

Guest editorial 'As good work as I do': Burne-Jones and stained glass

The first of Burne-Jones's commissions for stained glass came in 1857. This was for the window showing Jesus the Good Shepherd made by James Powell & Sons for a church in Maidstone, a design which was said to have 'driven Ruskin wild with joy'.¹ After that the career of Burne-Jones as stained glass designer was to flourish. The statistics bow you over: according to his Morris & Co. account books 786 stained glass designs in total were made by Burne-Jones between 1861 and 1898, the year in which he died (see p. 116). At the height of his activity in the 1870s, as computed by the Morris stained glass expert A. C. Sewter, Burne-Jones was producing on average a stained glass cartoon every eight and a half days. From his relatively tentative beginnings stained glass had become part of the rhythm of his life.

How did he himself regard the process of designing that became such a substantial proportion of his output? We must not forget that Burne-Jones's original intention had been to be a painter. In the course of that now legendary discussion in Le Havre, marking the definite decision of Burne-Jones and William Morris not to become clergymen, the friends had allotted themselves their future roles: Morris was to be the architect and Burne-Jones the fine artist. It was partly for reasons of financial necessity that Burne-Jones soon began to see his *métier* more broadly, as the painter whose more experimental imaginative art could be supported by commissioned design work in many different areas from book illustration to embroidery and tapestry, painted furniture, mosaic and stage design. The chief of these, giving him a regular remuneration, would be stained glass.

In 1893, writing to his then *inamorata* May Gaskell, Burne-Jones gave her an honest run-down of his career: 'I have never been able to live by my pictures – but for the designs of windows I should have lived in some poverty always'. He went on to tell her 'I have done many hundreds of them, and from some points they are as good work as I do – from the point of design namely'.² By the end of his life he was certainly accepting the importance of his work in decorative art which had developed in its confidence and power in parallel to his more introspective and imaginative paintings. The two ways of work were interdependent. They led on one another. And, as Burne-Jones himself had come to see it, there was a sense in which he needed both.

He needed the connectedness design work gave him in contrast to his lonely struggles in the studio, tackling those huge themes of creation, fate and doom. He needed the steadying influence of working to a definite commission, to a deadline (although in fact his deadlines tended to be stretchable) in a life of sometimes desperate emotional vicissitudes. Burne-Jones, born in 1833 in Birmingham, had been a sadly solitary child. His mother died when the infant was only six days old, a terrible event which lastingly affected his relationships with women which tended to be clinging but fundamentally guilt-ridden. His father, a struggling gilder and picture frame maker, was inarticulate with grief. The clever nervy boy grew into a pale, slim, shy and oversensitive youth with a distant longing for camaraderie.

The important friendships Burne-Jones made first at Oxford then in London helped him find the direction in his life. The chief of these friends of course was William Morris and any account of Burne-Jones's stained glass is inextricably intertwined with his. But there were earlier encouragers among the group of largely Pre-Raphaelite artists who welcomed and befriended Burne-Jones when he first



FIG. 1 (opposite): Tree of Jesse window with Creation Blue window above, designed by Burne-Jones for Waltham Abbey, Essex, and made by James Powell & Sons (1860–61). Photograph © Peter Cormack.



FIG. 2: Detail of Angels window by Burne-Jones (1862) for St Michael and All Angels, Brighton. He looked back in old age in 1898 on his enormous repertoire of angels, saying 'I must have by now designed enough to fill Europe'. Photograph © Peter Cormack.

arrived to live in London in 1857. It was Dante Gabriel Rossetti who had brokered Burne-Jones's first stained glass design, the one for the Maidstone *Good Shepherd*, passing on the commission that had originally been offered to him.

Burne-Jones went on to design more stained glass for James Powell: the sequence of three windows for St Andrew's College, Bradford; the St Frideswide window for Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford; the *Tree of Jesse* with an already remarkably confident Rose window for Waltham Abbey (FIG. 1). There's a mention in George Price Boyce's diary of a visit to Bradfield in June 1860 to see Burne-Jones's stained glass and another, a few weeks later, of going to Powell's glassworks and examining two sections of the St Frideswide stained glass for Oxford. It appears that by now Burne-Jones's stained glass was being recognised with interest at least within the intimate Pre-Raphaelite world.

William Morris had married first, in 1859. Red House, the red brick building at Bexleyheath in Kent, had been purpose designed for Morris and his bride Jane Burden. Morris planned to make it 'the beautifullest place on earth',³ drawing his friends into an idealistic mid-Victorian community endeavour. Extended visits were paid to Red House by Burne-Jones and his fiancée Georgiana Macdonald, the Methodist minister's daughter he had first met yet years before when she was still a child in Birmingham. Other friends collected for what were evidently jovial working holidays, assisting William Morris in the internal decoration of the house.

Though Burne-Jones was inherently so introverted and anxious he could also be almost manically sociable. Working on Red House alongside Morris was, for him, an intense pleasure, productive in both personal and professional terms. He painted scenes in tempera on the walls of the drawing room. He designed a pair of small and glowing stained glass windows, one depicting Love in a bold red tunic, the other showing Fate, holding her wheel of fortune, robed in green. Here at Red House we see early signs of Burne-Jones the versatile practitioner over the whole spectrum of the decorative arts.

The Red House years are so important in terms of what they led to: the serious movement for design reform in which Morris and Burne-Jones would both play a leading role. Burne-Jones was one of the original seven partners in Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., the decorating company of multi-talented 'Fine Art Workmen' which was set up by Morris in 1860. Premises were taken at 8 Red Lion Square in Holborn incorporating a showroom and production workshops. A glass painter, George Campfield, was brought in as foreman. A prospectus was issued, offering the partners' skills in mural decoration, woodcarving and stonemasonry, furniture, embroidery as well as stained glass which soon developed into the commercial mainstay of the company.

We need to read into the formation of the 'the Firm', as it became colloquially known, Morris's hopes for a new future in which art took its place as absolutely central to the lives of people of all classes. 'What business have we with art at all

unless all can share it?' was the ferocious question Morris would later pose.⁴ But we also have to view the inception of the Firm, with its often beautifully idiosyncratic work, as part and parcel of the friendships and shared enthusiasms of the partners, especially the close rapport between Morris and Burne-Jones. They worked easily together. They had so much shared experience. They spoke each other's language. They shared each other's narratives. Especially their outlook was shaped by their joint love of the Arthurian, discovered by both of them at Oxford when they first read Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. From then on the Arthurian became their 'sacred land'.⁵

In 1862 the Firm exhibited successfully at the International Exhibition in South Kensington, the partners' first showing in public. Burne-Jones received a number of commissions, including a 'lay' commission from a private client for stained glass which Burne-Jones decided should depict the Arthurian story of King Mark and La Belle Isoult. 'His regular habit now and for years afterwards was to design and draw such things in the evening' Lady Burne-Jones informs us in her memoir of her husband. After a frustratingly long engagement she and Ned had now got married and were living in early wedded bliss in rooms in Great Russell Street in Bloomsbury. George implies that the daytime was reserved for more solemn endeavours, for his drawing and his painting, while his evening design work could be done in public, 'the presence of friends making no difference – and men returned to the habit of dropping in after dinner almost as freely as before his marriage'.⁶ The little quotation gives us a vivid feeling of how Burne-Jones's designs for stained glass got fitted into the easy-going pattern of his early married life.

He evidently worked with extraordinary fluency. Philip Webb, Burne-Jones's co-partner in the Firm, recollected the sheer proficiency of his design work: 'He was wonderfully swift and confident. I have seen him draw quite a big cartoon for glass in the evening after dinner'.⁷ It was not just technique. Even at this early stage one is aware of the immense resources in Burne-Jones's designy imagination too.

Through the 1860s the number of stained glass commissions placed with the Firm had been rising steadily from five in 1861 to sixteen in both 1863 and 1864. The most significant of these commissions were for church work, in particular for a sequence of new churches designed by G. F. Bodley, the Gothicist architect who was a friend of the partners and admirer of the Firm. Burne-Jones may by now have lost his religious faith in formal terms but he had retained his deep emotional attachment to what he called 'Christmas Carol Christianity',⁸ the power of the ancient Christian imagery, the mysteries inherent in those well-known Christian narratives. In a sense the loss of faith had freed him to interpret the old stories from the Bible in new ways.

The Firm's work on the Bodley churches – All Saints' at Selsey, St Martin's in Scarborough, St Michael and All Angels in Brighton (FIG. 2), All Saints' in Cambridge – was a communal endeavour undertaken in the Red House spirit. Jointly Morris and the partners painted ceilings and internal spaces of the buildings. When it came to the stained glass a system was evolved whereby Philip Webb directed the overall arrangement, Morris supervised the colour and assembly of the glass in the Red Lion Square workshops and almost all the partners contributed designs for the windows, Ford Madox Brown's stained glass being particularly vigorous. But Burne-Jones's innate sense of design and the depth of human feeling he achieves make his windows already stand out from the others. His *Adam and Eve* windows at Selsey probably show credible people faced with an impossible dilemma (FIG. 3). The spectator is drawn in to share their terror and bewilderment. In the 1870s Burne-Jones gradually took over the figure design and composition for the majority of stained glass windows supplied by the Morris firm.

In 1868, the Burne-Jones family, now including two small children Philip and Margaret, moved into a substantial house in Fulham with a good north-facing studio. The move to the Grange had coincided with a sudden crisis in their marriage, caused by Burne-Jones's meeting and consequent infatuation with a young Greek woman, separated from her husband. The impetuous, exotic Maria Zambaco first sat to Burne-Jones, then came to the studio to take lessons from him. She became what Janey Morris had already become for Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the visual obsession, the model and muse.

We can find Maria's features in so many of his paintings: Maria was the model for the predatory nymph in *The Beguiling of Merlin*, for the woman created to be worshipped by the artist in the beautiful cycle *Pygmalion and the Image*, for the desperate Phyllis in pursuit of Demophoon in the Burne-Jones painting which caused such public scandal it had to be withdrawn from the Old Watercolour Society's annual exhibition in 1870. Burne-Jones even succeeded in infiltrating the likeness of Maria into his stained glass windows. The Biblical figure of the cymbal-clashing Miriam, taken from a portrait drawing of Maria, was first used for the church of St Michael and All Angels in Waterford in Hertfordshire in 1872 and was to be repeated many times.

The Burne-Jones marriage suffered badly, Georgie behaving with heroic stoicism that made her husband's guilt the more intense. He went through a nervous collapse and over this tense period did very little work. But once the affair had ended – more or less – he appears to have arrived at some kind of equilibrium through the continuing rhythms and demands of both his painting and commissions in design. His little nephew Rudyard Kipling who stayed regularly at the Grange in the middle 1870s, while his parents were in India, remembered the house as a happy active place with 'most wonderful smells of paints and turpentine whiffing down from the big studio on the first floor where my Uncle worked'.

The child was aware of Burne-Jones's designs for stained glass still in their early stages: 'At bedtime one hastened along the passages, where unfinished cartoons lay against the walls. The Uncle often painted in their eyes first, leaving the rest in charcoal – a most effective presentation'.⁹ Kipling also reminds us of the frequent eruption in the household of 'Uncle Topsy', his and the Burne-Jones children's name for William Morris, who 'came in full of some business of picture-frames or stained glass or general denunciations'.¹⁰

Their collaboration was increasingly important from 1875 when Morris decided to reconstitute the Firm under his own control. From now on it was renamed Morris & Co. The acrimonious break-up of the partnership left Burne-Jones, alongside William Morris who continued as controller of colour and production, sole designer of all stained glass windows for the company. This was the time at which Burne-Jones's designs reach full maturity. There's a tremendous imaginative fecundity about, for example, the sequence of stained glass he designed in memory of the Viceroy in India, Lord Mayo, for St Peter's Cathedral in Calcutta. These superb windows are, alas, now very difficult to view.

Most impressive of all his stained glass of this mid-period is the series of windows for St Martin's Church at Brampton in Cumberland. It emerged, like so much Burne-Jones art, from the network of his friendships. The commission came through Burne-Jones's close friend and fellow artist George Howard, later 9th Earl of Carlisle. St Martin's Church itself was designed by his long-term ally Philip Webb. Burne-Jones provided the designs for every single window in St Martin's, culminating in the magnificent east window with its strangely haunting image of 'the Pelican in her piety'.¹¹ The success of the commission lies in its coherence, the whole power of the architectural ensemble.

The window at Brampton was the subject of one of the most famous entries in

Burne-Jones's Account Book with Morris & Co., a *tour de force* of a complaint that a mere £200 was underpayment for 'a colossal work of fifteen subjects – a masterpiece of style, a *chef d'oeuvre* of invention, a *capo d'opera* of conception'.¹² Often these recurring complaints have been taken at face value. They were something much more complex. As has been pointed out by Alan Crawford in a brilliantly perceptive paper 'Burne-Jones, stained glass and laughter' such laments were the expression of a wildly quirky humour. From them we get a flavour of the easy, allusive, bantering relationship that underlay Burne-Jones and William Morris's fruitful collaboration. He ended the job; he wrote out his complaint; he snapped the Account Book shut again. This became Burne-Jones's necessary ritual, repeated through the years.

The opening of the Grosvenor Gallery in New Bond Street in 1877 saw the start of Burne-Jones's years of real fame as a painter. In the aftermath of the Zambaco affair he had been living low, not feeling like exhibiting. The spectacular assemblage at the Grosvenor of eight unseen Burne-Jones paintings, which included *The Days of Creation*, *The Mirror of Venus* and *The Beguiling of Merlin*, resulted in an onrush of appreciation. From then on his reputation as a major artist of the *avant garde* was to be more or less secure. But for Burne-Jones such unaccustomed exposure would be nerve-racking. He was after all an idealist in art, disliking the commercial machinations of the art market, cringing at the social pressures now assailing one of the celebrity artists of his time. He complained of feeling like a cab-horse being driven simultaneously in all directions. One of the things that acted as a safeguard was his regular commitment to Morris & Co. stained glass.

He liked, indeed he depended on, the technical parameters, the disciplines involved in conceiving a design. As he explained in 1880 to his doctor, Dr Radcliffe, stained glass 'is a very limited art, and its limitations are its strength'.¹³ Alongside the vast abstract concepts of his paintings, some of which took many years to complete, some of which indeed would never be completed, Burne-Jones relished the specific commission related to a definite architectural space. His delighted explanation of his work in mosaic for the church of St Paul's Within-the-Walls in Rome could equally well apply to his stained glass: 'It's one of those things that I do outside painting, far away from it. It has more to do with architecture, and isn't a picture a bit'. He explained to this same friend 'I love to work in that fettered way, and am better in a prison than in the open air always'.¹⁴

Burne-Jones might sometimes balk at the technical restraints he encountered in designing, urging William Morris to start making his own 'pot' glass to improve the quality of colour in the glass the Firm continued buying in. Sometimes his clients drove him to distraction. But emotionally Burne-Jones still depended on the 'fettered' work that kept him rooted in reality and tackled it with a continuing zest and energy.

In the 1880s political differences between Burne-Jones and William Morris threatened to destabilise even that great friendship as Morris became increasingly

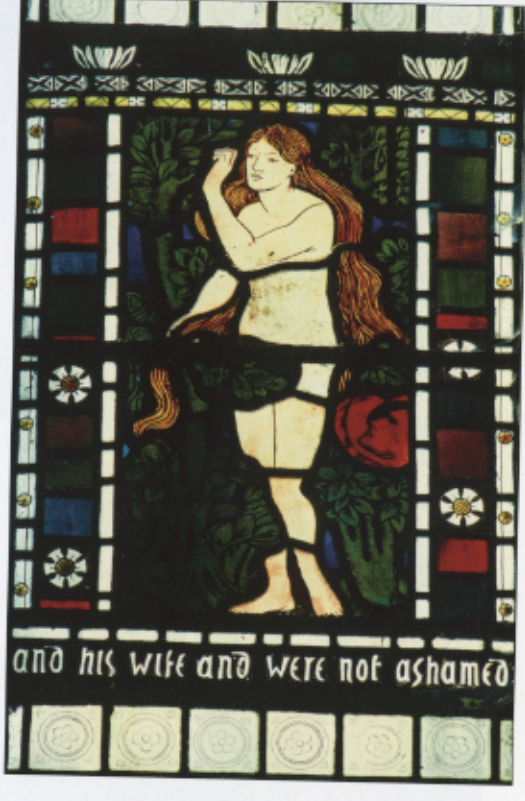


FIG. 3: Eve from Adam and Eve window designed by Burne-Jones (1862) for All Saints, Selsey, Gloucestershire, a church particularly rich in early Morris glass. Photograph © Peter Cormack.



FIG. 4: Detail from Crucifixion window, St Philip's Cathedral, Birmingham, designed by Burne-Jones (1888). Photograph © Peter Cormack.

History

NOTES

- 1 Aymer Vallance, 'The Decorative Art of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Bart.', *Easter Art Annual*, (1900): 2.
- 2 Edward Burne-Jones to Helen Mary ('May') Gaskell, 1893, private collection.
- 3 Edward Burne-Jones, quoted J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans Green, 1899), Vol. 1, 159.
- 4 William Morris to *The Manchester Examiner*, 14 March 1883, reprinted in Norman Kelvin (ed.), *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, Vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 173.
- 5 [Georgiana] [Burne-]Jones], *Memoirs of Edward Burne-Jones*, 2 vols. (London & New York: Macmillan & Co., 1904), Vol. 2, 247.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 1, 249.
- 7 R. R. Lethaby, *Philip Webb and his Work* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 249.
- 8 Mary Lago (ed.), *Burne-Jones Talking: His Conversations 1897-1898 Preserved by his Studio Assistant Thomas Rooke* (London: John Murray, 1982), 27.
- 9 Rudyard Kipling, *Something of Myself* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1937), 13.
- 10 Entry for May 1880, Burne-Jones Account Books with Morris & Co., Vol. 1 (1861-1882), Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (see transcript in this issue, pp. 123-83).
- 11 Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials*, Vol. 2, 109.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 159.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 14 Georgiana Burne-Jones to Charles Eliot Norton, 15 May 1886, Houghton Library, Harvard.
- 15 Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials*, Vol. 2, 296.

