

The Image of Aestheticism: Burne-Jones's *The Golden Stairs*

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Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera *Patience* opened at the Opera Comique in London on 23 April 1881. The stage directions to the opening scene read: 'Young ladies dressed in aesthetic draperies are grouped about the stage. They play on lutes, mandolins, etc., as they sing, and all are in the last stage of despair.'¹ From this description, the group could have stepped straight out of the canvas of *The Golden Stairs* by Edward Burne-Jones, which had been displayed for the first time at the Grosvenor Gallery, the previous May. Penelope Fitzgerald credits Luke Ionides, a patron of Burne-Jones, with suggesting 'to his crony W. S. Gilbert that he might like to write an opera based on Burne-Jones's maidens descending the golden stairs.'²

But why should this work, described by a contemporary critic as '... simply a troop of young girls descending a winding flight of stairs bearing musical instruments in their hands',³ have become the epitome of the Aesthetic Movement? The movement, then at its height, was an artistic revival appreciating a love of the beautiful and, as a contemporary indicated, a sign of 'modern intellect striving to attain that beauty in Art which abounds in Nature'.⁴ *Patience* was a satire on the movement, and it included a jibe at the 'greenery-yallery, Grosvenor Gallery'.⁵ The Grosvenor Gallery had been opened in 1877 by the wealthy Sir Coutts Lindsay and his equally monied wife to provide artists with an alternative show-case to the establishment Royal Academy. In the early years the Grosvenor's policy was in favour of the more avant-garde artists, so that it became identified with the Aesthetic Movement.

Until the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery, Burne-Jones had rarely exhibited in public since he had resigned from the Old Water-Colour Society in 1870. Rossetti wrote to *The Times* about the projected new gallery, 'Your scheme must succeed were it for one name associated with it – that of Burne-Jones – a name representing the loveliest art we have.'⁶ Walter Hamilton saw the Grosvenor Gallery as the headquarters of aesthetic art; a 'temple of art' in which 'Burne-Jones is the high priest'. Relevant to *The Golden Stairs*, is his statement that 'it is in the portrayal of female beauty that Aesthetic art is the most peculiar, both in conception as to what constitutes female loveliness, and the treatment of it'.⁷

The Golden Stairs, oil on canvas, was the first of Burne-Jones's large scale works, measuring nine feet by four. It had been designed in 1872, as the result of the impetus received from his Italian journey the previous year; begun in 1876 and finally completed just in time for the spring exhibition of 1880, at the Grosvenor, his only contribution that year. He had toyed with the idea of calling it 'Music on the Stairs' or 'The King's Wedding', but with typical ambiguity decided on *The Golden Stairs*. His wife noted in her diary that 'The picture is finished and so is the painter almost. He has never been so pushed for time in



Fig. 1. *The Golden Stairs* (1880).

his life'.⁸ However this is not apparent in the meticulously finished painting.

By exhibiting at the Grosvenor Gallery, the artist 'had an unexpected effect upon certain sections of the community'.⁹ E. F. Benson, in later life, reminisced that at the Grosvenor Gallery 'were companies of Burne-Jones's wan and willowy maidens, exquisitely painted who faltered up and down the Golden Stairs'. In consequence, 'wan women (in swiftly increasing numbers), were often seen about the London streets . . . It became fashionable in cultured circles to be pensive and willowy'.¹⁰ *The Golden Stairs* was thus largely responsible for the appearance and cultivation of a certain type of woman, providing a whole series of role models for the fashionable, artistic female, and thus becoming an established icon for the Aesthetic Movement.

The work was commissioned by Cyril Flower, who became Lord Battersea in 1892, a new patron of Burne-Jones. In 1877 he had married Constance Rothschild, whose cousin Blanche was Lady Lindsay, co-founder of the Grosvenor Gallery. Constance wrote many years later that at the beginning of her married life she had wanted to settle in Battersea, where her husband had inherited some land: 'I suggested making a "House Beautiful" in that region, allowing of closer intercourse with and better knowledge of men and women whose paths were so different from mine . . . It would have been a splendid experience. But it was not meant to be'.¹¹ Instead the Flowers settled for Surrey House, on the corner of Oxford Street and Edgware Road, to which they moved in 1879. Here, his wife says, Cyril 'added and built to accommodate furniture, pictures and books, of which we had a goodly collection'.¹²

William Rothenstein remembered visiting Flower's house at Marble Arch, when he was a student at the Slade School. He describes the man as 'fine and enlightened' and his home as 'a house full of paintings by Old Masters and objects of art'.¹³ It is not recorded when Cyril Flower first met Burne-Jones or took an interest in *The Golden Stairs*. Constance Flower notes that her husband 'showed independence of thought and originality in taste'; 'how his great love of art brought him into close touch with painters and sculptors, such as George Watts, Burne-Jones, Millais . . .'.¹⁴ She recalls her meeting with two Frenchwomen suffragists in 1911, who fervently admired Burne-Jones:

'Ah how beautiful is his picture called *The Golden Stairs*!' said the older lady . . . 'I am so glad,' I replied, 'for I have it.' 'Indeed!' said the lady, 'and what may be the size of your engraving?' 'Oh' I answered, 'there are many sizes [but] that does not matter much since I have the picture itself.' 'You have the original?' screamed the lady – 'the very original? Impossible!' 'Yes,' I said, much amused, 'Burne-Jones painted it expressly for us.' 'Then you knew him – you knew the master?' 'Yes, of course; he was a very great friend of ours.' 'A friend! then you belong to us, you belong to *le monde bohémien*!'¹⁵

Perhaps because the Batterseas had no children, Lord Battersea bequeathed *The Golden Stairs* to the National Gallery with a life interest to Lady Battersea. She surrendered this interest in 1924 and presented it through the National Art Collections Fund in order that it might be exhibited at the Tate Gallery.

Cyril Flower was a college friend of another aesthete, the writer Frederic Myers,

who maintained in an essay in 1883, that ‘assuredly the “aesthetic movement” is not a mere fashion of the day’ that ‘all the main forces of civilisation are tending towards artistic activity’.¹⁶ The work of Burne-Jones became closely associated – indeed identified – with the Aesthetic Movement, as the style which he evolved was poetic, one which served to create a mythical world through which the artist aimed to interpret the progress of the soul. John Ruskin considered that Burne-Jones’s ‘essential gift and habit of thought is in personification’; that he became ‘a painter of Mythology . . . understood by its symbolic figures to represent only general truths, or abstract ideas’.¹⁷ Ruskin’s view is particularly relevant to *The Golden Stairs* which exalts beauty independent of a meaning or message. It was this perception of beauty in art as a supreme experience in life which appealed to the aesthetic culture of the day; aesthetic in its Greek origin meaning literally ‘things perceptible to the senses.’

Walter Pater, the influential Aesthetic critic maintained that ‘All art constantly aspires to the condition of music’;¹⁸ and in this instance the reference to music is especially pertinent, as musical instruments are part of the decorative motif. It is known that Burne-Jones had a great love and appreciation of music. His wife and daughter both played instruments. Cyril Flower ‘also had a genuine love for music’.¹⁹ There was, moreover, at the time, a revival of interest in early music, especially amongst those involved in the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Ford Madox Hueffer wrote, that ‘towards the end of the seventies disinclination for bright schemes of colour begins to manifest itself . . . We have works like *The Golden Stairs*, which is practically a study in pale whites’.²⁰ Burne-Jones’s deliberate use of almost monochrome colouring in *The Golden Stairs* was certainly influential on the aesthetes. *Punch* commented on ‘that eminent Pagan Aesthetic’ with ‘his tinsel and gold and his sage-green tones’.²¹ But for some critics the range of colour was too limited. *The Illustrated London News* found, ‘The monotony of [the] masses of white [of the robes] . . . the least agreeable part of the colouring; not only is the tone too little varied, but the hues generally are opaque in lights and leaden in the shadows’.²² But it is the gradation of tone of the various hues, which gives the painting an effect of sculptured relief and adds to its abstract nature. Another contemporary found the picture ‘almost as sweet and delicate in its colour as a white lily’;²³ the lily being associated with the Aesthetic Movement as well as with purity and as an accoutrement to Virgin Goddesses. Cosmo Monkhouse, perhaps alluding to the current oriental influence in aesthetic circles, maintained that

. . . some cunning Japanese metal-worker with pale gold for the stairs and dull silver for the draperies, with soft greenish, brazen, and coppery amalgams for bush and hair and flesh, might reproduce the design of *The Golden Stairs*, with little alteration in colour and tone.²⁴

I believe R. Catterson-Smith argued convincingly when he said that “‘colour” which to the average mind means only a pleasant arrangement of hues, may be far more than that’. He maintained that ‘artists of the magnitude of Burne-Jones have a wider range of meaning in colour’, that it is used to appeal to the senses, and thus creates ‘the mental atmosphere . . . desired in his audience’.²⁵ The

expressive rather than naturalistic use of colour present in *The Golden Stair*, together with the light and shadow, adds to the harmony, which helps to create the ethos of beauty; and it was this that appealed so strongly to the aesthetic sensibility.

The only insistent criticism levelled at the painting is the lack of perspective of the figures, which was objected to by a writer in the *Morning Post* among others. Why, he asked, should 'the rules of perspective . . . be systematically ignored inasmuch as the girls above and behind appear larger than those below and in front – are mysteries hopelessly beyond the range of human speculation'.²⁶ But the criticisms ignore the decorative aspect and the 'mood' the painting creates. Walter Hamilton argued that 'Perspective . . . coupled with the somewhat constrained and angular attitudes of the figures', was a characteristic of the aesthetic school of painting.²⁷ The artist himself admitted that 'I never minded about the correctness of detail in poetical subjects, the poetry in them was so fine it was enough'.²⁸

Some contemporary critics protested about the unwholesomeness of Burne-Jones's figures, which influenced the aesthetic female. *The Illustrated London News* was concerned that 'the uniform pallor of the flesh tints' of the girls in *The Golden Stairs*, 'is neither consonant with youth, nor a gay and happy ceremony, nor with music'.²⁹ The deviation from nature in the figures of the painting, helped to give an impression of the graceful stiffness and intense languor which became identified with the Aesthetic Movement. Robert De La Sizeranne explained that: 'Having made his figures very long, he . . . exaggerates this effect by raising the hips; but as he wishes to preserve all the suppleness of the bust, instead of making the hips project most above, he rounds and lowers their spring.'³⁰ The result is the supple and sinuous body which *Punch* wittily referred to as 'the deadly-liveliness of the figures'.³¹

The more formal, classical style adopted by Burne-Jones in this painting is in the manner of the Renaissance; where the presentation of the body was a means of expressing the moral self; this became an important component of aestheticism. However, as John Christian admits, 'Burne-Jones was not interested in the anecdotal classicism of Poynter or Alma-Tadema . . . He was . . . strongly attracted to the "aesthetic" approach of Albert Moore and Whistler',³² wherein the rhythm of the figures and the decorative form produced expression. The Renaissance-style dress which contributes to the 'mood' as well as the beauty of the picture, had great appeal to the aesthetic female. Louise Jopling, herself a painter, painter's model, and socialite, said that 'Fashion, always ready to adopt anything new, set all the town wild to copy the dress and attitudes of his wonderful nymphs'.³³

The Golden Stairs is a supreme example of the 'Religion of Beauty' which gave the Aesthetic Movement of the late nineteenth century its significance. For it is directly drawn from a Renaissance devotional picture in composition, symbols and mood and recast to convey an image 'in which the emotive force of the altarpiece, the Madonna . . . retained all its trappings but underwent the quiet translation from religious piety into the worship of Beauty and Art', itself a sort of religion.³⁴ This sanctification of beauty is emblematic of what Frederic Myers deemed were

. . . the sacred pictures of a new religion; forms and faces which bear the same relation to that mystical worship of Beauty on which we have dwelt so long, as

the forms or faces of a Francia or a Leonardo bear to the medieval mysteries of the worship of Mary or of Christ.³⁵

Walter Pater wrote of 'the reign of reverie' where 'the religious spirit meets the delicacies of earthly love'. This is what Burne-Jones has created in *The Golden Stairs*, which contains what Pater terms 'people of remote and unaccustomed beauty, somnambulistic, frail . . . the light almost shining through them. Surely such lives were too fragile and adventurous to last more than a moment.'³⁶

The relationship of *The Golden Stairs* to the Aesthetic Movement and its effect on the movement's fashionable adherents, is apparent from contemporary comment. Burne-Jones's maidens epitomized the aesthetic ideal to a degree not previously attained. One critic noted how the maidens were 'distinguished by a beauty of an ideal kind; each being well chosen to evolve some natural grace of movement.'³⁷ This was echoed by *The Times*, which concluded that the girls were 'among the most beautiful that the master has painted, sad rather than joyous, but with a sadness that is tender and pleasing.'³⁸ *Punch*, taking a sideways look at the 1880 Grosvenor Gallery Exhibition, defines the Burne-Jones woman and her effect on current society.

'Why go' it asks.
'Well the Scraggington girls . . .
are nuts upon "motives" and tones,
And gush till their eyes grow like saucers
concerning that fellow Burne-Jones.'
'Those Greek fellows were far better form
than to worship a woman whose skin,
Was the colour of stale sorrel soup,
and whose hand was as limp as a fin.'
'Arts rot! Give me nature, dear boy,
wearing "sixes" but pretty and plump,
The worst is that girls dress up now
to the daubs of each dashed High Art Pump.'³⁹

In September 1880, Harry Quilter claimed that 'the modern gospel of intensity' was 'spreading from pictures and poems into private life' and 'there may now be seen at many a social gathering young men and women whose lack-lustre eyes, eccentricity of attire and general appearance of weary passion, proclaim them to be members of the new school.'⁴⁰ The attitude of the maidens in the painting was skilfully parodied by Gilbert in *Patience*. His ladies are languorous and intense, and in Act One walk 'in a doleful train.'⁴¹ Du Maurier in *Punch*, always a careful observer of the social scene, invented the Cimabue Browns, a family of intense aesthetes, whom he portrayed in many cartoons satirizing the current trend. Fig. 2 shows Maud in a gown similar to those in *The Golden Stairs* and mimicking the maidens attitudes. In the same issue, Du Maurier appears to be making overt reference to *The Golden Stairs* and to *Patience*, in his 'Design For An Aesthetic Theatrical Poster' (Fig. 3); note the wreath lying on the step, such as that on the stairs in the painting.



Fig. 2. 'Sirens, and Their Little Ways', *Punch*, Vol. 80, 7 May 1881, p. 210.



Fig. 3. Design For An Aesthetic Theatrical Poster, *Punch*, Vol. 80, 7 May 1881, p. 215.

Thus it was that the portrayal of the maidens in the painting as emblems of young beauty, became representative of the Aesthetic Movement. It can also be argued that the abstract element of the painting, its limited use of colour, and its apotheosis of beauty, all of which contributed to the mood, combined to form the ultimate image of aestheticism.

NOTES

- 1 W. S. Gilbert, *The Savoy Operas*, (1926: London 1962), p. 161.
- 2 P. Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones*, (London 1975), p. 173.
- 3 J. Cartwright, 'Sir Edward Burne-Jones Bart', *The Art Annual*, (1894), p. 22.
- 4 W. Hamilton, *The Aesthetic Movement in England*, (1882: New York and London 1986), p. 142.
- 5 *The Savoy Operas*, op. cit., p. 204.
- 6 *The Times*, 27 March 1877, p. 6.
- 7 *The Aesthetic Movement in England*, op. cit., p. 24.
- 8 G. Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, (1904: London 1993), II, p. 103.
- 9 M. Harrison and B. Waters, *Burne-Jones*, (London 1974), p. 126.
- 10 E. F. Benson, *As We Were*, (London 1930), pp. 258-9.
- 11 C. Battersea, *Reminiscences*, (London 1922), p. 172.
- 12 *ibid.*, p. 173.
- 13 W. Rothenstein, *Men and Memories*, (London 1931), p. 30. As this would have been circa 1888/9 when *The Golden Stairs* would have been *in situ.*, it is strange that he makes no mention of Burne-Jones's pictures, as he admitted being profoundly affected by his work at the Manchester Royal Jubilee Exhibition in 1887, which had included *The Golden Stairs*. See *ibid.*, p. 19.
- 14 *Reminiscences*, op. cit., p. 174.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 312.
- 16 F. Myers, 'Rossetti and the Religion of Beauty' in R. Aldington (ed.), *The Religion of Beauty*, (London 1920), p. 204.
- 17 E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin*, (London 1904), 33, pp. 292-3.
- 18 W. Pater, *The Renaissance*, (London 1893), p. 106.
- 19 *Reminiscences*, op. cit., p. 175.
- 20 F. M. Hueffer, 'Sir Edward Burne-Jones', *The Contemporary Review*, LXXIV, (August 1898), p. 191.
- 21 *Punch*, 25 June 1881, p. 300.
- 22 *The Illustrated London News*, 8 May 1880, p. 451.
- 23 C. Monkhouse, *British Contemporary Artists*, (London 1899), p. 142.
- 24 *The Academy*, 8 May 1880, p. 347.
- 25 R. Catterson-Smith, 'Sir Edward Burne-Jones', in J. H. Muirhead (ed.), *Nine Famous Birmingham Men*, (Birmingham 1909), pp. 247-8.
- 26 *Morning Post*, 4 May 1880, p. 5.
- 27 *The Aesthetic Movement in England*, op. cit., p. 24.

- ²⁸ M. Lago (ed.), *Burne-Jones Talking*, (London 1982), pp. 172–3.
- ²⁹ *The Illustrated London News*, 5 May 1880, p. 451.
- ³⁰ R. De La Sizeranne, 'English Contemporary Art', in *Masters in Art* (Boston), 2, Part 19, July 1901, p. 31.
- ³¹ *Punch*, 20 May 1882, p. 240.
- ³² L. Parris (ed.), *The Pre-Raphaelites*, (London 1984), pp. 300–1.
- ³³ Quoted in *Burne-Jones*, op. cit., p. 126.
- ³⁴ G. N. Anderson and J. Wright, *Heaven on Earth: The Religion of Beauty in Late Victorian Art*, (London 1994), p. 18.
- ³⁵ 'Rossetti and the Religion of Beauty', op. cit., pp. 210–11.
- ³⁶ W. Pater, 'Aesthetic Poetry' in *The Religion of Beauty*, op. cit., pp. 91–2.
- ³⁷ *The Globe*, 3 May 1880, p. 2.
- ³⁸ *The Times*, 1 May 1880, p. 8.
- ³⁹ *Punch*, 5 June 1880, p. 253.
- ⁴⁰ H. Quilter, 'The New Renaissance; or The Gospel of Modern Intensity', *Macmillan's Magazine*, XLII, (September 1880), pp. 392–3.
- ⁴¹ *The Savoy Operas*, op. cit., p. 168.