

Maxfield Parrish and the Art of the Pre-Raphaelites Resisting Realism in American Painting

Maxfield Parrish's (1870-1966) mediaeval simplicity and fantasy in his work, which utterly rejected the dominant art of the period in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had made him one of the most fascinating artists of his time. The late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States, had been a period when the populace witnessed an increasing climate of industrial, financial and social change. With the continuous influx of European émigrés to the States and the increasing possibility of international trade, which brought in new wealth for America, many American artists in their works rejected fantasy and the past, and would engage with the new mood, qualities and sounds that began to dominate their towns and cities. In painting, this was reflected in a style, which became known as American Realism, which had sought to reflect the 'gritty reality' of the effects of mass production, and technical innovation occurring in America. Yet, while realist artists in North America such as Thomas Eakins (1844-1916), John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), Winslow Homer (1836-1910), and later The Eight and the group called Ten American Painters aka The Aschan School who would open the doors to much of the essence of the new Modernism in American art, Parrish's art would often mirror much of the attitudes and spirit of the Pre-Raphaelite artists in England (1848-1922 app.) defying the reality of his present time.

In contrast to a period of Realist painting in America, the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had also been an epoch in which the Arts and Crafts Movement in England (1860-1910 app.)—which had been greatly inspired by the Pre-Raphaelite artists—had motivated a mediaeval revival which gazed back to the ideas and moods of the past. Believing that a greater spiritual dimension had belonged to the past and the Middle-Ages, those central to the development of the movement in England during the mid-to-late nineteenth-century such as William Morris (1834-96), and A. W. Pugin (1812-52) had sought to create a kinship between the current time and the medievalism of the past. As such, the movement in England, contrary to the Realism in painting surrounding Parrish in America had longed for a time when conditions were more wholesome and when stronger emphasis on humanity had existed in the character of British society and in its artistic production, overall. (Adams, 1987), 9.) This developed from the belief that because of the Industrial Revolution (17th-19th) in England, the mass production infiltrating society was creating goods of inferior standards in contrast to the past. (Steven Adams, *The Art and Crafts Movement* (London: New Burlington Books, 1987), 9.) As the Arts and Crafts Movement became more wide-ranging in England, its ideas would be transported into the United States during the latter part of the nineteenth century and were influential. As Adams points out,

“...the arts and crafts in Britain was exported and grafted onto indigenous traditions abroad. In the United States, the revival of craft traditions has a resonant appeal for a nation with a strong political affinity with individualism

and for things handmade and homespun...shaker communities in the United States were producing simple furniture and buildings that echoed many of the creative and social ideals of the arts and crafts movement". (Adams, 1987), 9.)

AGAINST THE REALISM OF THE PRESENT

In the United States, from the latter part of the nineteenth century, Parrish's works had reflected much of this 'humanism' of the past, which was central to the driving impetus behind the English Arts and Craft Movement and the art of the Pre-Raphaelites in England. As such, he would often parody various sentiments reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelite's particular iconic and arcane symbolism and sense of naturalism in his art. Unlike the popular realism of his time in American painting, for his fantasy book covers, figurative paintings and nostalgic landscapes, Parrish, as many of the Pre-Raphaelite painters in England had also done, drew inspiration from old fables, literature and various arcane and spiritual sources and his rejection of any of the established principles of art associated with realism or of a 'realist' depiction of things within the period from his earliest works in 1885 would reveal an overall nostalgic vision of an idyllic past long forgotten. This vision would manifest in his fantasy magazine and book illustrations containing medieval subject matter such as castles, knights, ships, old-world characters and swirling streamers, which for example, would be seen in the nostalgic cover designs he did for *Mother Goose in Prose* (1897). For the author Kenneth Grahame's book *Dream Days* (1900), Parrish's illustrations were "drawn from a child's perspective, and are representations of a child's fantasy world and of the adult world as seen from a child's point of view", and would reveal his transcendence of the present time and passage into the world of fantasy through his art. (Coy Ludwig, *Maxfield Parrish* (New York: Watson-Guption, 1973), 56.) Other works by Parrish like this would include fairy tale and nostalgic fantasy covers such as those he did for Scribner's Magazine c. late 1890s, *The Reluctant Dragon* (1900-01) for Kenneth Grahame's book *Dream Days* (previously mentioned), the Untitled Cover for Scribner's Magazine, October, 1899, *the Land of Make-Believe*, (1912) (figure 1), Illustration for Scribner's Magazine, August, 1912 *Reverie*, Cover for Hearst's Magazine, 1913, Scribner's Fiction Number, August 1897, *The Garden of Allah* (figure 2) which he did in 1918 for the gift boxes of Crane's Chocolates, *Mural for the Eastman Theatre*, Rochester, New York *Interlude: Music; Lute Players* (1922), and *Hilltop* (1926) (figure 3).



Figure 1: Maxfield Parrish, *The Land of Make-Believe*, 1912.

Hubert von Herkomer, a noted critic of the period commenting on a particular series of illustrations by Parrish had stated that he had combined a "...photographic vision with the Pre-Raphaelite feeling" (Ludwig, 28) and this "feeling", would also be seen in Parrish's *Harper's Bazar Easter 1895* (figure 4) which was his first cover design for a national magazine (Ludwig, 55) and the cover he also did for Hearst's Magazine July 1912 *The Frog Prince* (see figure 5) and compare it with the English Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt's *Lady of Shalott*,

which Hunt had painted in 1889-92 (figure 6), both of which also avoid the popularity of realism in painting at the time. The "Pre-Raphaelite feeling" in Parrish's works would also be found in his 'intentionally naïve' portrayals of medieval characters, such as his "Oh, quarter-staff is often rough" the poster lithograph illustration he did for *Ballad in Lincoln Green* by Aldis Dunbar, *St. Nicholas* (1900) (figure 7), which comprises a religious and mediaeval simplicity that would be found in much of the art of the Pre-Raphaelites.

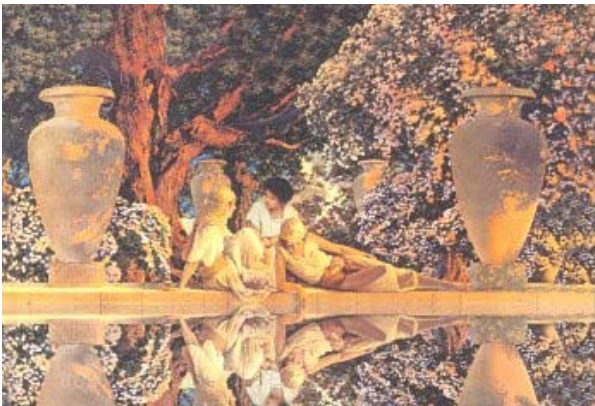


Figure 2: Maxfield Parrish, *The Garden of Allah*, 1918.



Figure 3: Maxfield Parrish, *Hilltop*, 1926.

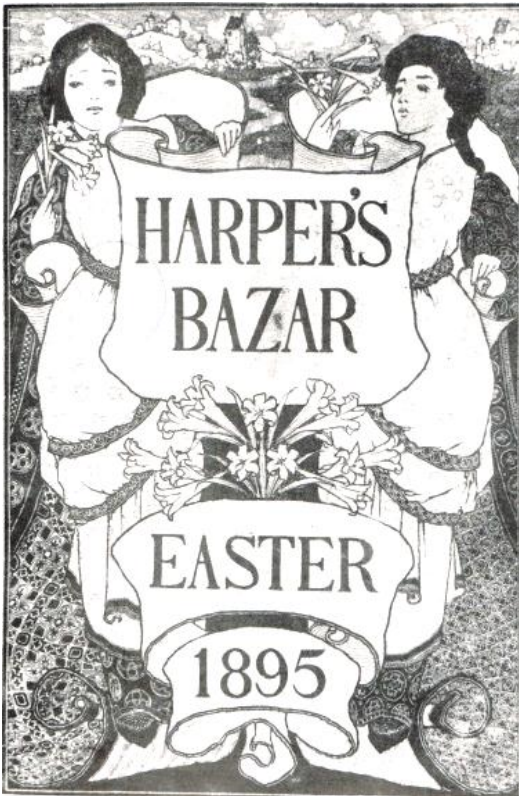


Figure 4: Maxfield Parrish, *Cover for Harper's Bazar Easter*, 1895.



Figure 5: Maxfield Parrish, The Frog Prince, 1912.



Figure 6: William Holman Hunt, The Lady of Shalott, 1889-92.

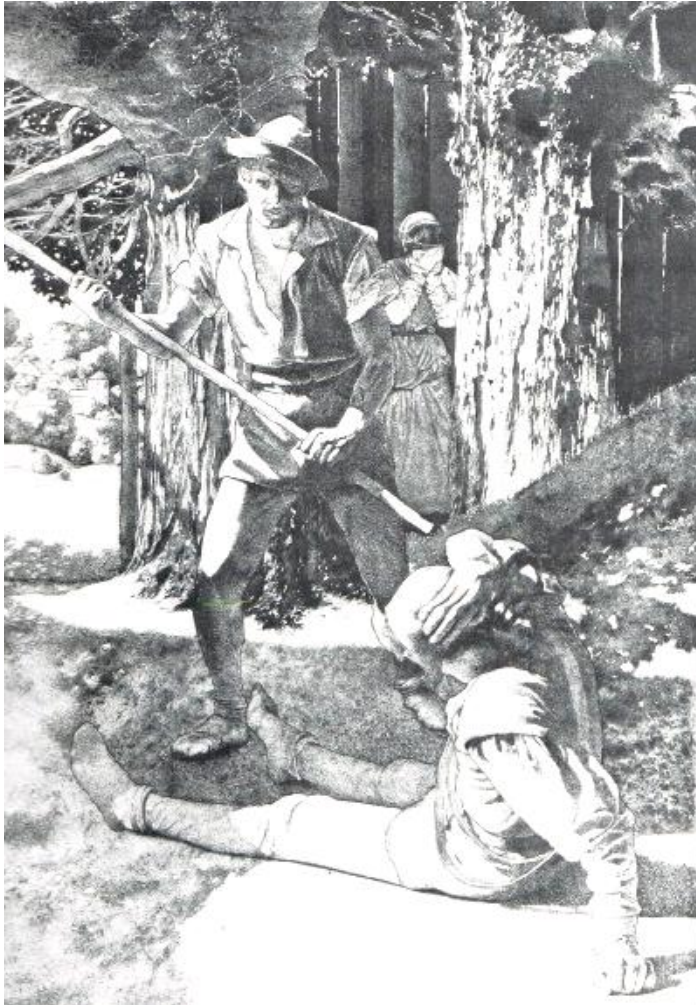


Figure 7: Maxfield Parrish, *St Nicholas*, 1900.

In fact, Parrish had spent most of his life in the American countryside moving to rural New Hampshire in 1898 (Ludwig, 14) during a time when a movement called American ‘Progressivism’ had continued to arise:

“...from a growing distaste for the way in which the giant corporations [had] pursued their aims without [much] regard for the interests in the community as a whole”. (Esmond Wright, *History of the World: The Last Five Hundred Years* (Middlesex: Viscount Books, 1984), 560-1).

While the Pre-Raphaelites in England had created through their works perspectives of the world of the past during a period in which industrial Britain had foreshadowed the effects of industrial mass production in the US, in England, in opposition to the spirit of this time, a look to a mediaeval past and

“...the belief that the material and moral fabric of society had been infinitely better sometime in the past, be it the England of the Middle Ages or the America of the pioneer age” (Adams, 1987), 9)

had been prescribed by the English author, artist and critic John Ruskin (1819-1900), who had been a central influence on both the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and on the Arts and Crafts Movement in England. Ruskin greatly had influenced and characterized much of the Pre-Raphaelite's attempts for producing a more straightforward and undemanding approach to painting resulting in a simple and naïve look in their works. In relation to this, Ruskin advocated that painting “...should return to [a] pious, naturalistic and unaffected approach found in the work of the artists active in the fourteenth and fifteenth century”. (Adams, 1988), 7). Ruskin's books *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (c. 1851-1853) had played a crucial role elaborating “...on the moral sanction of early art and architecture and the example of the Middle-Ages both as an artistic and social ideal...”. (Adams, 1988), 51). In fact, in keeping with the ideas of William Morris, Ruskin in his theoretical writings and treatise, which criticised the realism and prescriptive academic doctrines in the art of the present had advanced the Pre-Raphaelite's emulation of “...the early Italian, early Christian and 12th-15th century artists”. (Steven Adams, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: New Burlington Books, 1988), 42). Ruskin's influence, can for example be seen in Gabriel Dante Rossetti's nostalgic *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848-49) (figure 8) and in John Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1849-50) (figure 9), which both pay homage through their religious themes to a “...mystical symbolism inspired by chivalric themes and medieval poetry” that appears to draw inspiration from the historical achievements of the early religious Italian Renaissance masters Cimabue (1240-1302), Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337), Orcagna (1308-1368), Fra Angelico (1395-1455) and Benozzo Gozzoli (1421-1497). (Adams, 1988), 38). The idea of religious fantasy can also be seen in William Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World* (1851-53) (figure 10) as well as in Arthur Hughes' *The Scapegoat* (1854), and in other Pre-Raphaelite work. For Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, these ancient artists had been important because of their strong attraction and kinship “...for spiritual and sacred sentiments”, as well as their freedom from the prescriptive academic doctrines in the art of the present which they saw as absent from painting during their time. (Adams, 1988), 42). Moreover, following Ruskin's views on contemporary art in England at the time, the majority of the Pre-Raphaelites also realized that the painters

“...in the “14th and 15th centuries were unsophisticated craftsmen that had been motivated only by simple piety and...were able to work with a direct and heartfelt simplicity and represent the world in an uncomplicated, straightforward style... preoccupied with spiritual issues and its exponents ... [which] rendered the world with a pious and unaffected simplicity, aiming only to articulate religious truths”. (Adams, 1988), 49).



Figure 8: Gabriel Dante Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1848-49.



Figure 9: John Millais *Christ in The House of His Parents*, 1849-50.



Figure 10: William Holman Hunt, *The Light of The World*, 1851-53.

With the export, spread and influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement in the US (Adams, 1987), 9) these ideas would furnish "...historical and theoretical reference points, not only for the artists of the Pre-Raphaelite circle, but also for many other 19th century artists, architects and craftsmen [that had been painting] throughout Europe and the United States". (Adams, 1988), 42). Because of their speculations on the beauty of the distant past, the English Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's disinclination to paint the real "immanent world of the mid-19th century and its paintings"

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had been “quite distinct from the naturalistic paintings of the period”. (Adams, 1988), 29).

In his landscapes, in contrast to much of the realism in Realist painting within the period, the English Pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais’s way of depicting nature had been to represent it as if frozen in time,—as ‘an extreme sense of naturalism’ or parody of naturalism which depicted nature and the natural environment as something seductive, unchanging and almost ‘dreamlike’. Millais’s work appears to avoid painting the realism of the present and in a sense, parody naturalism, which can be seen in the reeds depicted in his *Ophelia* (1851-2) (figure 11). (Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Publishing, 1987), 165).



Figure 11: John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-2.

Other examples in Pre-Raphaelite painting, which in sense, would parody naturalism in a similar way and defy the realist focus in art on the present time which appear to have influenced Parrish’s work in America can be seen in Ford Maddox Brown’s *The Last of England* (1852-5) and in Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *St Catherine* (1857) (figure 12) among other pre-Raphaelite works.



Figure 12: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *St Catherine*, 1857.

In the depiction of the everyday, in contrast to the realism of the period, these works take “on a cross-section of social, religious and literary themes” (Adams, 1988), 38) while avoiding a realist depictions of things, places, with the figures rendering a particular kind of truth, which is decadent and nostalgic. In regard to this ‘unnatural’ depiction of naturalism, Millais and other Pre-Raphaelite painters would render in their works something of a ‘frozen’, even

dreamlike and archaic feeling of the past being attached to the idea of nature and the natural surrounds, which appears akin to much of the “Pre-Raphaelite feeling” found in Parrish’s works and would be echoed in the spirit of many of his landscapes. See for example, his s *Torlonia*, which was the illustration he did for Edith Wharton’s book *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, (1904) (figure 13) where a similar ‘sense’ of naturalism to the Pre-Raphaleites would be turned into fantasy.



Figure: 13 Maxfield Parrish, *Torlonia*, 1904.

This approach can often be traced to the look of his sunlit colours, and in the way that he paints nature and trees for example, which would also be derived from his techniques for painting and uses of color. This depiction of nature in Parrish is revealed as a representation of nature—as something timeless and nostalgic, rather than as an overall attempt to show it as present reality or as something entirely real.

In contrast to the Realist painting occurring in America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both Parrish and the Pre-Raphaelites were similar in that they had defied artistic tradition and contemporary artistic doctrines and were not academic painters or formerly trained with a particular theoretical foundation, but instead, had chosen to create their own methods without especially choosing to follow a particular school or set of aesthetic conventions. (Ludwig, 189-200.) Parrish in fact had worked from his own photographs, which had helped him create much of the oneiric and unchanging quality or ‘dream-truth’ of his landscapes, which he filled with his “Pre-

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Raphaelite feeling”. For these he would take photographs of nature stating, “Only god can make a tree” (Ludwig, 177) in his effort to avoid painting a reality of the present. In fact, both the English Pre-Raphaelites and Ruskin’s influence can be also found in North America in the painting of the American Pre-Raphaelites, who, in terms of the appearance of their works, seem to bridge a gap between the English Pre-Raphaelites’s work and Parrish’s own. See the American artist Thomas Charles Farrer’s *Mount Tom*, (1865) (figure 14), which Parrish’s own ‘representations’ of nature would seem a little related to.



Figure 14: Thomas Charles Farrer, *Mount Tom*, 1865.

REFERENCING THE ICONICITY OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

In looking at Parrish’s works one might also find that the “Pre-Raphaelite feeling” in his painting also appears to share an affinity with the paintings of the Italian Renaissance and with the Pre-Raphaelite painter Burne Jones’s affinity with the art of the past, which would not just include art prior to the fourteenth century, but also would appear to be inspired by Italian High Renaissance painting of a later time such as the work of Sandro Botticelli (1490-1527 app.) which had manifested in Parrish’s illustrations for the children’s and mediaeval storybooks. Like Burne-Jones work, Parrish as did Botticelli had derived much inspiration from literature rather than from the real world directly. (Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Middlesex: Tiger Books, 1998, c. 1873), 50) Parrish, Burne-Jones and Botticelli were all ‘poetical’ painters who would meld the “...charm of story and sentiment, the medium of the art of poetry, with the charm of line and colour, the medium of abstract painting” (Pater, 52); and in some cases there appears to be an affinity between all three of them as both Parrish and Burne Jones in their works also appear to covet an idyllic sentiment which is akin to Botticelli’s meditative subtlety. (Pater, 50) (figure 16).



Figure: 16 Edward Burne Jones, *The Golden Stairs*, 1880.

As Adams would state in relation to Burne Jones,

“His pictures of the late 1860s and early 1870s are finely wrought, highly formularized figure studies variously reminiscent of the works of Giorgione, Botticelli and Michelangelo—and quite unlike the Quattrocento painting that had been so revered by many of his colleagues”. (Adams, 1988), 100).

In particular, in his defying of the present, Parrish’s nostalgia for the past and the iconic symbolism of the Italian High Renaissance can be seen in his fantasy painting *Mary and Child* (1898) (figure 17). The work references Pre-Raphaelite iconicity and the classic achievements of the High Renaissance acknowledging great Italian Renaissance masters such as Masaccio’s *Madonna and Child with St Anne*, c. 1423), Giorgione’s *Castelfranco Altarpiece*, (c.1500-1502 app.), Giovanni Bellini’s *Madonna and Child* (1510) (figure 18), *Madonna degli Alberetti* (1487), and Andrea del Sarto’s *Madonna of the Harpies* (1517) for example, and signals his homage perhaps, through what one might call a ‘mock religiosity’, which, in a gentle way, mocks or pays tribute to Pre-Raphaelite’s relation to the world of Italian Renaissance religious painting. Within the aforementioned painting by Bellini, in Parrish’s *Mary and Child*, as well as the aforementioned High Renaissance masterworks, the figures are furnished with a noble presence, which avoids the realism in painting occurring within the same period in America. As such, Parrish’s *Mary and Child* can be seen as a Pre-Raphaelite fantasy with allusions to artists such as Masaccio and others signaling Parrish’s unusual link to the world of religious Italian Renaissance painting and like Burne Jones’s work, is reminiscent of Giorgione *Castelfranco Altarpiece*, (c.1500-1502 app.), Giovanni Bellini’s *Madonna and Child* (1510), *Madonna degli Alberetti* (1487), Piero della Francesca’s *Adoration of the Christ*

Child (1472-74) and *Baptism of Christ* c.1457 and Andrea del Sarto's *Madonna of the Harpies* (1517). A similar relation to Italian Renaissance painting in Parrish can be seen in his *Community Plate* (1918) (figure 19), which depicts an architecture and iconicity reminiscent in many fifteenth century Italian Renaissance paintings revealing Parrish's acquaintance with the symbology and iconology of Italian Renaissance masterpieces also referenced by Burne Jones.

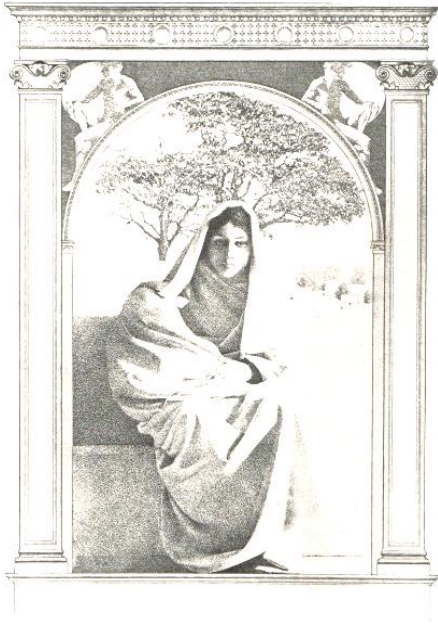


Figure: 17 Maxfield Parrish, *Mary and Child*, 1898.



Figure: 18 Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna and Child*, 1510.



Figure: 19 Maxfield Parrish, *Community Plate*, 1918.

Similarly, Parrish's painting *Florentine Fete* (1912) (figure 20) again tangled in High Renaissance iconicity and Pre-Raphaelite fantasy is monumentally conceptualized and envisaged and creates a parody of Italian Renaissance iconic masterwork paintings, with the title of the work acknowledging artists such as Filippo Brunelleschi, Donatello, Michelangelo, Fra Angelico, Botticelli, Lippi, Masolino and Masaccio of the Italian Renaissance Florentine School. In Parrish's *Florentine Fete*, a group of statuesque and frozen figures are removed from the reality of Parrish's present time as the people in it are shown frozen in a timeless and unchanging world in colorful costumes, some sitting, others standing on stairs, some in front of,

some under and some behind arches echoing and reflecting a previous world of beauty and harmony long forgotten. The figures in Parrish's painting all appear tied to a Classical certainty and previous artistic tradition and time when life was noble, and when buildings and architecture were beautiful and well crafted. In this nostalgic fantasy, Parrish would parody the overall harmony of spirit of the Renaissance's link to the Classical and its overall standards of excellence while caricaturing the architectonic figures in the painting in a timeless and noble Classical architectural setting that would defy the spirit of his present time. Other fantasy works in Parrish's canon, which parody the iconicity and overall Classicism of Italian Renaissance painting defying the realism of his present time in painting had included his *Old King Cole*, his mural for the Hotel Knickerbocker in New York (1906) (figure 21), *Lady Ursula Kneeling before Pompdebile*, *King of Hearts*, which he had completed for Louise Sander's book *The Knave of Hearts* c.1925 and *Interlude: Music* (aka *Lute Players*) (1922), *Untitled overmantle panel* (1920); *Daybreak* (1922) and *Dreaming* (1928). These works all contain backgrounds which appear to be inspired by religious-looking landscapes in Italian Renaissance paintings. Through this, Parrish had provided a mirror of a timeless Renaissance art which he fills with a strong essence of archaism and fantasy in a way

which is also reminiscent of freezing the moment in time by Millais in his *Ophelia* and her environment and in other aforementioned Pre-Raphaelite works.

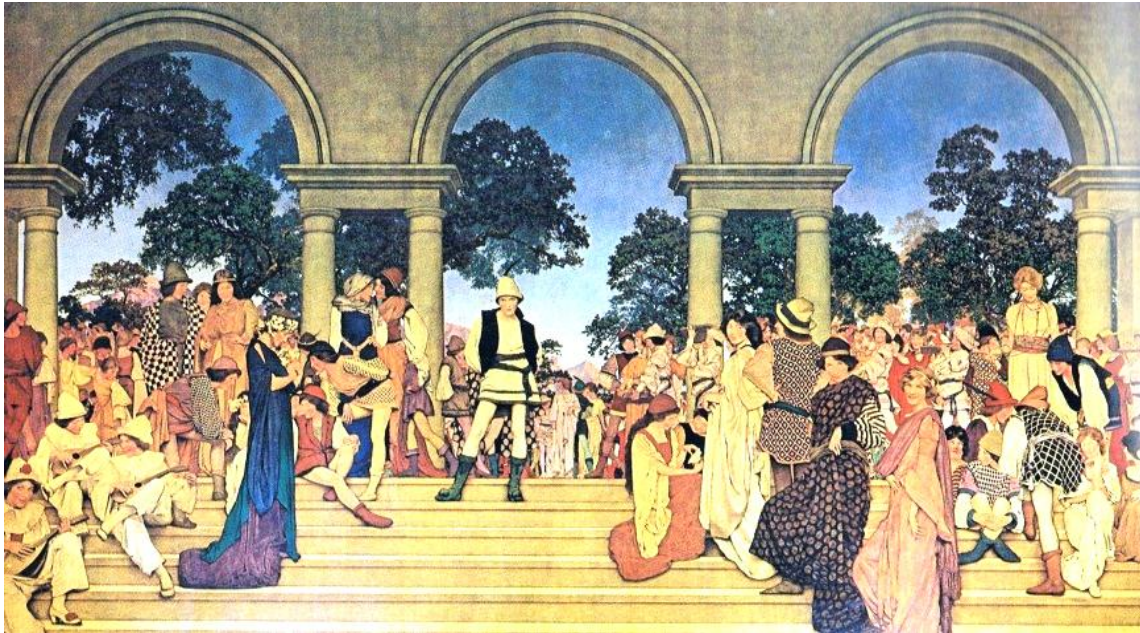


Figure: 20 Maxfield Parrish, Florentine Fete, 1912.

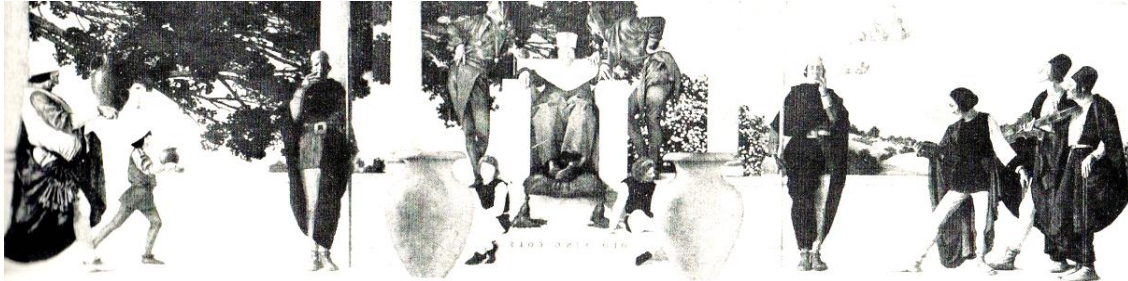


Figure: 21 Maxfield Parrish, Old King Cole, 1906.

Through his paintings, illustrations and overall mediaeval simplicity Parrish would reject the present revealing his affinity with the spirit of Ruskin and William Morris who had both revealed a longing for an idyllic past and its previous standards of achievement. Through this, Parrish had defied the reality of the present and would align himself with something far more in keeping with the spirit of the Arts and Crafts Movement and that of the art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in England during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By conjuring a “Pre-Raphaelite feeling” in his art, he would nostalgically gaze back to the past referencing the spirit of the Italian Renaissance, Arts and Crafts Movement and Pre-Raphaelites in England and through this, his paintings and

illustrations would reveal his tendency to depict a pious and unaffected simplicity that would greatly affect a spirit of timelessness and 'romantic archaism' within the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries in America in place of depicting the 'gritty realism' found in the realist painting of his own time. In this regard, it would appear that Parrish's nostalgic subjectivity of vision and powerful imagination reflects a feeling or craving to avoid the period of increasing industrialization, urbanism and technology within the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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