



Mary Countess of Lovelace – née Stuart Wortley – in her wedding dress.

# A Golden Girl: Burne-Jones and Mary Stuart Wortley

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*The Golden Stairs* holds a special place in the career of Sir Edward Burne-Jones as it is his ultimate expression of the aesthetic ideal of 'Beauty for its own sake'. One of the reasons for the popularity of the painting has been its apparent autobiographical character, as the various heads have been identified as portraits of the young women who influenced his life during the 1870s. At this time Burne-Jones's life was not a happy one, as he was recovering from a disastrous love affair with the Greek beauty Mary Zambaco.

*The Golden Stairs* was conceived in 1872 and developed from 1876. In the late 1870s Burne-Jones prepared many sketches of drapery and figure arrangements. However, it was not until 1879 that he decided to include the portraits of close female friends. According to John Christian the following girls can be identified in the painting: May Morris, Frances Graham, Margaret Burne-Jones and Mary Stuart Wortley.<sup>1</sup> Other well known social beauties have been linked to the picture, including Laura and Margot Tennant<sup>2</sup> and Mary Gladstone. It has also been suggested that Edith Gellibrand, who acted under the name of Edith Chester, is depicted.<sup>3</sup>

Considerable conjecture surrounds these identifications as Burne-Jones never recorded his subjects and, perhaps not surprisingly, his wife Georgiana did not specify them in the *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (1904). No account of the painting until the 1924 *National Art Collections Fund Annual Journal* gives a clear indication of their identities. Given Burne-Jones's known aversion to portraiture, the need to specify the sitters was apparently of little importance to him. His choice was essentially private, as it was an ideal that was paramount; his personal conception of an ideal woman. This ideal was essentially comforting, for the girls are not threatening but benign and peaceful.

When the painting was first exhibited in 1880 it was interpreted in terms of accepted notions of female behaviour and expectations; the main goal in life being to marry, preferably well. Linked to Burne-Jones's earlier works such as the *King's Wedding*, the image was read by the Victorian public as a group of maiden minstrels descending the stairs having escorted the bride and groom to their nuptial chamber. The girls themselves were perceived as ideal marriage material.<sup>4</sup> The artist, on the other hand, seems to have conceived the work as a *memento mori*, for the girls were growing up and he would soon lose them to husbands and families.

Burne-Jones's opinion of marriage was far from positive, having suffered his own trials and tribulations. Indeed he feared marriage could be a 'waste place' and his greatest concerns were for his daughter Margaret who he placed in profile at the top of the stairs. Burne-Jones was deeply attached to his daughter, who was by all accounts 'unfairly pretty' and was described 'as a beauty in the mould of

her father's ideal'.<sup>5</sup> In 1879, at the age of fourteen, she was already aware that she was growing up and complained that her father's portrait of her in a muslin dress, with her mother and brother, gave her a flat chest.<sup>6</sup> It was his love for his children that largely deterred Burne-Jones from running away with Mary Zambaco. Margaret eventually married J. W. Mackail, who was to become well known as the biographer of William Morris. Burne-Jones's inclusion of his daughter in *The Golden Stairs* is perhaps the key to understanding the painting, especially the sense of loss that it conveys; his fear of her growing up, falling in love and leaving him.

Frances Graham, subsequently Lady Horner, who had been Burne-Jones's greatest consolation during the difficult years after his affair with Mary Zambaco, is leading the procession in profile bottom left holding some cymbals. Behind her stands her best friend Mary Gladstone, daughter of William Gladstone, with May Morris placed centrally holding a viol. In reality these girls were not submissive or passive ideal types. They were well educated and informed and often 'progressive' in their attitudes. They led independent lives, in some cases marrying late in life in order to pursue their interests or careers. Indeed, these girls grew up to be New Women. In their journey through life personal satisfaction and fulfilment was not necessarily pinned to marriage. Ironically, in *The Golden Stairs* Burne-Jones captured a generation that was to reshape the role of women in the late nineteenth century.

Mary Stuart Wortley has been identified as the 'second to approach the door'.<sup>7</sup> Her inclusion was verified by Lady Susan Tweedsmuir who indicated that her 'Aunt Mamie' was depicted in the painting.<sup>8</sup> It has been suggested that Mary knew Burne-Jones through her brother-in-law, Norman Grosvenor.<sup>9</sup> In fact Norman Grosvenor's marriage to Caroline Stuart Wortley did not take place until 1884, while Burne-Jones's letters to Mary date back to 1875. It is more likely that Mary met Burne-Jones through Edward Poynter, his brother-in-law. Poynter, through a number of different connections, established a firm friendship with the Stuart Wortley family. During the 1870s Poynter received his most important commission to date, which was to decorate the billiard-room at Wortley Hall, near Sheffield, for Mary's cousin, the Earl of Wharnccliffe.<sup>10</sup> He was a close friend of John Everett Millais, who trained Mary's brother Archie Stuart Wortley. Poynter also drew Mary's sister, Margaret Stuart Wortley, in 1875, on the eve of her engagement.

Mary's inclusion in *The Golden Stairs*, which Burne-Jones completed in 1880, is fascinating in that her contribution to the contemporary artistic and social scene has gone virtually unrecorded. In fact her interest in art encompassed everything from painting to architectural design. She was the close friend of C. R. Ashbee, C. F. A. Voysey and William and Evelyn De Morgan. Both a patron and collector, she was committed to art, education and social improvement. Mary's life and achievements are illustrative of the changing nature of the role of women in late Victorian society and stand in sharp contrast to the passivity of the girls in *The Golden Stairs*.

Mary was born in 1848 the eldest of nine children. Her father, the Rt Hon. James Archibald Stuart Wortley Q.C. M.P., was the third son of the 1st Baron Wharnccliffe. He married the Hon. Jane Lawley, daughter of Lord Wenlock, in 1846. Mary grew up in London and spent most of her childhood in a small house in St James's Place.<sup>11</sup> Her father had hoped to become the Speaker of the House

of Commons but a crippling riding accident left him a permanent invalid.<sup>12</sup> This left the family in what could best be described as 'genteel poverty', although the boys were well educated, and the family's many connections meant that Mary and her sisters had the hope of making good marriages. As the eldest daughter Mary had the greatest family responsibilities, particularly with regard to nursing her father.

According to family tradition Mary yearned to be an artist from her youth. Susan Tweedsmuir gives an account of her aunt's early life in a volume of reminiscences entitled *The Lily and the Rose* (1952). In this she wrote: 'She ardently wished to study painting, and she put all the force of an exceptionally strong will into becoming an artist. She decided to have training at the Slade School in Gower Street. Her parents always bent to her will and they agreed to this.' Apparently this was no easy ambition to fulfil, due to the restrictions placed on the movement of young unmarried girls in the 1870s:

When she was young, no girl of *quality* could be seen alone in the street without scandal . . . However, by sheer force of character and insistence she managed to get an escort through the danger zone of Bond Street and Regent Street, where friends and acquaintances might be met. Then, alone, she embarked on a quick rush through the remaining streets till she reached the Slade, and she told me amusingly of her terror lest any friends, returning in a luggage-laden four-wheeler from King's Cross or Euston, should catch a glimpse of her. After all these dangers were past, she stood at her easel all day, walked to within a shilling fare for a cab in the evening, and came home to amuse her invalid father.<sup>13</sup>

The Slade had opened in 1871 and admitted women, although they had to enter by a separate door. It seems likely that Mary attended the Slade during its early years, when she would have found herself in the company of Evelyn De Morgan. Edward Poynter was appointed the first Slade Professor at University College in 1871, and although he held the post for less than six years, he made quite an impact. Poynter laid great stress on drawing the nude figure as the basis of a serious art curriculum. This was important at a time when many female artists were denied access to life-classes. From the start the Slade took women art students seriously, and provided mixed classes in the study of the draped model. Even so, it was not until 1898 that women were permitted to progress to study from the nude.

Mary began her career with portrait painting. A portrait of her sister Blanche was shown at the Royal Academy. However, it appears that she was not content with portraiture and soon experimented with other genres. Her career as an active painter lasted from c.1875 to 1893, during which time she exhibited eight works at the Grosvenor Gallery, one at the New Gallery, one at the Manchester City Art Gallery and one at the Royal Society of Artists. Most of these works indicated her leaning towards landscape painting, but she also attempted paintings of a more poetic and symbolic nature which may have been influenced by Evelyn De Morgan, Walter Crane and Burne-Jones. There were mixed opinions about her stature as an artist. Susan Tweedsmuir wrote: 'I should like to be able to record that she was a great artist. If hard work and unflagging will power could have made her so, she would have been one: but her work, though faithful and accurate, was never

more than mediocre'.<sup>14</sup> However, the author of her obituary in *The Times* suggested that 'her talent was genuine and seriously cultivated'.<sup>15</sup>

Mary quickly allied herself to avant-garde artists. She sought the advice of both Walter Crane and Burne-Jones. A close friendship developed with the latter which explains the inclusion of her portrait in *The Golden Stairs*. The letters the two men sent to her were subsequently deposited at Wightwick Manor, Wolverhampton, by Lady Fairfax-Lucy, the daughter of Susan Tweedsmuir. They indicate the strength of friendship between Mary and Burne-Jones from the mid-1870s onwards. It is clear from the letters that Mary had serious artistic intentions and already had her own studio. She consulted Burne-Jones about models, and on one occasion enlisted his help in obtaining a model she was particularly taken with. Burne-Jones wrote: 'I have been very kind to you. I have written to get the address of that model for you – a thing I couldn't do for myself though I have wanted that young female here many months.'

She was not just interested in fine art but was also keen to experiment with design work. The letters Walter Crane wrote to her, dating from 1875-76, suggest that she was looking for ventures that would be commercially successful:

I enclose the note to Mr. W. H. Ward which you ask [for]. They are the only people I happen to know who bring out Valentines.

If you had the inclination to try a design for a Valentine with the figure or figures done upon a dark ground, in a Pompeian sort of manner, I believe you would have a good chance with Messrs. Ward, as some American novelties which appeared last year – figures on black grounds – extremely vile though they were – had great success, but no doubt something artistic might be done on the same principle. I merely offer the suggestion, as I know Messrs. Ward expressed a wish to bring out something of the sort last year.

Marcus Ward was the most important company involved in the production of greeting cards, and this recently developed area offered opportunities for women. There was the prospect of moving from greetings cards to illustrated magazines and ultimately books.

The letters from Burne-Jones to Mary reveal a lively relationship in which Burne-Jones apparently revelled, but from which his wife was evidently excluded. In 1879 Burne-Jones wrote to her: 'Come and have tea with me, will you? Can you on Wednesday and you shall see my *Annunciation* – it is the only day I can show it you, for on Thursday it goes away. I asked Miss Gladstone to come but I don't know if she will – but do thou come at any rate and I'll walk back with you.' Another letter reveals Burne-Jones's shyness and dislike of Show Sundays when he was at 'home' to all and sundry: 'If I could have known to-day that you were going on to me I should have turned back – I had fled from the house because I was threatened with the arrival of a very unbearable bore (whose name I won't tell you, because you would instantly make mischief).'

The famous incident when Burne-Jones dismissed the family cook without telling Georgie is also recounted in a letter to Mary:

... will you come to lunch? Tomorrow will you? Wednesday will you? Thursday

will you? we have no cook because while Georgie was out the other afternoon I sent her away for being so ugly (its true, I don't care who knows it) I could think of working all day long but for her face, if face it could be called – but there are chops for guests and bread and wine.

The cook was twice as big as I and twelve times as big as Georgie – that's twenty-four times and it was a brave thing to do and the only thing I am proud of as having done. I was rather frightened when I'd done it and went rapidly to town and bought some goldfish . . . and presented them as a peace offering and all was well.

The letters are full of Burne-Jones's jocular banter, perhaps surprising given that he has often been misconstrued as a depressive. However, on occasions he does reveal a darker side: 'Phil has gone back . . . and Margot is at school and Georgie is quite fat and my father is here and is very trying, very – as parents always are – he sits and admires everything that belongs to me like I could beat him and it makes me feel wicked and remorseful.' The teasing character of the correspondence is exemplified by this last extract, which perhaps demonstrates why his friends found it impossible to throw away his letters:

I dare say you think it an excuse and this bitter remark brings me to the subject of the ring at the bell – and I want to tell you how bad it was for my budding morals the other day at your house to hear you all exclaim together when some poor one knocked at the door 'Now, Who's this bore!' – and wherever I go in the world people do it . . . I wish you were coming to tea this afternoon, I hope somebody will come, I would say who's this bore.

By the close of the 1870s Mary had established herself as an artist and was part of the intellectual and artistic world. Yet at the age of thirty-two her prospects of marriage looked slight. But then unexpectedly a proposal came, from Ralph, Lord Wentworth, and her whole life changed. Ralph Gordon Noel was the grandson of Lord Byron, his mother being Ada Lovelace, the poet's legitimate daughter. Mary may have feared that marriage would restrict – even end – her artistic activities. Fortunately these fears were unfounded. After marriage she continued to paint, her husband providing a studio for her at their London home, Wentworth House. However, it was Ralph's succession to the Lovelace estates in 1893 which seems to have brought her career as an exhibiting artist to an end. The reason for this was that when her husband inherited the estates he also gained possession of the Byron papers. The study of these papers were to become his obsession in later life. This proved a trial to his wife. As Sarah Tweedsmuir wrote: 'The whole Byron saga became a sheer weariness to her, a weariness shot with constant alarm, that there should be something published about Byron or his wife which would make [him] . . . angry or unhappy.'<sup>16</sup> Instead she devoted herself to the maintenance of the estates which she ran until her death in 1941. Her commitment to the latter, and her continued support of the arts and crafts, is confirmed by Susan Tweedsmuir:

She planned the building and improvement of the cottages on her husband's

estates. She also took a leading part in any movements for the revival of arts and crafts, and she constantly voiced her conviction that people should not buy antique furniture and old pictures, but patronise and support the arts of their own day. She was an ardent admirer of William Morris, and of the architect Voysey, and their influence led her down strange paths.<sup>17</sup>

Although Mary abandoned her own independent career she continued to believe in the importance of art in society. She was committed to the Home Arts and Industries Association, forming two classes on her husband's estates at Ockham and Porlock Weir. Voysey provided designs for the Ockham furniture shop while the Porlock class produced decorative leather work. With the help of Voysey she designed cottages for her estate workers and improved their living conditions. She even provided Village Halls. She extended her sense of family to the community, which although conforming to the 'paternalistic' ethos of a socially responsible aristocracy, does not diminish her achievement. As an artist, designer, patron and philanthropist she recognised the power of art to improve the lives of ordinary people. Art gave meaning to her life. She lived an exemplary life and perhaps after all fulfilled Burne-Jones's idea of a 'Golden Girl'.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> John Christian, 'The Golden Stairs', in L. Parris (ed.), *The Pre-Raphaelites*, Tate Gallery Exhibition Catalogue, (1984), No. 154, p. 235-236.
- <sup>2</sup> Penelope Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones*, (London: Michael Joseph 1975), p. 183.
- <sup>3</sup> *National Art Collections Fund Annual Journal*, (1924), p. 457.
- <sup>4</sup> See Anne Anderson, 'Soul's Beauty: Burne-Jones and Girls on *The Golden Stairs*', in *19th Century*, Vol. 18, No. 1, Spring 1998, pp. 17-23.
- <sup>5</sup> John Christian, *Burne-Jones. The paintings, graphic and decorative work of Sir Edward Burne-Jones*, Arts Council, (1975), No. 237, p. 76.
- <sup>6</sup> *Edward Burne-Jones*, op. cit., p. 180.
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 183. There are no preparatory drawings to verify this. In fact Mary Sturt Wortley may be the girl behind Mary Gladstone with her head turned away from the spectator. Numerous photographs of Mary depict her in this manner, especially the one by Frederick Hollyer dated to c.1885.
- <sup>8</sup> Postcard from Lady Mander in the Tate Gallery Archive.
- <sup>9</sup> John Christian, in *The Pre-Raphaelites*, op. cit., p. 236.
- <sup>10</sup> Lord Wharnccliffe also commissioned *King Cophetua and the Beggard-maid* from Burne-Jones.
- <sup>11</sup> Susan Tweedsmuir, *The Lilac and the Rose*, (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. 1952), p. 28.
- <sup>12</sup> Caroline Grosvenor and Lord Stuart of Wortley, 'The First Lady Wharnccliffe', in Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: the Windflower Letters. Correspondence with Alice Caroline Stuart Wortley and her family*, (London: Longman 1988), p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *The Lilac and the Rose*, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> *The Times*, 21 April 1941.

<sup>16</sup> *The Lilac and the Rose*, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 29.