

Comparative Study

Ophelia

The Artworks

Odilon Redon, *Ophelia among the Flowers*



Date: around 1905-1908

Medium: pastels on paper

Size: 64 cm x 91cm

Country of Origin: France

Currently in: The National Gallery, UK

The theme:

Each of these pieces depicts the figure of Ophelia from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, they do so in dramatically different ways and different media, however. In addition to that, each of the pieces references the most famous, off-stage scene of the character – her death by drowning when picking flowers.

Michael James Talbot, *Ophelia*



Date: 2013 (original)

Medium: bronze sculpture

Size: 52 cm x 95 cm x 20 cm

Country of Origin: Great Britain

Currently: available for purchase, previously on display in Calken Gallery, London, UK

John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*



Date: 1851-1852

Medium: oil on canvas

Size: 76.2 cm x 111.8 cm

Country of Origin: Great Britain

Currently in: Tate Britain, London, UK

Reasons for choosing the theme:

I had been interested in Redon's *Ophelia among the flowers* due to its color use and intriguing portrayal of Ophelia as secondary to the flowers. This led me to searching for other renditions of Ophelia's famous death in different media and with different intents behind them.

Formal Analysis



Fig. 4

General composition:

The **focal point** of this piece lies on the vibrant, red flowers, distinguished visually through **hue, color value, and sharpness of the shape**. Interestingly, Ophelia's face blurs into the background with smudged soft pastels, instead maintaining the viewer's focus on the flowers. Her face is however the **secondary focal point**, as it is placed in accordance with **the rule of thirds** (Fig. 4) The composition is **unbalanced**, with the left side of the page filled much more exhaustively than the right.

The Color Scheme:

Oranges and yellows are the most present in this piece, creating a **complimentary color scheme** with the used blue hues. The flowers themselves use another **complimentary color scheme** – **red and green** – making the red flowers draw even more attention from the viewer.

Texture:

The use of **dry pastels** allowed Redon to create various textures. Noticeably, the **texture** of the paper is visible due to an **unblended** quality of some of the pastels, leaving the original color of the paper visible. Contrastingly, the green leaves and red flowers are more careful and solid in their coloring, giving them that „**sharp**” and **focused** quality. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 5

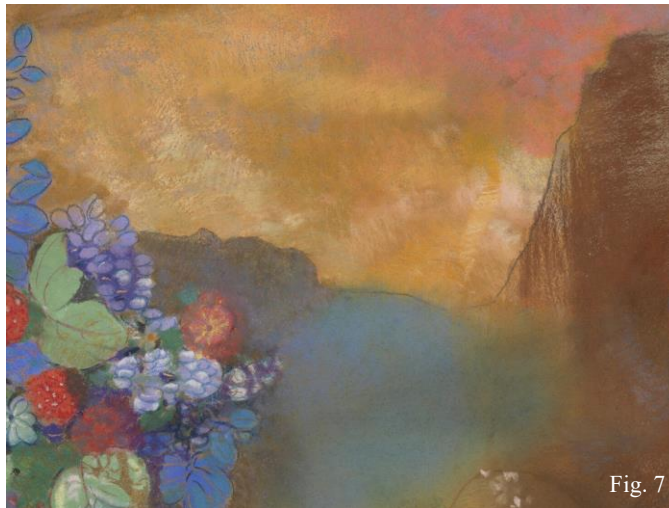


Fig. 7

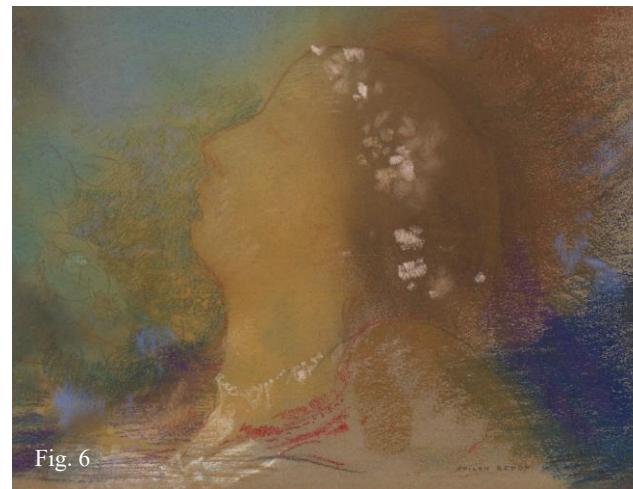


Fig. 6

Contrastingly, Ophelia herself (Fig. 6) is a lot softer; her lines are **smoothly blended** into the background, making the figure look more **ethereal and ghost-like**. Redon's experience as a French **symbolist** is visible here, with the eerie but soft look of the human figure, barely recognizable at first glance features, and the delicate suggestion of a flower crown on her head.

Creating Space:

This piece does not include much **tonal modelling**, but instead creates space through **overlap** between objects and employing some principles of **aerial perspective in the background** (Fig. 7). The objects most to the front, the flowers, are the most **focused and vibrant**. Some principles are **subverted** instead; the warm colors are more present in the background than the foreground, and the foreground element of Ophelia herself is blurry rather than sharp and focused.

The piece primarily evokes a dream-like quality through contrasting sharp shapes with **blurry lines, vibrant colors** with more dull ones, as well as the **general flatness** of the artwork, making the experience seem surreal. The **pastel strokes** are very visible throughout most of the drawing, either through **outlines** or unblended color blocks (Fig. 8). There is also a variety in the way the flowers are presented – some of them are merely suggested with circular, dotted shapes, whereas the others have more solid contouring and shapes. Ophelia herself is overshadowed by the floral elements, eyes closed representing possibly her death already, although she looks more like she is asleep instead (Fig. 6). This further emphasizes **the dream-like effect** the artwork thrives on, along with the symbolist background of Odilon Redon's art.



Fig. 8

Formal Analysis



Fig. 9

Realism:

The sculpture is made of **bronze** and it is an intricate recreation of a **realistic human figure**. The arms, stomach, and collarbone have clear indications of muscle and fat (Fig. 9). The fabric is styled in such a way that it creates the effect of sheer, wet material clinging to the skin. The hands (Fig. 10) are dainty and delicate looking, showing the girl's vulnerability.

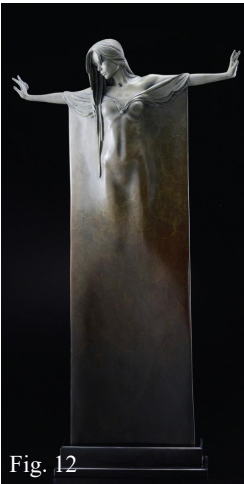


Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 10

The Hands:

The hands (Fig. 10) are gentle and dainty, and they contrast with the pose **mimicking a crucifixion** (Fig. 12 and 13). The hands are instead raised in defiance or almost a carefree dance, breaking the **rectangle shape** of the entire sculpture. There is an accurate indication of all the joints, flesh and fingernails, achieving a **realistic effect**. The hands have no callouses, showing her aristocratic lineage and the fact that she has not had to do physical work.

Pose:

The entire sculpture is centered around a **rectangle shape** from which the woman is emerging. Her head and forearms are the only elements that **break this silhouette** when looking from the front. The figure imitates crucifixion, but also has a more defiant outlook than helplessly hanging from the crucifix. The fabric is closely attached to her body, showing the anatomy and imitating a wet effect. The material appears **flowy**, however it is blocked in the rigid shape of the rectangle. From the side, *Ophelia* appears thin (Fig. 14), only the chest, stomach, backside and head break the shape of a thin sheet of paper. She appears to be suspended in mid-air, her feet and calves disappearing into the shape of the fabric completely, giving her an **ethereal** look. She also looks as though she is stretching the fabric forward when analyzed from different angles.

The face:

The figure's eyes are closed as she turned her head to the side and down, with attractive, **symmetrical features** (Fig. 11). She appears slim and somewhat mature, her jawline being emphasized, hence making her look less youthful. Her lips are closed and expressionless.

Water effect:

The bronze in this sculpture has a **ripple-like effect** on its surface (Fig. 15), indicating the circumstances of the play's *Ophelia's* death. The fabric appears thin and sheer, sticking to the carefully modelled body, referencing her drowning in *Hamlet*. The hair appears heavy and sticks together, also as though weighed down by water.



Fig. 11



Fig. 15

Formal Analysis

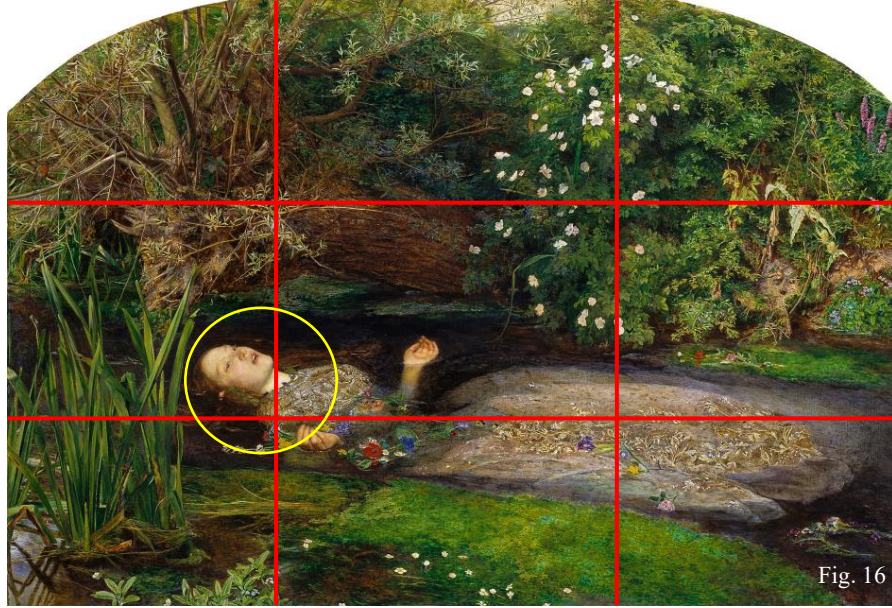


Fig. 16

The composition:

J. E. Millais' *Ophelia* places Ophelia's face in accordance with **the rule of thirds**, on the lower left intersection (Fig. 16). This draws more attention to it, along with the **color value contrast**. Her face is the brightest spot on the entire canvas, and it is surrounded by the **darkest color value**, the water in the river, making her stand out even more. The figure itself is set around a **diagonal**, making the **composition** follow the same shape.

The color scheme:

This painting operates on the **complimentary color scheme** of red-green, with green being the most dominating color broken down by reddish browns of the dirt, trees, and Ophelia's hair. Other colors in the piece are rare, although the colors in Ophelia's hands appear in purple, yellow, red and blue.

Ophelia's face:

The character's expression is unfocused, possibly dead already as her eyes are open but do not appear to be looking anywhere. Her lips are slightly parted and her chin is tilted up, as though she had been looking up before drowning. There is a faint blush on her cheeks, suggesting that she is either still alive or has just died.

The pose:

Ophelia is portrayed as mostly submerged in the water, her dress floating toward the surface. Her hands are lifted up and to the sides, holding flowers but also appearing as though she were pleading. They expose her chest, which shows her **vulnerability**. Heavy darkness surrounds her head, drawing attention to it. She appears to be slipping into the darkness in a dream.

The use of oil paint:

The medium of **oil paint on canvas** allowed Millais to achieve the smooth blending that is visible in the **tonal modelling**, hence achieving incredible realism. **The brush strokes** on the skin are near-invisible (Fig. 18). However, this comes into contrast with the **brush strokes** on the flowers and dress, where the paint appears to be laid on **thicker** and **is not blended as much** (Fig. 18). This makes Ophelia look even softer by comparison with her harsher surroundings. **The progression of color values** on her hand as opposed to the thickly-painted flowers allows Millais to draw more attention to the figure of Ophelia herself.



Fig. 17

Creating space and form:

Millais creates the illusion of 3D form through careful **tonal modelling**. This is especially visible on Ophelia herself (Fig. 17 and 18), where her skin is softly **shaded and blended** in order to look realistic. Space in the piece is also indicated by **overlap** – the plants fade into the background except for the tall grass near Ophelia's head. A combination of these allows for an intricate space that still maintains a **realistic** look instead of appearing too flat.



Fig. 18

Function and Purpose

Ophelia context:

The subject of *Hamlet*'s character Ophelia and her death was one that Odilon Redon (Fig. 19, self portrait) returned to frequently throughout his life. He frequently used contemporary and classic literature references in his work. Surrounding this particular piece, the artist had been moving away from the grotesque (Fig. 21) and instead approached art more as a lyrical exploration of color, likely influenced by Japanese prints and younger artists such as Paul Gauguin.



Fig. 19

The use of pastels:

Pastels were Redon's favorite medium and he utilized them in this piece as well. His mastery of the medium became his legacy, and the way he obtained vivid colors such as on the flowers in *Ophelia among the flowers* maintained a dream-like quality while also serving as a poetic representation of the scene.

Mood:

Unlike the grim and graceless description of the original scene in *Hamlet*, Odilon Redon's rendition appears more dream-like and aesthetically pleasing. The dream quality is primarily obtained through the differing textures between Ophelia herself and the flowers, as well as the vivid coloring that creates a surreal feeling in the mind of the viewer. She appears to merge with the plants and river that surround her as opposed to other renditions of her death, which placed more focus on detail and the grim nature of the events surrounding her tragic fall. The figure has a serene quality; her eyes are gently closed as though she really were sleeping (Fig. 20).



Fig. 20

The dreams and philosophy:

As a French symbolist, Odilon Redon was intrigued by everything dream-like. He said it himself that: *'My drawings inspire, and are not to be defined. They place us, as does music, in the ambiguous realm of the undetermined'* (National Gallery UK website). The story of Ophelia was often compared to other tales of doomed young love, such as the mythical Orpheus and Euridice. Romantic and symbolist art associated death and love with youthful characters and their transient beauty. This may have also been influenced by Sigmund Freud's research into the realm of dreaming.

Meaning:

The focus in this artwork is placed onto the flowers rather than Ophelia herself, who is blending into her surroundings. This shows a focus on the dream rather than the dreamer, and how Ophelia becomes insignificant and one with nature after her death. By its sheer vividness, the dream is more than the person dreaming, and this serves as a subversion of the tragedy with which Ophelia's death is described in the play.

Why was it painted?

Odilon Redon's personal interest in literary themes influenced this artwork, as well as his recent viewings of two other pieces that depicted the death of Ophelia: *The Death of Ophelia* by Eugène Delacroix (1844, Louvre, Paris) and *Ophelia* by Sir John Everett Millais (1851-52, Tate Britain). His response to the original text differed dramatically from these two renditions, less literal and more dream-like instead. Furthermore, his interest in this character's story was likely influenced by Redon's experience watching his friend and collaborator, Emile Hennequin, drown in July 1888. The artist had been helpless to the tragedy and may have served as a catalyst for creating this artwork (National Gallery UK)



Fig. 21

Odilon Redon, *Eye Balloon*, 1878

Function and Purpose

Ophelia context:

The sculpture depicts Ophelia, the love interest in *Hamlet*, but does not explicitly depict her death as opposed to most other renditions. The character is shown in a water effect, clearly referencing her drowning, but does not directly show her helpless and dying – instead, she appears to still have control over her muscles and is standing upright, albeit suspended in the rectangle shape of the entire sculpture.

The author:

Michael James Talbot (Fig. 22) is a British contemporary sculptor who completed a postgraduate study in the Royal Academy of Arts in London after gaining a scholarship, receiving the coveted Landseer prize in 1983. He has been a part of the Royal Society of British Sculptors since 1997. The artist's inspiration is the human form and its dramatic poetry, which is reflected in the entirety of his *Emergent* collection. He has reflected upon sculpture in this way: *Sculpture for me, is essentially a theatrical construction, an attempt to show and illuminate a chosen moment in time. I like to give my sculptures choreography of form, tension and balance, to lead the eye and capture a moment in time.* (M. J. Talbot, Calken Gallery website) This tension and balance can be visible in *Ophelia*, as the outstretched arms draw the viewers' attention toward her face, dramatically shifted to the side with tension in her muscles in the neck. The chosen moment in time is Ophelia's death.

Inspiration for Ophelia:

Talbot was always inspired by the human figure. He stated that he had been thinking of the human spirit floating, rising above the concerns of life, which may explain the suspended look of *Ophelia*. Talbot also said that: *The inspiration for these effects is taken from light reflecting off moving water onto adjacent surfaces, originally in the enigmatic waterways of Venice. This inspiration has led to an intense and ongoing study of patina effects giving the sculpture a liberating painterly aspect.* This patina effect is visible on *Ophelia* (Fig. 24) and the desire to experiment with this effect may have been the reason for Talbot to use the character as his subject, concerning her personality and tragic tale.

Fig. 22



The Emergent Collection:

Ophelia is the first part of a longer series of Talbot's sculptures called the *Emergent* series. They are depictions of human figures embedded in flat planes and emerging from them, hence the name. Another example of a piece from this series is *Seraphina* (Fig. 23), also sculpted from bronze and embedded in the flat plane. Talbot said that the key to this collection is firstly sculpting the intricate gesture while knowing that a lot of the detail will be lost in the addition of the plane. *By adding, I take away, in doing so I'm saying "this aspect is important and this aspect can fade". As so often in art, less is more.* (M. J. Talbot, Calken Gallery Website). This is reflected in *Ophelia* through putting the emphasis on her face and hands, allowing the rest of her body to fade into the plane.



Fig. 23

The Meaning:

Through an exploration of the human figure rising, as Talbot said, above the concerns of life, Talbot shows a different take on the character of Ophelia. Rather than making her a simple victim accepting her fate, she appears more frustrated with her fate, willing to rid herself of the pain surrounding her story in *Hamlet* through death. Talbot portrays Ophelia as having had more agency within the story and her death. The mystery of her death, not presented in the play itself, is reflected by the enigmatic effect of the water and the mysterious, emotionless expression of Ophelia for sale, focusing on aesthetic appeal.



Fig. 24

Function and Purpose

Ophelia Context:

The character portrayed in this painting is *Hamlet's* Ophelia, the love interest of the titular character of Shakespeare's play. The scene chosen by Millais is her death, which, in story, was due to her falling into a river while collecting flowers and drowning – after she had gone insane from grief over her father's brutal murder by her beloved Hamlet. All of this happened while she was singing. This creates an eerie, tragic scene that Millais conveyed within the painting primarily through Ophelia's expression.

Floral Symbolism:

The flowers used in the painting are all either directly referenced in *Hamlet* (willow, crowsfeet, nettles, daisies) or are symbolic to the scene. Ophelia wears a chain of violets around her neck (Fig. 28) which represent faithfulness, chastity, or death. There are pansies around her legs which represent unrequited love. There is also a red poppy which signifies death (Fig. 29) (K. White, 2020), never mentioned in the Shakespeare original. The space itself is filled with weeds, accurate to the description within the story, which specifies that Ophelia fell to her *muddy death*, showing an ending with little grace or elegance, which reflects her insanity and the tragic nature of Hamlet's behavior toward her.



Fig. 25

Process:

The painting was done on what was called a double canvas, where both canvases were stretched on the same wooden frame, and the second one was used to cover the back of the painting to protect it. Interestingly, his process followed first painting the entire background and only adding the figure of Ophelia afterwards. He painted on location at Hogsmill River (Fig. 25) for five months – hence, flowers that bloom in different seasons are presented next to one another. After finishing the background, Millais painted Ophelia in his studio with the model posing for him in a bath (Tate Britain, 2022).



Fig. 28



Fig. 26



Fig. 27

The Model:

Millais's model for Ophelia was Elizabeth Siddal, a 19 years old woman who later married one of his friends. She posed for him in a bathtub in a dress he bought for this painting specifically, in order to show how her hair and clothes would react to the water surroundings. He conducted a few studies of her using pencil (Fig. 26 and 27) but not as many as one might expect for such an intricate piece. There was also one oil sketch whose whereabouts are unknown (Tate Britain, 2022).

Function:

Ophelia serves as an illustration of the tragic scene of the character's death with a new vision surrounding it. Millais was a Pre-Raphaelite, and the group generally painted from nature and focused on subjects from modern life and literature, often using historical costumes and on-location painting which they could do because of the tubes of paint available. In addition to that, they paid a lot of attention to detail.



Fig. 29

Why was it painted?

Two centuries after *Hamlet's* debut, the play regained popularity, especially the romantic figure of Ophelia became a source of inspiration for Victorians. Her death was one of the few off-stage deaths in the play, which was uncharacteristic of such an important character toward the story. As part of the Pre-Raphaelites, Millais was likely taken by this heroine and aimed to visualise her psychologically-charged, tragic death, as the play did not do. He also aimed to critique the Victorian practice of arranging marriages for money and status (Tate Britain, 2022).

The Meaning:

Through the use of floral symbolism and the eerie mood, Millais conveyed the tragedy of Ophelia's fate and her lovelorn nature in this realistic recreation of what her death may have looked like. He did not shy away from the less elegant details such as the muddy water and weeds, much to the disapproval of the Victorian society.

Cultural, conceptual and material significance

Critics' Response:

The response to Redon's rendition of Ophelia was generally positive, although not very widespread. Redon has been unsuccessful before 1890, when he gained popularity for what is now considered his worst work, as he started **painting with oils** in order to fit the public desires better. Although the true appreciation for his older lithograph work as well as the pastels in his later lifetime is widespread now, the response to *Ophelia among the flowers* was positive even during his lifetime, nearing its end when he gained enough notoriety to merit a prominent place in the Armory Show in New York (M. Kimmelman, 1990). His dream-like portrayal of Ophelia was a **unique look** on her death, which helped in making it more positively looked upon. The critics praised Redon's use of color and his mastery with the medium of pastels.

Current response:

Odilon Redon is currently thought to have influenced the surrealist movement through his **symbolist interpretations of the human psyche** (M. Kimmelman, 1990), especially through his earlier achromatic work.

French Symbolism:

Redon was a French Symbolist, and the movement influenced his fascination with the psyche and the natural world, similar to how other French Symbolists did, most of them suffering from depression throughout their lives. He likely turned to the movement because of this connection to inner trauma. The symbolists inspired him primarily conceptually, as the movement focused on the dichotomy between the highs and lows of life (A. Lester, 2000). The same can be visible in Redon's work, where he contrasts the grotesque with the beautiful skillfully.

Freudian influence:

Sigmund Freud began his research into the human subconscious around 1890, eventually writing the landmark book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900. This was only 5 years before the creation of *Ophelia among the flowers*, and years into the general fascination with dreams and the subconscious of the symbolists. Young love and death were both associated with dreams, making Odilon Redon's inspiration with this association as well as **Freud's research into dreams** likely. The research that the doctor conducted was pioneering in the realm of dreams and entered the consideration of them into the public consciousness around when Redon would have begun to think about making *Ophelia among the flowers*. (National Gallery UK)

Artistic Influences:

In his later life, Redon befriended impressionists and even exhibited with them in 1886. The influence of the movement is likely what led him to the vibrant colors that *Ophelia among the flowers* has, instead of his early-life achromatic work. Gauguin introduced him to **the Nabis** in the 1890s, at which point Redon adopted **Japonisme**, expressive use of color, clearly visible in the analyzed work in his later lifetime, including his *Ophelia* renditions of which he made several. The influence of Japanese art on his work is also visible in the „flatness” of *Ophelia among the flowers*, similar to Japanese prints. Another influence were **two Ophelia-centered paintings** that he saw a few years before making *Ophelia among the flowers* (National Gallery UK), which include Eugène Delacroix's *Ophelia* (1844, Louvre, Paris) (Fig. 31), as well as John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1851-52, Tate Britain), another part of this comparative study.



F. Cotes, *Frances Ann Acland, Lady Hoare*, 1766-70



Fig. 31

E. Delacroix, *The Death of Ophelia*, 1844, Louvre, Paris

The pose is more dramatic and tragic than in Redon's portrayal – the latter may have wanted to contrast this impression in *Ophelia among the flowers*.

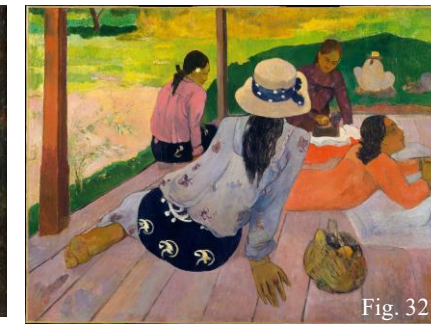


Fig. 32

P. Gauguin, *The Siesta*, 1892-94, The Metropolitan Museum

This example of Gauguin's color work shows how vibrant and colorful the art Redon saw day-to-day during their friendship was.

Material significance:

Redon's work revolutionized the use of dry pastels. The medium first started being used in the 16th century as a sketching medium, but it was developed in the mid 18th century as a properly respected medium by various artists, such as Francis Cotes (Fig. 30). In the early 19th century the medium lost popularity but regained it around 1860 when E. Degas began working with it. Once it began being respected, it generally prided itself on realistically recreating reality with a soft, blended aesthetic. Redon worked with the medium very differently, maintaining the visible texture in his work rather than blending out each stroke.

Cultural, conceptual and material significance

Critics' response:

Talbot is one of the most prominent and successful figurative artists of the modern times and his work, including *Ophelia*, has had a very positive response from critics. He has received numerous awards and positions, and his sculptures sell for up to tens of thousands of pounds. He had a permanent exhibition in the Calken Gallery of London which included *Ophelia* for 5 years (2011-2016) and is part of the Royal society of British sculptors. This is likely due to the realism of the sculptures as well as the unique qualities of the *Emergent* collection, which is his most well-known series (Calken Gallery website) – the flat plane in which the figures are set makes them immediately recognizable as Talbot's work. The sculptures also have an aesthetic appeal, which makes them a worthy addition to wealthy people's homes, with spiritual beauty as the prevailing theme.

Material significance:

Talbot uses primarily wax, clay and bronze for his sculptures. In the case of *Ophelia*, his use of bronze allowed him for the atypical patina effect that would mimic water on the surface of the sculpture, an unconventional use of a tarnishing of the metal – patina is essentially rust on bronze, making this employment highly unconventional but nevertheless achieving stunning effects (Fig. 34) that invoke the tragic circumstances of Ophelia's death and add another unique touch to the sculpture in its entirety. *Ophelia* utilizes this effect most prominently and with greatest significance to the character portrayed. This use of bronze is uncharacteristic, though in his work he has inspired many younger contemporaries.

Greek mythology influence:

Talbot has stated on various occasions that he takes great inspiration from Greek mythology (Michael James Talbot website). In addition to that, the influence of classical and neo-classical sculptures that depicted Greek myths and heroes can be seen in his work, specifically through the intricate and detailed recreation of the realistic human body. Ophelia's tale is often associated with that of Orpheus and Euridice, making it likely that classical representations of the myth played a part in the inspiration for *Ophelia* (Calken Gallery Website). Antonio Canova's 1777 *Orpheus* (Fig. 33) represents the intricate and expressive nature of realistic classical sculptures. However, Talbot's addition of the flat plane (Fig. 34) made the *Emergent* series uniquely his own, despite the classical and neo-classical influences.



Fig. 33

The relation to *Hamlet*:

Through referencing one of Shakespeare's most well-known plays, Talbot achieves an intertextuality that the common audience will immediately recognize whether or not they've read or seen *Hamlet*. This is due to the cultural osmosis that has occurred around Shakespeare's more popular works, making them widely adored and understood at least in the general sense. It would be hard to find someone who does not know about Ophelia's tragic death, which adds to the cultural impact of this sculpture. It is primarily a decoration, but also a new vision of this old character, represented in countless ways throughout history and widely recognized as a tragic victim of an even more tragic tale. Talbot shows her in a different light, with seemingly more agency and a spiritual freedom and defiance that her characterization had not included before. Because of the widespread impact of *Hamlet*, the sculpture speaks for itself despite the innate intertextual nature, allowing for interpreting it without having studied the text previously.

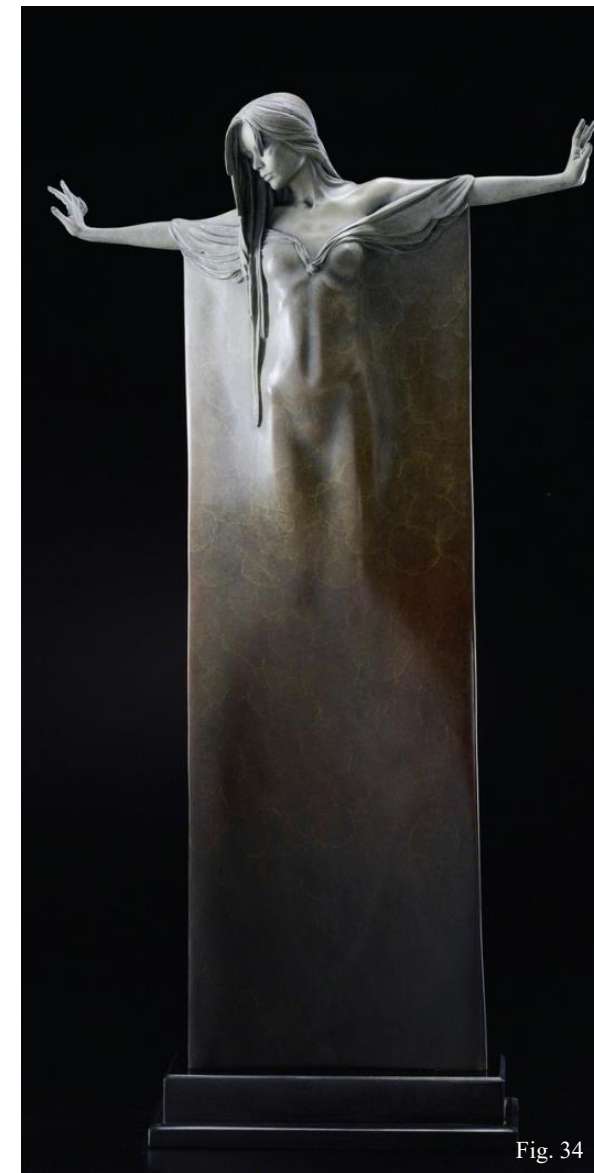


Fig. 34

Talbot's *Ophelia* has intricately sculpted anatomy, similar to that of the classical and neo-classical sculptures. The sculptures are also highly expressive in body language.

Cultural, conceptual and material significance

Critics' response:

Despite the success of the painting, the response to John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* was controversial at the time of its creation. This was primarily due to the lack of elegance the figure portrayed; Pre-Raphaelites depicted their models candidly and the open mouth (Fig. 35) was scandalous by Victorian standards (K. White, 2020). The Pre-Raphaelites chose not to idealize nature, much to the disapproval of their contemporaries, and also chose their models with, at the time, unconventional beauty. The models they chose, like Siddal, were instead considered blatantly lower-class, oversexualized and masculine. One critic wrote about *Ophelia*: "The open mouth is somewhat gaping and babyish (...) There is no pathos, no melancholy, no brightening up, no last lucid interval." (K. White, 2020). The ideal Victorian woman was more delicate and demure (Fig. 36), unlike the Pre-Raphaelite models. Various critics were also skeptical of the setting, claiming that portraying Ophelia in a *weedy ditch* was an absurdity and unbecoming of her (K. White, 2020). This view occurred likely due to the sterility and idealization of the Victorian times, where anything outside the beautiful norm was considered indecent. *This* represents the contemporary response toward Millais's *Ophelia*.

Later response:

The Pre-Raphaelite models reinvented the standards of beauty of the times. By around 1870, the qualities that Millais portrayed in his *Ophelia* were being appreciated (K. White, 2020). In the modern times, Millais's rendition of Ophelia's death is one of the most popular and recognized by the general public. The attention to detail that Millais exhibited is appreciated by the modern public, and the intricate blending that he accomplished is an inspiration to artists working with oil paint.



Fig. 35

Unconventional process:

Millais's process of painting the entire background before beginning work on Ophelia herself was considered unconventional at the time, but allowed Millais to obtain the stunning intricacies of her surroundings.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

Millais was part of the Brotherhood while he painted *Ophelia*. The Brotherhood prided itself on painting from nature, which led to Millais spending over 5 months at Hogsmill River, painting the intricate background. This aspect also influenced the final look of the painting, as there are flowers from different seasons present (Rebecca Jeffrey Easby, 2015). In addition to that, the ideology of the Brotherhood stood against the previously held notions of artists idealizing nature and instead insisted that they should recreate nature as accurately as possible. Elizabeth Siddal was one of their favorite models, used in several paintings of various members such as G. Rossetti's *Regina Cordium* (1860) (Fig. 37). She married a member of the Brotherhood and stood out against the contemporary models with her hooded eyes, wilder hair and full lips, qualities that were seen as true nature by the Pre-Raphaelites but were widely considered manly and undesirable by the Victorians. The Brotherhood's influence is visible in Millais's work, both through his process and his choice of model as well as his technique.



Fig. 36

Joshua Reynolds, *Lady Charles Spencer*, 1766

Example of earlier models

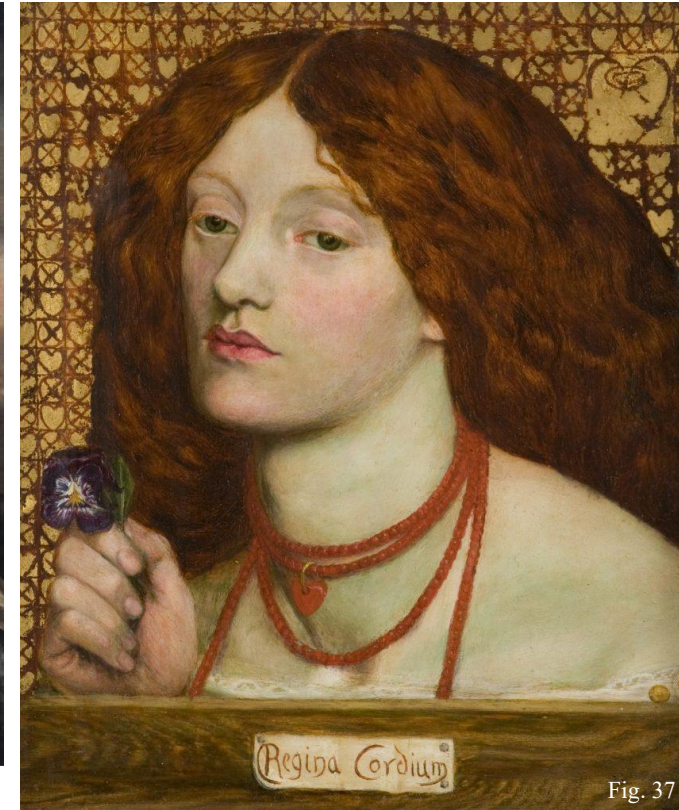


Fig. 37

Gabriel Rossetti, *Regina Cordium*, 1860

Formal comparison

Compositional similarities and differences

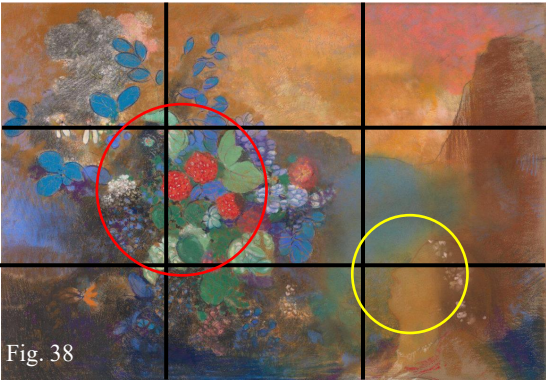


Fig. 38

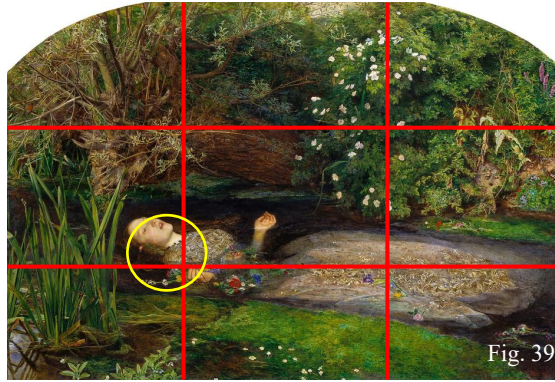


Fig. 39

Composition:

The **focal point** in Millais's *Ophelia* (Fig. 39) falls on the character's face due to the use of the **rule of thirds** as well as **color value contrast**. Millais deliberately draws the viewer's attention to the face in order to better convey the tragedy of her death through her expression. In Redon's piece (Fig. 38), however, Ophelia is only a **secondary focal point** to the vibrant, colorful flowers. Both artworks incorporate the **rule of thirds** and place Ophelia's face at one of the intersections, however Redon only portrays the character from the shoulders up, and **blends** her into the background so that the intricate plants may take the center of attention. This reflects upon the focus of the two artworks: Millais aims to depict the tragedy of Ophelia, whereas Redon portrays the beautiful dream-like state in which she finds herself, little to no tragedy involved.

Additional context:

Because Redon had seen Millais's *Ophelia* before having created *Ophelia among the flowers*, it is possible that several of the similarities are no accident. The use of the **rule of thirds** appears to be significant here, though the figures are placed differently on the canvas. Similarly, the **abundance of flowers** in Millais's rendition may have inspired Redon, as most other depictions of the character had her primarily in green grass, with flowers in just her hands.

Color Schemes:

Millais's and Redon's artworks are both **vividly colorful**, although in different ways. Redon uses a **double complementary color scheme**, utilizing pastel colors with a surreal shade, reflecting the dream-like state. Millais's vivid colors are focused on the **red-green complementary**, dominating **warmer hues** and a generally realistic portrayal of the outside world. The vivid green does not appear as surreal as the colors in Redon's *Ophelia among the flowers*. Contrastingly, Talbot's sculpture is almost completely **achromatic**, with small additions of near-neutral colors in the patina-influenced sections. This is likely influenced by the classical sculptures, but may also be a reflection of the spirituality that Talbot focused on in this piece, the sensation of a spirit floating above mortal concerns.

Ophelia's Expression:

Talbot's sculpture and Redon's pastel drawing both portray Ophelia with an absentminded, unreadable expression. They have closed eyes and lips (Fig. 40 and 41), **conventionally attractive features**, as well as the aesthetic of someone at peace with death, showing no strong emotion. In contrast, Millais's *Ophelia* (Fig. 42) has the character's **eyes and mouth wide open**, hands raised in a pleading gesture, reaching toward heaven. Although each of the Ophelias displays a certain level of vulnerability, Millais's portrayal is by far the most emotional, placing a direct focus on the tragedy of her fate.

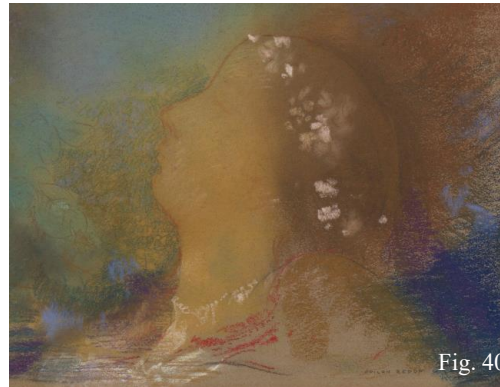


Fig. 40



Fig. 41



Fig. 42

Flowers:

Both Millais's and Redon's *Ophelia* depictions include flowers as a prominent element. This is due to the integral role flowers play in Ophelia's characterization in *Hamlet*, where **they serve both symbolically** and as the literal cause for her death, collecting flowers absentmindedly whilst already insane being the reason why she falls into the river and drowns. Talbot, however, **removes the flowers entirely** and only indicates the water effect onto her as a reference to the original play.

Function and purpose Comparison

Interpretation of the original play:

Due to the original inspiration having been rooted in a widely-recognized play, each of these artworks is the author's reflection upon the character of Ophelia from *Hamlet*. Millais's is the most direct interpretation – it is a highly rooted in the original text illustration of the off-screen death, putting **an emphasis on the tragedy** of her fate. Millais uses flowers directly from the original play whilst adding his own touch. Talbot and Redon, however, appear to use Ophelia more as a recognizable conduit through which they can express something more abstract and spiritual. Odilon Redon's *Ophelia among the flowers* is primarily a more **dream-like take on the fate of the character**, with little tragedy to be found. Instead, it appears to be a love letter of sorts to the realm of dreaming, considering how the focus is on the surreally colored flowers rather than Ophelia herself. Similarly, Talbot's *Ophelia* focuses on the **aesthetic** that the artist wanted to experiment with. The motif of Ophelia appears to be more of a literary reference than a core component of the piece. However, the way Talbot portrays the character gives her more agency and shows her as more defiant than the original characterization. This reflects the more modern vision of women after the feminist movement.

Biographical influences:

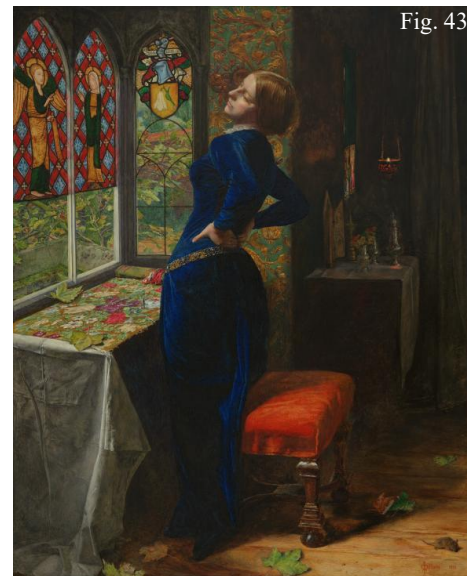
The reason for creating the piece appears to have biographical aspects to it in the case of Odilon Redon, whose friend died by drowning in 1888. The other artists seem to have been driven simply by the desire to create or illustrate this scene, as well as experimenting with techniques. In addition to that, Millais's piece appears to have served a social function as well as a desire to express the nature of Ophelia's death without idealization, such as the **Brotherhood** intended.

Social function:

Millais's piece was made with the intent of criticizing the Victorian practice of **occasionally arranging marriages** for wealth and power (Tate Britain, 2022). Ophelia served as a conduit for the tragedy. Talbot and Redon's works do not seem to have broader social functions but instead focus more on personal expression.

The piece in the context of the artists' other works:

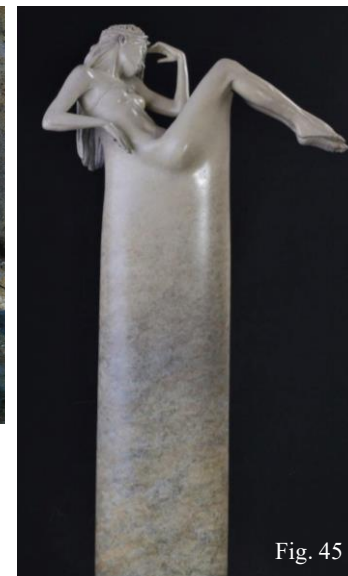
Ophelia among the flowers was made during Odilon Redon's colorful artistic period, in harsh contrast to the achromatic early pieces. The work during this period was much more dream-like, and the theme of **Ophelia** herself was used by him in several pieces before and after *Ophelia among the flowers* (for example, Fig. 44). Talbot's *Ophelia* was an unusual project and his **first use of the plane**, later defining his *Emergent* collection – thusly an important piece for the artist himself and his development (other *Emergent* piece – Fig 45). John Everett Millais made many paintings **inspired by literature**, even specifically Shakespeare, such as *Mariana* (Fig. 43) depicting the character from *Measure for Measure* (Tate Britain, 2000). The artist also drew inspiration from a poem about this character written by Tennyson (Tate Britain, 2000) and the two were exhibited together at first. This painting had been made only a few months before *Ophelia*, showing that the latter was not out of place in his **body of work**.



J. E. Millais, *Mariana*, 1851



O. Redon, *Ophelia*, c. 1903



M. J. Talbot, *Amethyst*, c. 2015

Representation of nature:

Millais, as part of the Brotherhood, aimed to recreate reality with as much detail as possible, fighting against the previously widespread romanticization of it and Ophelia's death. He achieved this by spending months painting on location. Contrastingly, Redon's artwork does not recreate reality but reimagines it, making the surreal effect of the space more vivid, something characteristic of **Symbolism**. Michael James Talbot's *Ophelia* was inspired by the light effect on water in Venice, reflected through the **patina effect**. He does not attempt to recreate nature but allows the medium itself to remind of it.

Cultural, conceptual and material significance comparison

Artistic influences:

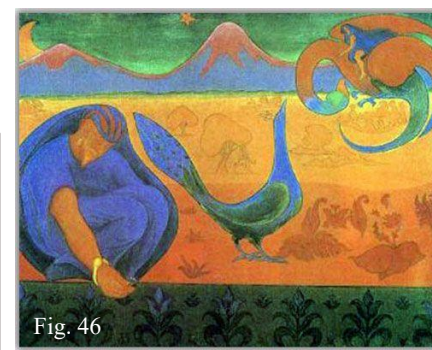
Each of the artists has clear influences on their work – Redon's colors inspired by Gauguin and **The Nabis** (Fig. 46), with an additional practice of **Japonisme**, Millais's strong **Brotherhood** influence in the process and style (Fig. 47) is visible even in his choice of model, as well as **classical and neo-classical** (Fig. 48) sculptures with high expressiveness of body language can be traced as influencing Talbot's *Emergent* Series. Furthermore, Redon is currently credited as having largely influenced and inspired the later surrealist movement.

Social Response:

None of the pieces had a completely negative contemporary response and each of them was quite successful for the artist. However, Millais's choice of model and his portrayal of her face sparked controversy, as did most of the other members of the **Brotherhood**'s works. They successfully reinvented **the beauty standards** of the times for drastically different qualities to start being appreciated. In addition to that, Millais's choice of scenery was not widely appreciated during his life. Redon's *Ophelia among the flowers* was during the most successful time in his career, but he never gained that much notoriety during his lifetime. Talbot is widely **successful** currently and the *Emergent* series started with *Ophelia* is the most well-known set of works by him. His artworks sell for thousands of pounds for private collections and he has received numerous high-respected rewards for his sculptures, as well as securing a position in the renowned **Royal Society of British Sculptors** (Calcken Gallery website).

Social context:

John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* was a response to the popular **Victorian practice of arranging marriages for wealth and social power**, which Millais disagreed with and aimed to criticize (Tate Britain, 2022). The character of Ophelia and her tragic tale of young love lost – although the relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet had been arranged with some actual feelings involved on both sides, the behavior of Hamlet contrasted with Ophelia's feeling that she had to follow through may have been influential in her spiraling into madness – served as a reflection of the state of arranged marriages in general. Contrastingly, Odilon Redon's *Ophelia among the flowers* was not a direct response to any social phenomenon, but was likely inspired by the increasing interest in dreams and surreal imagery – owed to **Sigmund Freud's research in the matter**.



P. Ranson, *Nabi landscape*, 1890, private collection

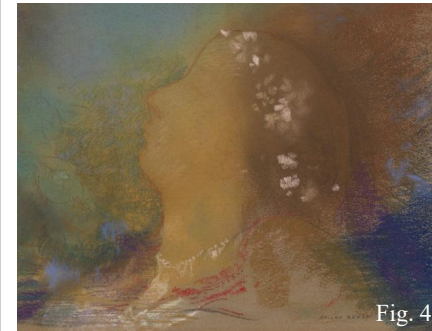


Fig. 49



Fig. 50



Fig. 51



D. G. Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*, 1867, The Metropolitan Museum, USA



J. A. Houdon, *Winter*, 1787, The Metropolitan Museum, USA

Medium:

Each of the three artworks was done in a different **medium** and the media were used in different ways. For Redon, the uneven but blendable nature of pastels allowed him to accomplish the ethereal look that he aimed for, making Ophelia **seamlessly blend** into the background while maintaining the intricate texture of pastels (Fig. 49). Both Talbot and Millais used their media to achieve an **intricate realism** – Millais uses the properties of oil paint in order to create realistic tonal modelling (Fig. 50) and the softness associated with human figures in this medium, whereas Talbot employs the natural properties of **3D sculpture** making the shadows for him whilst recreating the flesh from different angles (Fig. 51). In addition to that, Talbot's *Ophelia* benefits from the medium's unconventional use of **the patina effect**, creating water-like ripples on her surface (Fig. 51). Each of these artists was or is extremely skilled in their medium of choice and utilizes it in order to achieve a different effect on the tone of the piece as a whole.

Connections to own artwork: *Submerged (Breathe)*



Composition:

To imitate the rectangular shape of the plane in Talbot's sculpture (Fig. 53) with the use of this **art nouveau** inspired frame (Fig. 52). In this way, the character is still trapped within the shape without me having to sacrifice the „flatness” of the image.

Ripple effect:

The intriguing **patina effect** in Talbot's *Ophelia* was made to imitate water. I wanted to make it clearer that my character was also submerged, so I added the grey lines indicating **water** rippling in the background. This made the piece a lot more interesting and readable, and the effect was heavily influenced by Talbot.

Fig. 58



Flatness:

The flat characteristic of **Japanese prints** that influenced Redon (Fig. 56) inspired me in creating this piece. I simplified the anatomy and avoided shading to keep the piece flat.

Texture:

The texture of pastels in Redon's artwork made me want to explore texture in my digital work. I used a heavily textured brush to create the effect visible (Fig. 58) mostly in the hair I drew **translucently**.

Pose influence:

Talbot's *Ophelia* sculpture (Fig. 53) influenced the pose in *Submerged (Breathe)* (Fig. 52). Both of them reference **crucifixion**, although the character in mine's arms are lowered in a more defeated expression than Talbot's defiant *Ophelia*. In addition to that, both of the pieces are based around a character partially submerged in water, part of their body peeking out above the surface in a vulnerable position. Talbot's piece, however, put more emphasis on indicating **realistic anatomy** than I wanted, so the pose is simplified into **mostly flat shapes**.



Facial expression:

The empty, **unfocused gaze** and parted lips of Millais's *Ophelia* (Fig. 55) was an influence in the expression in *Submerged (Breathe)* (Fig. 57). I wanted this same helplessness in my character, a look of defeat and acceptance of it, a readiness for death.

Connections to own artwork:

Lost in a Daydream



Fig. 59

Facial expression:

From the front, Talbot's *Ophelia*'s head is turned to the side, tilted down in a **neutral expression** with closed eyes and lips, hair falling to cover her face in part (Fig. 60). I opted for a **similar angle** in *Lost in a Daydream* (Fig. 59) because of the serene look that *Ophelia* maintains. It fit my vision for this dream-like piece that I wanted to express. Studying the sculpture drew my attention to the subtly indicated **bags beneath her eyes**, showing a tired look. I wanted a similar effect in my piece.



Fig. 60

Conceptual influence:

Odilon Redon's *Ophelia among the flowers* (Fig. 63) is focused on the **dream-like escapism** that occurs when you are in pain. The concept and his vision of Ophelia's mind during her death was an inspiration in creating *Lost in a Daydream* (Fig. 59). This piece is based around escapism and how fading into a **surreal world** (in Redon's represented by the vibrant flowers, in mine represented by the galaxy hair) serves to avoid the pains of reality, represented with less color.

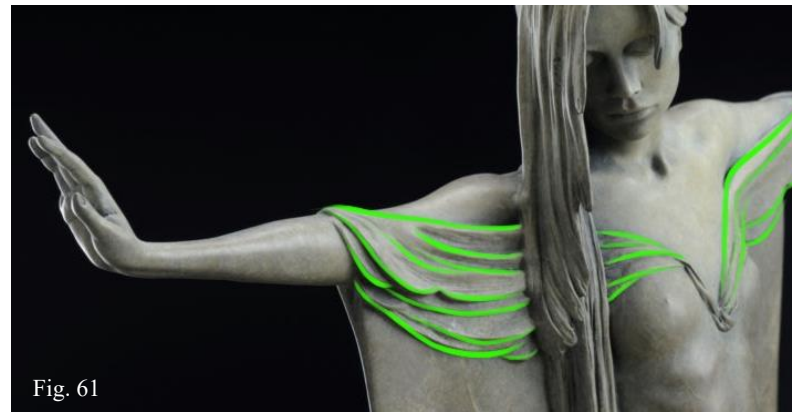


Fig. 61



Fig. 63

Flatness:

The flat nature of Redon's *Ophelia among the flowers* (Fig. 63) inspired by **Japanese prints** was a factor in making this piece. I thought about how contrasting this flat nature with the vibrant, dynamic nature of the hair would be interesting and would place more emphasis on the **dichotomy between dreams and reality** in my piece. In this way, I decided to have the plain white face as opposed to shading it, or placing it in environmental, surreal lighting.



Fig. 62

Echoing flowing rhythm:

The fabric of *Ophelia*'s **sleeves** was an inspiration in how to make the hair of my character flow. The thinness of the fabric is conveyed through **echoing the flowing lines** that create it (Fig. 61). I echoed each shape in the galaxy hair to imitate this, as well as make the shapes more reminiscent of both hair and space. In addition to the hair falling over her shoulder, I was inspired by the way Talbot made the hair on the other side wrap around the head above the ear (Fig. 60), showing the neck in a vulnerable state and making the hair look heavier, while also **framing the face** elegantly.

Connections to own artwork: *Ophelia*



Fig. 64



Fig. 65



Fig. 66

Flower symbolism:

Similarly to Millais's *Ophelia*, where the flowers he used were either tied to the original story or provided additional meanings of death, devotion, and purity through flower language (Fig. 66), I used flowers symbolically in my *Ophelia* sculpture. Orchids primarily mean purity, safety and innocence. This was used in contrast with another aspect of the plant – they are poisonous, making the water they are submerged in poisonous as well. These two elements contrast with one another, giving meaning to the piece: the loss of innocence through mental illness, submerged in poisonous water that represents the mind of someone with depression.



Fig. 68



Fig. 69

Facial expression:

The **emphasis on tragedy** in Ophelia's expression (Fig. 65) in Millais's piece was a driving factor for me when sculpting my clay head. The unfocused look in her eyes, the tilted chin as well as the large nose – **atypical beauty standards** for the times when Millais painted *Ophelia* – informed the way I sculpted this head (Fig. 67), placing emphasis on the large nose and **prominent chin**. This influence is primarily visible from the side, in the way the bones and flesh portrude harshly from the silhouette as opposed to traditionally feminine, gentle features. This sculpture was also loosely based on **my own appearance**, exaggerated in the appropriate directions to fit Millais's portrayal of Siddal and the naturalistic tragedy in it. This look of helpless tragedy that Millais obtained was one I wanted to be present in *Ophelia* as well.



Fig. 67

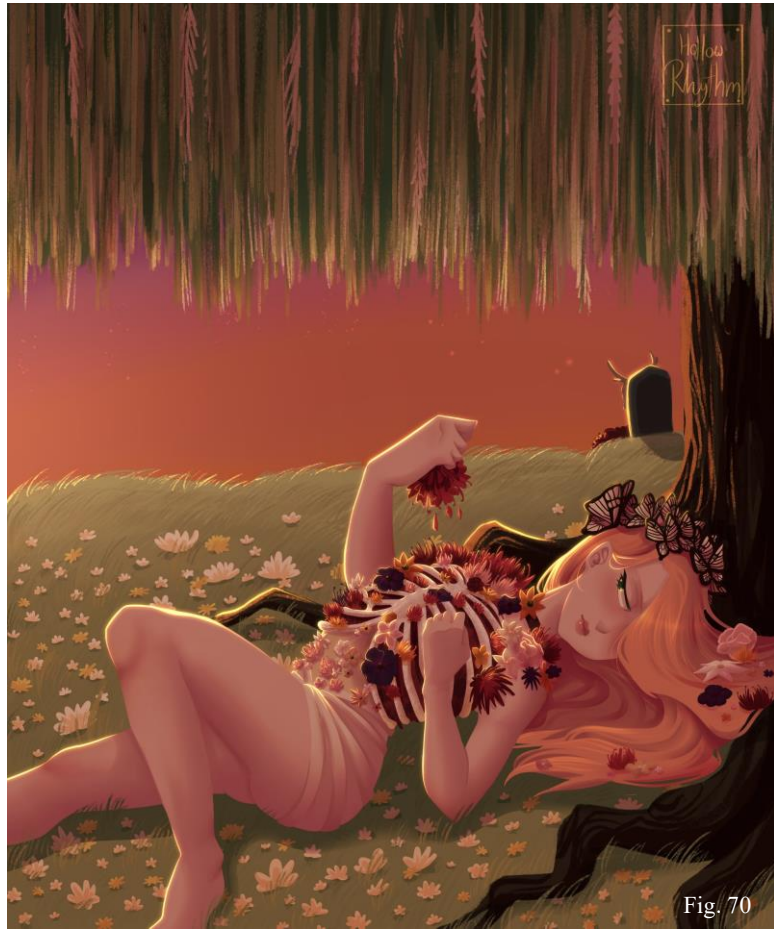
Conceptual influence:

Analyzing the theme of Ophelia in these artworks inspired this piece and the way I presented the sculpture itself. Placing it in water and flowers was meant as a direct reference to the Shakespearean character – emphasized by the title. Analyzing these artworks drew my attention toward the tragic figure that is Ophelia and made me explore it in this sculpture.

Ripple effect:

Talbot's *Ophelia* uses the **patina effect** to create a ripple-like look (Fig. 69). When glazing my sculpture, I was inspired by this to pick a heavily **textured glaze** (Fig. 68) with a reflective surface, making the faint color resemble water. The cracking is a bit too distinctive for water, however, so the translation is not as direct as I had hoped when picking the glaze.

Connections to own artwork: *Lycoris Radiata*



Pose and composition:

Millais's *Ophelia* is in a lying down on her back, hands outstretched toward the air, placed **diagonally** on the canvas (Fig. 75). This makes the piece a lot more **dynamic**, rather than the static parallel posing possible. This inspired me to place my lounging character in *Lycoris Radiata* more diagonally, to emphasize the **dynamism** I wanted to achieve. This **angle** allowed me to show more detail on the body and outfit by placing the **perspective** slightly above, similarly to Millais (Fig. 70).



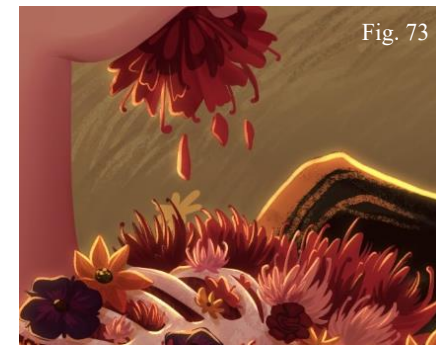
Color scheme:

Odilon Redon's use of rusty reds, yellows and browns in *Ophelia among the flowers* was an influence in the color scheme I chose for *Lycoris Radiata*. Reds are more dominating in my piece whereas Redon leans more into yellows and oranges. However, the complementary scheme between red and green was maintained in my piece and enhanced, becoming the dominating scheme as opposed to Redon's blue-orange complementary. I wanted the warm, soft aesthetic in *Lycoris Radiata* that Redon captured.



Red spider lily (*Lycoris Radiata*) photograph

This flower (Fig. 72) is tied to death in **Japanese culture**. It used to be planted around graves, and the crimson color it bloomed in was thought to be the **blood of the deceased**. The whole plant, is poisonous – because of this, there were many tales that picking one and bringing it to your house would bring **bad fortune** to prevent children from touching them. (K. Brenner, 2021)



Floral symbolism:

Millais's use of floral symbolism (Fig. 74) inspired me to use the symbolism of **the death flower** (Fig. 72) in my piece, naming it after the latin name for the red spider lily. This flower is the most present in the piece (Fig. 73), drawing the connotations of **death and reincarnation**. In Japanese literarute and media, the appearance of the red spider lily (referred to as *Higanbana*) is most commonly used to **foreshadow death**. (K. Brenner, 2021)



Connection to own artwork:

Experimenting with media

Fig. 76



Sculpture:

I was never that interested in exploring 3D sculptures, but analyzing the intricacies with which Talbot achieves the **three-dimensional** form made me want to experiment with the medium somewhat. Working with bronze was not an option for me so I instead opted to work with sculpture in the **section-by-section** manner that Talbot described in all of his sculptures. It also gave me the opportunity to understand **3D space** more effectively, forcing me to work on each side of the face rather than just worrying about one particular angle. Talbot achieved feminine, traditionally attractive features that I was not quite capable of replicating, however.



Fig. 77



Fig. 78

Dry pastels:

When designing *I.A.M.*, I knew I wanted vibrant colors on top of the piece and I debated how to accomplish that without using digital art. I thought back to my analysis of Odilon Redon's work and how vibrant the colors were. Ultimately, the textured but colorful look I obtained in the final (Fig. 78) was exactly what I wanted thanks to the use of dry pastels.



Fig. 79

Oil painting:

During my first experiment with oil painting (Fig. 79), I was trying to imitate the smooth blending that Millais achieved in *Ophelia*, as well as the loose but clear indication of the floral themes. I found the medium very difficult but I learned a lot from this exercise of studying his technique in practice after extensive theoretical study. I have decided that oils are not for me, but I am quite happy with the ease with which I could draw flowers.



Fig. 80

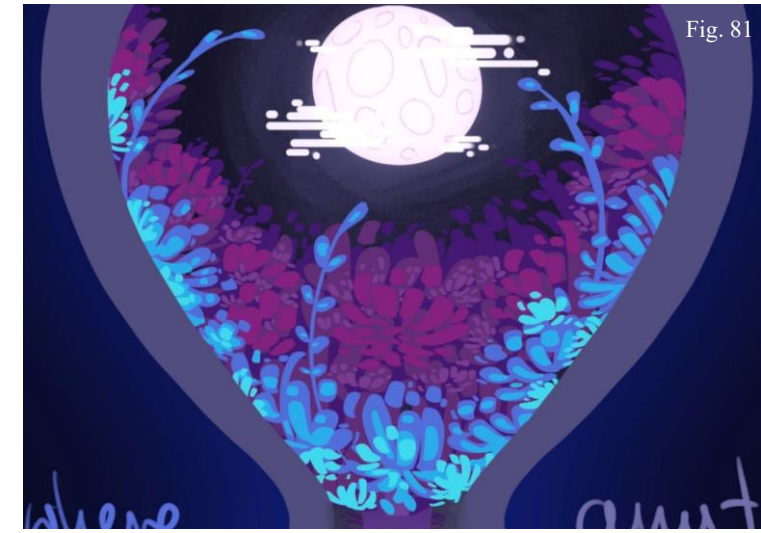


Fig. 81

Flower drawing technique:

Studying the loose, shape-based way in which Redon drew flowers (Fig. 80) was a big inspiration in how I have drawn flowers since. *The Road to Nowhere* (Fig. 81) includes a segment filled with only shapes organized in a way that imitates petals, creating dense but surreal foliage – the petals are not even connected to one another in places, and I think that is part of the charm of the technique, that they are so flat but so dense and aesthetically pleasing, as in Redon's.