1901

Charles S. Ricketts created this print for his edition of ancient Roman philosopher Lucius Apuleius's *De Cupidinis et Psyches amoribus* (Of the Love of Cupid and Psyche). A woman with long hair and flowing robe stands by a round window. Around the room are a chest, flowers, a lyre and a vessel. Through the window can be seen a figure in the claws of a large bird. The inside lid of the chest shows a woman on the back of a bull (Europa and Zeus).. The dramatic imagery is characteristic of the kinds of illustrations Ricketts composed for books produced by his private publishing firm, the Vale Press, which he established to address what he saw as the declining quality of mass-produced publications. Like William Morris, Ricketts was involved in all aspects of his books: he designed the bindings, illustrations, borders, initials, and even the typefaces used by his press.



Edward John Poynter, October, 1870

Edward Poynter was a painter and a good draughtsman. The South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) commissioned him to provide designs for large figure panels and other decorations for the Dutch Kitchen or Grill Room (this is now called the Poynter Room).

His lively drawing of the human figure gives a sense of life and movement to the conventional series of the Twelve Months. Students in the women's section of the School of Design at South Kensington painted the tile panels. This is a watercolour sketch of the design - Scorpio, as part of the Zodiac falling in October (though Libra also does)



Aubrey Beardsley, The Peacock Skirt - Illustration for Oscar Wilde's play Salome, 1893

The Peacock Skirt was the second of ten illustrative plates published with the English version of Wilde's play. It shows a rear quarter view of a woman, Salome, wearing a long robe decorated with stylised peacock feather pattern. Her headdress is also decorated with peacock feathers, and more long peacock feathers drape down over her back. The head of a peacock is visible over her left shoulder. Salome is turned to the right, to converse with a second figure, probably the "Young Syrian" mentioned in the text of the play, with an androgynous face but masculine hairy knees, elaborate hairstyle and pleated tunic. The drawing was influenced by James McNeill Whistler's decorations in his 1876–77 Peacock Room, designed for Frederick Leyland's house at 49 Prince's Gate, but now in the Freer Gallery of Art. The refined curving lines of Beardsley's drawing were also influenced by Japanese woodblock prints, and anticipate the forms of the Art Nouveau aesthetic.

"I have one aim—the grotesque. If I am not grotesque, I am nothing" - Aubrey Beardsley

Whilst he only had a short life, died of Tuberculosis at 25, he gained much notoriety - exploring taboo subjects like Victorian-era sexuality, gender fluidity, satire, & the macabre through his work.

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Article from the Guardian "[Beautiful rebels: the daring art of the aesthetic movement](#)"

Notable Crossovers:

Art Nouveau

Symbolism

Arts and Crafts Movement

Pre-Raphaelites

The Decadent Movement

"For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion — that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake." - Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*