

BURNE-JONES - A QUEST FOR LOVE

When I left Oxford I got to know Rossetti, whose friendship I sought and obtained. He is, you know, the most generous of men to the young:- I couldn't bear with a young man's dreadful sensitiveness and conceit as he bore with mine. He taught me practically all I ever learnt: afterwards I made a method for myself to suit my nature. ¹

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, more perceptive than any of his contemporaries, was the ideal person for Edward Burne-Jones to present himself to as a young, aspiring artist. He recognised Burne-Jones's native talent and encouraged him to build upon it without recourse to the stifling academic procedures, which were the accepted training practice of the time. The non-conformist art which arose from this method of teaching left Burne-Jones vulnerable to hostile criticism. However, to approach his art from an academic position is to completely miss the point. For the only way to appreciate its genius is to approach it with an innocent eye.

Cupid's Forge (plate) was exhibited at the Old Watercolour Society in 1865, together with five others by the artist. It prompted a substantial review in *The Art Journal* which fell into the trap of comparing Burne-Jones's aesthetics with the writer's own conservative prejudices.

In the first place, we would inquire why it is that he overlooks usual anatomical proportions and the acknowledged bases on which the human body is constructed? Again we would wish to know how it is he does not cast these draperies upon his figures with some express relation to the forms they clothe, and why he does not cast these draperies into folds and masses which by the well-ascertained laws of gravity they are bound to assume?

2

The result of visiting Italy in 1859 and 1862 had been an enriching experience, manifest by rich and dark colouration, tending towards the choice of iron reds and dark oranges combined with deep greens. Thus his naive view presented in his earlier drawing became more complex by the inclusion of sumptuous colour, at this time chiefly derived from study of Venetian painting. Edward Clifford, who first discovered Burne-Jones in the early 1860s, completely understood the artist's intention when he wrote:

... The Forge of Cupid, which is as magnificent in colour as any picture ever painted. The autumn trees, the pine wood, and the white sky are of unparalleled beauty. ³

The charge of eccentricity was a natural charge for the Philistines to make against him, but it was a bewildering one to

the victim, for he had painted things quite naively, as they appeared to him. Only he had no academic proclivities. ⁴

No one else has ever approached him in the perfection of the use of body colour. Sometimes it is scrumbles like an impalpable mist, sometimes it is dragged on thick, sometimes it lies like a fine powder. And the paper itself reveals new qualities when it is stained with his adorable pigments. ⁵

When *Cupid's Forge* was painted, Burne-Jones's technique was to make very few preparatory studies; those which were made were generally figure studies, complete and fully resolved. Most of the work, including the background, took place on the final paper or canvas in colours. Rarely considered as a landscape painter, Burne-Jones's genius for it is evident in this early work. Though a minor part of his output, his treatment of it, which reacted against Pre-Raphaelite detail and sought a generic, textural effect, was highly effective as an emotional key to the figures. This conception had a considerable impact upon subsequent painters.

The eclecticism of Burne-Jones's sources is evident in *The Blue Woman* (plate), which, together with *Clara* and *Sidonia Von Bork* (Tate Gallery, plates &), suggest that like Rossetti, Burne-Jones had a fondness for German sixteenth century engravings. ⁶ The designs share the features of a condensed divided interior; the figures occupy the majority of the picture yet allow distant rectangular spaces to embrace subsidiary themes. In contrast the overall background is distinctly a patterned two-dimensionality. Subjects from this early date were often contrasting: virtuous women and seductresses. *The Blue Woman* obviously represents such a virtuous lady, and it may well be a trial version of *Clara von Bork*, made to accompany the first *Sidonia* (private collection, USA) as both pictures pre-date the pair in the Tate Gallery. Her face resembles that of the artist's future sister-in-law, Agnes MacDonald.

The charming icon *Venus* (plate) is typical of the artist's simple view of life at this time (1860). A large part of his early painting concerns itself with the celebration of an uncomplicated and innocent beauty and in this work there is none of the pessimism that is so evident in his later works. However, menacing elements do occur and can be seen in the contemporaneous works that deal with *Fair Rosamund* and *Queen Eleanor*.

*

It was Watts much later who compelled me to try and draw better. ⁷

A study of the dialogue between George Frederick Watts and Burne-Jones has yet to be made. There was a long standing friendship which involved an exchange of influences. Initially Watts wished to redress the lack of formal training in Burne-Jones's career. The effect of this criticism on one hand gave Burne-Jones a sense of inferiority which he never really lost; on the other it drove him to move away from the medieval simplicity of his drapery studies to the complexity of a neo-classical style that anticipated and influenced the emerging Aesthetic movement. The critic, Sidney Colvin recognised in Burne-Jones's ideas and development the essential modernity of his art; writing in 1870, he stated that:

... the strength of his work lies in its genuine expression of an imagination of the nineteenth century because it does not deal with figures in nineteenth century hats and bonnets. ⁸

Colvin agreed with Watts and said of Burne-Jones's art:

His power of painting has been immensely in advance of his power of drawing. ⁹

Evidence of this concentration upon these apparent defects resulted in the artist producing a series of masterful drawings of great intensity which emerged from the mid-1860s. He located, in his admiration for late Renaissance art, especially from Mantegna and the book *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a nostalgia for classical Greece and Rome that exactly paralleled his own. This redirection is evident in the drawing *A Draped Figure* (plate), which not only depicts an analytical and dissective approach to the drapery, but also demonstrates a new interest in the medium for its own sake. The manifest sadness permeating the drawing is characteristic of the emotions aroused by his liaison with Maria Zambaco which began around 1867. ¹⁰

It can be argued that the whole of Burne-Jones's work is concerned with the psychology of love. His first love for Georgiana MacDonald was uncomplicated, and the paintings of the period 1858 to 1864 echo this. However, the *femme fatale*, which was only hinted at in the early work, dominates the content of his paintings from the time of his affair with Maria. Throughout the 1870s his work became increasingly pessimistic in philosophy even though his preoccupation with absolute beauty did not diminish. This paradox is most apparent in the magnificent product of his middle period *Laus Veneris* (1873-78, now in the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, plate).

Venus Epithalamia shows how far Burne-Jones's design had moved from the quaintness of the works of ten years earlier. The female nude divides the painting into two halves, her sensuality predominates, whilst beyond, the recessed stairway and the procession give the narrative justification for the picture. Such blatant sexuality is rare in Burne-Jones's work, but is softened by the obvious tenderness felt towards the model, Maria Zambaco. He deftly avoids the voyeuristic element which tends to predominate in bourgeois painting of the period.

Unfortunately, although Burne-Jones intended to move to Greece and live with Maria, the affair's disastrous climax wrecked both their lives. During the period of most unhappiness, from around 1870 to 1875, the angst felt by the lovers permeates the works he was creating; his figures became angular, their expression often painful and his lines became nervous, gestural and erratic. Three works in the present exhibition are typical. In *Hercules* (plate) the figure's distress is evident in all three ways. The key work *Souls by the Styx* (plate) is most revealing in its subject, where suffering souls await transport to Hades. Punishment and distress is the theme, a comparison to *Venus Epithalamia* (plate) is telling. The Wattsian gloom portrayed through the nocturnal atmosphere and the balanced texture of the bodies brings no respite to the image, while it is interesting to note that there is a passing homage to Watts's *Orpheus and Eurydice* (plate) in the distant pair of lovers. The studies made for this picture together with its subject show how effective Burne-Jones could be in selecting a theme which exactly suited his state of mind. Never was autobiography so closely interwoven between artist and his output.

*

*I was always drawing. Unmothered, with a sad papa, without sister or brother, always alone, I was never unhappy, because I was always drawing.*¹¹

The process continued for his entire life and in order to expurgate the pain of a distasteful dream or situation Burne-Jones would satirise himself in the comic drawings which he made to amuse his immediate friends or family (plates &). In themselves, they would make an informative biography. The two *Artist's Dreams* are closer than usual to the themes of his painting, in that they depict a woman as a frightening intrusion.

*

*What of Burne-Jones as a draughtsman and painter? First and foremost he was a master of design. As a designer he had the copiousness of the great artists of the past;*¹²

Coming from William Rothenstein, one of the great British draughtsmen of the 1930s, and made at a time when appreciation for Burne-Jones was at its lowest, this is praise indeed. Rothenstein acknowledges Burne-Jones's fecundity and versatility. As a designer for stained glass, book illustration, tapestry etc., Burne-Jones is unrivalled; his inventiveness is unending and part of this is due to the eclectic nature of his sources, part to his native genius and part through his sense of insecurity, which lead him to return to source material. The demands made by the Morris Firm to supply hundreds of designs each year did not result in a monotonous repetition, for he approached each design individually. Consequently the design within his paintings is always fresh. His apparent preference for elongated verticality is a spill over from his designing figures for the lancets of Gothic windows. Many of the single figure decorative paintings such as *St George* (plate), *St Cecilia*, and *Sybilla Delphica* originate from stained glass designs.

The two designs for the applied arts in the present group of works derive from the late period. *Flodden Field* (plate), which is atypical since it was designed to be sculpted by Sir Edgar Boehm, was commissioned by the artist's friend and patron, George Howard, Ninth Earl of Carlisle. As a rule, battles were of little interest to Burne-Jones since they epitomised destructive masculinity, ie. man as the aggressor rather than the victim. The finished sculptural relief was made as a compensation for the loss of the initial commission, *Arthur in Avalon*, originally meant for the library at Naworth Castle; Burne-Jones could not bring himself to part with the painting and he worked upon it from 1881 until his death, even going so far as to hire a special studio exclusively for it. In its early stages the battle was portrayed as raging around Arthur's resting place in the painting and would suggest that *Flodden Field* derived from *Arthur in Avalon* more directly than would at first appear. Burne-Jones and George Howard both responded deeply to the Howards' picturesque ancient castle at Naworth, lying in its own valley that reverberates with Border history. One theory which may well have inspired the subject is that the nearby church and hamlet of Arthuret had links with the death of King Arthur. George Howard himself had illustrated a similar theme in the 1860s. Having lost *Arthur in Avalon*, artist and patron sought another colourful historic episode as a replacement. The alternative chosen, which involved both the Borders and George Howard's ancestors, was the battle at Flodden. Although nine centuries at least

separated legend of Arthur in Avalon and the Battle of Flodden Field, Burne-Jones's interpretation of the scene in each work is much the same. Two relief versions exist today, one in the library at Naworth Castle and the other in Carlisle Art Gallery.

*

St Philip's church, Birmingham, had a special place in Burne-Jones's heart as it was only a short distance from Bennett Hill, where he grew up. Consequently the windows which were installed in the church from his designs show a consummate mastery and stature that bears tribute to his genius. Being a Neo-Classical church the windows were ideally suited to his picture making style. Extremely large, they challenged him to overcome the problems accompanying such a vast scale. His answer in *The Nativity* (plate) was to create an emphatic diagonal division of the space, offset by groupings of elongated figures in either corner. This design is unusual in that it is painted in gouache and gold paint and carries no evidence of lead lines. Under normal circumstances these cartoons evolved in the Morris studio, but in the case of *The Nativity* the evidence would suggest that it was made after the cartoon (Victoria and Albert Museum), as an alternative finished version in itself.

*

I have 60 pictures, oil and water in my studio & every day I would gladly begin a new one. ¹³

Burne-Jones wrote this at a time when the misery of the Zambaco affair was at its most intense. Stress had the result of making his creativity more active and for that reason, during the last twenty years of his life, his imagination produced far more than he could possibly bring to completion. During the early 1870s he conceived of the idea of creating a Renaissance type studio, employing numerous assistants and apprentices to carry out the great body of work that he invented. Today there exists a huge corpus of paintings which emanated from the studio in an incomplete form. The Master supervised all stages and was responsible for the finishing touches, correcting any errors or unsatisfactory textures. Whilst *Arthur in Avalon* was in production it underwent numerous adaptations, and *The Hill Fairies* (plates &) were invented as side panels to make it into a triptych. The idea was abandoned after 1885 and the two side panels exist today in an unfinished state. They were framed and exhibited at the great Burne-Jones Memorial Exhibition held at the New Gallery in 1898, and sold in his first studio sale.

*

... every drawing from his hand, every fragment of design, each patient study of leaf, or flower or drapery, has in it something of that imaginative impulse which controls and informs the completed work. ¹⁴

... Burne-Jones's work most essential characteristic, certainly his greatest accomplishment. We mean his gift of composition of line, his power of precisely and perfectly filling and never overcrowding, the space... ¹⁵

*But as a master of line he was always unequalled; to draw was his natural mode of expression - line flowed from him almost without volition. If he were merely playing with a pencil, the result was never a scribble, but a thing of beauty however slight, a perfect design.*¹⁶

Today Burne-Jones stands free from the prejudicial views which stemmed from around 1910, an outcome of Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist exhibitions held in England, that existed until renewed interest in the Victorian era in the late 1950s began to clear them away. Now we can accept the truth of the three foregoing quotations. As a technician the artist was in control of a variety of media. What makes his evident mastery so compelling is that image and material are inevitably linked. His command of different media allowed him to utilise specific means for a particular type of image - a pastel drawing is not just physically different from a pencil drawing, but evokes a completely dissimilar type of emotional response. Many drawings, made between 1874 to c.1878 showed a new confidence in their fine controlled line, replacing the anguished hesitancy with a sinuous and serpentine line which weaved its way across many decorative surfaces and anticipated Art Nouveau by twenty years. Even those drawings which were not decorative in function had the same incisiveness that preforms the image. (*Sybilla Delphica* and *Head of a Girl*, plates &).

Although the *Sybilla Delphica* drawing was based upon Maria's features the absence of tortured lines and the calm dignity of the pose, together with the disciplined use of hard pencil would indicate that the artist and his muse had achieved a state of resolution. That is not to say that the hard pencil drawings were the sole form of expression during this period. A love of texture continued to be evident on Burne-Jones's use of coloured crayons and chalks which were used to great effect on various coloured papers (plate).

The Tree of Forgiveness was something of a watershed for Burne-Jones; it is an epic restatement of the watercolour *Phyllis and Demaphoon* (plates &), and is as revealing. In the first version the artist declared his entanglement with Maria, in the larger version he stated with great tenderness the forgiving aspect of the story and significantly gave to it the title. Maria had returned to London in 1879 and they were in contact again, thus the painting's message of strength and resignation inevitably had a great personal significance.

It was not only Burne-Jones's consummate sense of design which gives a dynamic to his painting, but also the effective depiction of the interaction of two or more figures. The psychological tension generated by their relative positions is endorsed often by exchanged glances. The energy of the exchange becomes the pivotal point of the work; this is most apparent in the *Tree of Forgiveness*, but is also used most powerfully in the complex design of *The Golden Stairs* (plates &). When a model is drawn full faced, Burne-Jones rarely allows the subject to engage the viewer (*Head of a Girl*, plate), but when he actually does, as in *The Annunciation*, (Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight), it produces a profound impact. (Frequently the model used for the direct gaze was his wife, Georgie).

It was often commented upon by his contemporaries that Burne-Jones did not have the skills required to make a portrait painter - but nor did he have the desire to become one. However he did make innumerable portraits of people he cared for within the immediate circle of his family and friends. The more involved he was with the sitter, the more successful the portrait, but ultimately he responded to the qualities in them which already existed in his own vision.

One feels that the portrait of Helen Mary Gaskell (plate) is more of an idealised image than a literal portrait. This said, it cannot be denied that all his portraits have a singular and personal quality. Characteristically they show no animation of feature as it was his intention to go beyond their mere physiognomy in order to reveal the soul of a beloved friend. (plate).

*

Dating from the period of most unhappiness *Love's Wayfaring* (1870-1898) can only be called a pessimistic picture. The scars of his encounter show in its intrinsic sadness, as the theme is the slavery and dependency that love imposes. Beauty is not excluded, yet forms the basis of the painting; it satirises the misconceived joy that lovers feel and portrays them literally in bondage. Burne-Jones has always been represented as the least sensual artist amongst his contemporaries. That this idea is mistaken is easily proven by the male nude studies (plates &) for this work. The softness of his line, the warm colours of paper and crayon and the contours of the nude are all placed in the service of a sensual image. We can only deplore the fact that the final painting in the Victoria and Albert Museum is the work of studio assistants.

Illness marred long stretches of Burne-Jones's life. The ensuing periods of confinement away from the studio did not dam his creative stream. An informal style developed which came to maturity in the 1880s. He developed pictures without recourse to laborate studies which were complete in themselves. These enabled him to investigate ideas and themes without the scrutiny of the public eye. Mid-way between book illustration and painting, they were generally made as gifts to intimate friends and family. His wife, Georgiana, was the recipient of the thirty eight circular gouaches which constituted *The Flower Book*. It was the artist's intention to publish them in book form and they can be seen as a tribute to the medieval illuminated manuscripts which he studied as a young man in the British Museum. In them can be traced variations or commentaries upon themes that he had already used in his more public works. Amongst them are two which show a fascinating insight into existing paintings. *Wake Dearest* (plate) deals with the final kiss in *The Sleeping Beauty* story, something Burne-Jones left out of all three series of pictures and *Witches Tree* (plate), a re-interpretation of *Merlin and Vivien* goes further than the painting and show the aged musician completely succumbing to the enchantress. Also *The Flower Book* encompasses the whole of the artist's experience as a practical designer and includes references to his work for stained glass eg. *Flower of God* (plate) is an Annunciation, *Travellers Joy* (plate) is a nativity, whilst *Golden Cup* and *Honour's Prize* (plates &) are re-workings of subjects which occurred as tapestries.

*

*The ending of the tale you see;
The Lover draws anigh the tree,
And takes the branch, and takes the rose,
That Love and he so dearly chose.*

Over many years Burne-Jones elaborated ideas which emerged as his response to the briar rose - an ancient native of the British countryside. It's attractiveness lay for him not only in it's delicate flower, admired throughout history by poet and painter alike, but for the effectiveness of it's cruelly protective thorns. They came to symbolise his experience of love which brought both pleasure and pain - the pleasure in an idealised loved one which

simultaneously brought about feelings of despair and ultimate loss. In fact it can be observed that the ambiguity it inspired was so deep rooted in Burne-Jones's personality as to form its basis and to inform the whole of his art. Certainly the *Briar Rose* series had their origin in his early design for the tile panel *Sleeping Beauty* (1861). The subsequent three sets of *Briar Rose* paintings occupied large periods of work until the final series was completed in 1890. The legend of the *Romaunt of the Rose* from Chaucer inspired a set of embroidery designs in 1874. The tale, like that of *Sleeping Beauty*, deals with a quest against adversity to reach the Heart of the Rose. From the embroidery designs Burne-Jones selected three to make a triptych: *Pilgrim at the Gate of Idleness* (on temporary loan to *Pincturo Victoriana* exhibition at the Prado Museum), *Love Leading the Pilgrim* (Tate Gallery), and *The Heart of the Rose*.

The Heart of the Rose (plate) parallels the final painting of the *Sleeping Beauty* series (plate) in that it portrays the union of the Princess (the rose) and the Prince (the pilgrim). Both the paintings reveal the pursuers, Prince and Pilgrim, standing in awe at beauty enthroned. Although Pilgrim is presented directly to the Rose by Love, she still remains unfathomable - a distant and elusive figure, her physical beauty his only reward. When Burne-Jones redesigned the story for inclusion in the Kelmscott Press Chaucer, his interpretation went a stage further and the Heart of the Rose is portrayed with her face turned away towards the infinite heavens; sphinx-like, she has her eyes closed. Burne-Jones would seem to have finally realised that the mysteries of love and existence would always remain an enigma for him.

The works illustrated here provide an opportunity to trace the development of one of the most important English painters of the nineteenth century, whose evolution directed the aesthetic development of English culture. Burne-Jones led the way forward to Symbolism, and in his late period achieved a European stature, the influence of which went so far as to touch the young Picasso in Spain in the 1890s.

Bill Waters, May 1993.

¹. J Comyns Carr, Exhibition Catalogue, *The New Gallery Exhibition of the Work of Sir Edward Burne-Jones*, New Gallery, 1898, page 9.

². *The Art Journal*, 1898, page 174.

³Edward Clifford, *Broadlands as it was*, London, 1890, page 57.

⁴Ibid. page 51.

⁵Ibid. page 50.

⁶J Christian, "Early German Sources for Pre-Raphaelite Designs", *The Art Quarterly*, Volume 36, 1973, page 56.

⁷J Comyns Carr, Exhibition Catalogue, *The New Gallery Exhibition of the Works of Sir Edward Burne-Jones*, The New Gallery, 1898, page 9.

⁸Sidney Colvin, "English Painters of the Present Day, III Edward Burne-Jones", *The Portfolio*, 1870, page 17.

⁹Ibid. page 20.

¹⁰The dating of the drawing is incorrect, it cannot be derived from the year 1862 and stylistically it has to be dated 1869-70.

¹¹Quoted 1890, M Harrison and B Waters, *Burne-Jones*, Barrie & Jenkins, 1973, page 2.

¹²Tate Gallery Exhibition Catalogue, *Centenary Exhibition of Painting and Drawing by Sir Edward Burne-Jones 1833-1898*, June 17 to August 31, 1933, page 6.

¹³J Comyns Carr, *New Gallery Catalogue*, 1989, page 13.

¹⁴F Wedmore, *On Books and Arts*, London, 1899, page 261.

¹⁵G Robertson, *Time Was. The Reminiscences of W Graham Robertson*, London, 1931, page 84.

¹⁶Quoted letter to Charles Eliot Norton, M Harrison and B Waters, *Burne-Jones*, Barrie & Jenkins, 1973, page 103.