

Ford Madox Brown was invited to join, but the more senior artist remained independent but supported the group throughout the PRB period of Pre-Raphaelitism and contributed to The Germ.

The group's intention was to reform art by rejecting what it considered the mechanistic approach first adopted by Mannerist artists who succeeded Raphael and Michelangelo. Its members believed the Classical poses and elegant compositions of Raphael in particular had been a corrupting influence on the academic teaching of art, hence the name "Pre-Raphaelite". In particular, the group objected to the influence of Sir Joshua Reynolds, founder of the English Royal Academy of Arts, whom they called "Sir Sloshua". To the Pre-Raphaelites, according to William Michael Rossetti, "sloshy" meant "anything lax or scamped in the process of painting ... and hence ... any thing or person of a commonplace or conventional kind".[1] In contrast, the brotherhood wanted a return to the abundant detail, intense colours and complex compositions of Quattrocento Italian art.

Through the PRB initials, the brotherhood announced in coded form the arrival of a new movement in British art.[2] The group continued to accept the concepts of history painting and mimesis, imitation of nature, as central to the purpose of art. The Pre-Raphaelites defined themselves as a reform-movement, created a distinct name for their form of art, and published a periodical, The Germ, to promote their ideas. The group's debates were recorded in the Pre-Raphaelite Journal.

At his own request D. G. Rossetti became a pupil of Ford Madox Brown in 1848.