

Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Harry Ward and illuminated manuscripts

Author(s): PHILIP McEVANSONEY A

Source: *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 157, No. 1350 (September 2015), pp. 599-601

Published by: Burlington Magazine Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43858553>

Accessed: 08-12-2022 15:50 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Burlington Magazine Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Burlington Magazine*

Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Harry Ward and illuminated manuscripts

by PHILIP McEVANSONEYA

IT HAS BEEN observed that Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'vision of the Middle Ages was at its most intensely original in the series of watercolours depicting a "Froissartian" world of chivalry and courtly love' that he undertook in 1857.¹ By then Rossetti had been exposed to John Ruskin's interest in illuminated manuscripts and had met Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris, 'also enthusiasts for all things medieval', who 'refocused Rossetti's interest in the [medieval] period and may have contributed some of the visual sources', although Rossetti's 'medieval vision was his own'.² Rossetti's knowledge of the 'visual sources' underlying his conception of a "Froissartian" world' may also have been the outcome of a previously undocumented circumstance. The discovery of letters seeking permission for Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Morris individually to study in the Manuscripts Department of the British Museum, where the principal English collection of illuminated manuscripts was then held, may shed some light on the chronology of their artistic development.

The attention paid to illuminated manuscripts by artists in the Pre-Raphaelite circle, notably the three whose work is most often held to reveal the influence of the study of illuminations, Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Morris, has been the subject of intermittent research and discussion. Various motifs have been identified as direct borrowings from illuminations, and other probable or possible debts have been proposed.³ Such research has tended to concentrate on a fairly limited number of manuscripts that were then in the British Museum and are now in the British Library.⁴

However, it has been argued that the study of illuminated manuscripts in the mid-nineteenth century was also conducted not only from original works but also through the medium of reproductions, many high-quality volumes of which were produced between about 1830 and 1860.⁵

It was the convention in the period that students, as they were collectively known, wishing to have access to the illuminated manuscripts had to be recommended by a suitable referee. This was easy for the artists in question to arrange because their referee, Henry Leigh Douglas (Harry) Ward, had been employed in the department since 1849 and spent his working life there. Ward has occasionally been noted on the fringes of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. It may be that he was, at least on occasion, more important and helpful than his seemingly peripheral position suggests. It has been plausibly speculated that Ward was brought into the Pre-Raphaelite circle by the poet and writer Coventry Patmore, who from 1846 to 1865 was employed in the department of printed books at the British Museum. Patmore was in the Pre-Raphaelite circle by 1849, but it is not known exactly when Ward was introduced into it.⁶

On 7th August 1856 Ward made a request on Rossetti's behalf to his immediate superior, Edward Bond, the assistant keeper: 'I beg to recommend M^r Dante Gabriel Rossetti [*sic*], of 14, Chatham Place, Blackfriars Bridge, to the privilege of copying illuminated M.S.S. in this department'.⁷ Rossetti must have enjoyed the privilege and he may have told Burne-Jones and Morris, with

I am very grateful to Sheila O'Connell, Department of Prints and Drawings, British Museum, Michael St John-Macalister, Department of Manuscripts, British Library, Bryony Leventhall, formerly of the British Museum Central Archive, and Andrew Wawn for information and advice in the preparation of this article.

¹ J. Treuherz: 'The most startlingly original living': Rossetti's early years', in *idem*, E. Prettejohn and E. Becker: exh. cat. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Liverpool (The Walker) and Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2003-04, pp.38-41. The main 'Froissartian' works include those Rossetti undertook for Morris; see V. Surtees: *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882)*. A *Catalogue Raisonné*, Oxford 1971, nos.90, *The blue closet* (1857; Tate, London); 91, *The damsel of the Sanct Grael* (1857; Tate, London); 92, *The tune of the Seven Towers* (1857; Tate, London); 99, *Chapel before the lists* (1857-64; Tate, London); 101, *The death of Breuze Sans Pitié* (1857-65; sold, Christie's, London, 11th June 1993, lot 80). Morris also owned nos.75, *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini* (1855; Tate, London); 80, *Fra Pace (The monk)* (1856; private collection); 116, *Salutation of Beatrice* (1859; National Gallery of Canada) and 117, *Dantis amor* (1860; Tate, London). In 1858, in relation to *Before the battle* (1858; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Surtees, no.106), Rossetti wrote that 'chivalric Froissartian themes are quite a passion of mine'; see W.E. Fredeman, ed.: *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Woodbridge 2002-10, II, *The Formative Years, 1855-1862*, pp.224-28, no.58.16, to C.E. Norton, July 1858.

² Treuherz, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.41.

³ *Idem*: 'The Pre-Raphaelites and Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts', in L. Parris, ed.: *The Pre-Raphaelite Papers*, London 1984, pp.153-69; A. Faxon: *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, rev. ed., Oxford and New York 1994, pp.92-94; M. Braesel: 'The Influence of Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts on the Pre-Raphaelites and the Early Poetry of William Morris', *Journal of the William Morris Society* 15, 4 (Summer 2004), pp.41-54.

⁴ These include: London, British Library (hereafter cited as BL), Harleian MS (hereafter cited as HMS) 4379, the 'Harley Froissart', and HMS 4380, *Chroniques*, both Bruges, c.1470-72; HMS 4425: *Roman de la Rose*, Bruges (?), c.1490-1500; HMS 4431, works of Christine de Pizan, central France (Paris), c.1410-14; Royal MS

2.A.xxii, the Westminster Psalter, south England (St Albans or Westminster), c.1200; Additional MS (hereafter cited as Add.MS) 10293-4, *Lancelot du Lac* and *Quest of the Saint Graal*, northern France (St Omer or Tournai), early fourteenth century; Add.MS 18855, *Book of Hours*, Bruges, c.1450. See also Braesel, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp.42 and 52 note 19, who gives a list of manuscripts that William Morris 'would have seen'.

⁵ For example, in citing BL, HMS 2897 fol.86v and Burney MS 274, fol.395v as the sources of motifs found in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Fra Pace* and *The wedding of St George and Princess Sabra* (1857; Tate, London; Surtees *op. cit.* (note 1), no.97), Treuherz, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.158, suggested that Rossetti worked from Henry Shaw's *Dresses and Decorations of the Middle Ages*, London 1843, a source the artist used on other occasions; see J. Christian: 'Early German Sources for Pre-Raphaelite Designs', *Art Quarterly* 36 (1973), pp.56-83 esp. p.79, but the originals may possibly have been among the first manuscripts he was able to study in the British Museum. The use by Rossetti and others of C. Bonnard: *Costumes des XIIIe, XIVe et XVe siècles*. . . , 2 vols., Paris 1829-30, is well known; see E. Yamaguchi: 'Rossetti's Use of Bonnard's "Costumes Historiques": a Further Examination, With An Appendix on Other Pre-Raphaelite Artists', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* NS 9 (2000), pp.5-36. Other potentially relevant publications are listed by Treuherz, *op. cit.* (note 3); Braesel, *op. cit.* (note 3); and R. Watson: 'Publishing for the Leisure Industry: Illuminating Manuals and the Reception of a Medieval Art in Victorian Britain', in T. Coomans and J. De Maeyer, eds.: *The Revival of Medieval Illumination*, Leuven 2007, pp.79-107, esp. p.102.

⁶ G.H. Martin: 'Ward, Henry Leigh Douglas (1825-1906)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn., 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36728>, accessed 2nd June 2015. However, the ODNB entry on Ward is not full, for example omitting to mention Ward's first marriage, in 1858, to Emma Holland (b. c.1828, d. before 1866), a lone parent. On Patmore, see W.E. Fredeman, ed.: *The P.R.B. Journal* [. . .] 1849-1853, Oxford 1975, *passim*.

⁷ BL, Egerton MS 2846, fol.151, 7th August 1856.



1. Jane Morris's jewel box, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddall and Philip Webb. Before 1862. Painted wood with iron frame, hinges and clasp, 17.7 by 29.2 by 17.7 cm. (Society of Antiquaries of London, Kelmscott Manor).

whom he was then in close contact, how to obtain it for themselves. But it was not until the following year that the latter two also sought entry to the collection on Ward's request. On 9th February 1857 he wrote to Sir Frederic Madden, the keeper in the department: 'I beg leave to recommend M^r Edward Jones, 17. Red Lion Square, for permission to copy from the Bedford Missals [*sic*], and from others of the class of select M.S.S'. A week later he wrote again recommending 'M^r William Morris, B.A. of Exeter Coll. Oxford, and of 17. Red Lion Square, to the privilege of permission to ~~copy~~ draw from the Bedford Missal [*sic*], and others of the finer class of M.S.S. in the British Museum'.⁸ Burne-Jones had abandoned his studies at Oxford to go to London to become an artist, in connection with which he studied with Rossetti. From November 1856 until 1858 Burne-Jones and Morris shared rooms in Red Lion Square, a few minutes' walk from the Museum. For both, such study would have been a continuation of their activity at Oxford where they had pored over medieval manuscripts in the Bodleian Library.⁹

There is no record of what was studied by any of the three artists in 1856–57, but it may be no coincidence that Ward was highly knowledgeable about the continental medieval romance. He later produced the first two of the three volumes cataloguing the manuscript romances in the Museum, the publications that were agreed by obituarists to be his life's achievement.¹⁰ If, as is

likely, Ward's knowledge of the romances was well developed by the mid-1850s, he could have been a source of encouragement and advice to Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Morris precisely when their medieval and Arthurian enthusiasms were reaching their height. No doubt Ward's advice regarding the most worthwhile manuscripts to consult would freely have been given. The illuminated manuscripts from which Pre-Raphaelite artists studied and sometimes absorbed ideas were within Ward's range of expertise, being largely of continental origins, principally French or Flemish, but not all dated from within the period of the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries that Ruskin favoured.¹¹

Rossetti's request was expressed by Ward in general terms; he was presumably guided through the collection by the latter who may have shown him the 'Bedford Missal' (in fact a Book of Hours)¹² which he might have encouraged Burne-Jones and Morris to apply to study. Burne-Jones requested to study that manuscript specifically and other 'select manuscripts', a term still used in the department to indicate the superior class of manuscripts to which access is restricted. Morris also wished to see the Missal and others of 'the finer class of M.S.S.' The term 'finer class' has no specific meaning but it presumably referred to manuscripts with more elaborate and extensive illuminations and palaeography and may be understood to mean select manuscripts.¹³ Perhaps a specific request was a more plausible way to seek an entrée to the

⁸ BL, Egerton MS 2846, fols. 191 and 195, 9th and 16th February 1857. Ward's letter on Morris's behalf may have coincided with an undated and ambiguously worded letter from Ruskin to Bond introducing 'my friend, Mr Morris; whose gift for illumination is I believe as great as any thirteenth century draughtsman', and requesting that he allow his binder 'to bind a missal' (unspecified) for Morris; Manchester, John Rylands University Library, John Ruskin Papers, Eng. MS 1254/53, a facsimile of which, but without the precise source, is given in the *Journal of the William Morris Society* 2, 1 (Spring 1966), p. 2. In the latter, on the basis of Ruskin's reference to being 'so busy with Turner', it is suggested that the letter dates from the period of five or six months beginning in October 1857 when he was sorting the works in the Turner bequest. However, as Ruskin spent much time on that work between February and June 1857, it is possible that the letter dates from that earlier period and that it more or less coincided with Ward's letter.

⁹ Treuherz, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp. 163 and 168.

¹⁰ H.L.D. Ward: *Catalogue of Romances in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum*, London 1883–93. Obituaries: *The Times* (1st February 1906), p. 4; *Gentleman's*

Magazine 300 (February 1906), pp. 106–07.

¹¹ Ruskin's views were set out in, for example, 'Addresses on Colour and Illumination (1854)', in E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, eds.: *The Works of John Ruskin*, London 1903–12, XII, pp. 474–508.

¹² BL, Add. MS 18850, Paris and Rouen (?), c. 1410–30, now known as the Bedford Hours; see E. König: *The Bedford Hours. The Making of a Medieval Masterpiece*, London 2007.

¹³ Kindly confirmed by Michael St John-Macalister, Department of Manuscripts, British Library, by email, 2nd July 2010.

¹⁴ For example, "'The Bedford Missal' in the British Museum", *Illustrated London News* (7th May 1853), pp. 355–56; its provenance is given by König, *op. cit.* (note 12), pp. 128–29.

¹⁵ M. Braesel: 'The Tile Decoration by Morris & Co. for Queens' College, Cambridge: the Inspiration of Illuminated Manuscripts', *Apollo* 149 (1999), pp. 25–33, esp. pp. 26, 30 and 33 note 65. Braesel adds that Morris listed some of the manuscript Books of Hours he studied in his notebook, BL, Add. MS 45303.



2. *Collected Works of Christine de Pizan* ('*The Book of the Queen*'), by the Master of the Cité des Dames. c.1410–c.1414. Vellum, 36.5 by 28.5 cm. (folio). (British Library, London, Harleian MS 4431, fol. 376r, detail).

department than Rossetti's vague and general one. By 1856 Rossetti was becoming better known, whereas in 1857 Burne-Jones and Morris were yet to begin to make their mark.

The Bedford 'Missal' dates from c.1410–30, somewhat later than the period of illumination advocated by Ruskin. Therefore it may be doubted that Ruskin would have directed anyone to it given his avowed preference for earlier illuminations, but it is possible that Ward, or Rossetti – to whom its numerous brightly coloured illuminations would surely have appealed – might have. The fact that the 'Missal' had been comparatively recently acquired by the Museum in 1852, and that its purchase had been well publicised, may also have added to its attraction.¹⁴ Morris certainly studied the 'Bedford Missal', but his single passing reference to it is from somewhat later, c.1861, and was apparently made in connection with the designs for decorated tiles for the hall chimney-piece at Queens' College, Cambridge. Morris made more prompt use of another manuscript source,

¹⁶ W.M. Rossetti, ed.: *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters with a Memoir*, London 1895, II, p.51, cited by A. Faxon: 'The Influence of Christiane de Pisan on Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal', in L. Di Girolami Cheney, ed.: *Pre-Raphaelitism and Medievalism in the Arts*, Lampeter 1992, pp.96–97, and Braesel, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.51, note 6.

¹⁷ This date was first reported by E. Yamaguchi: 'Osculatory Obsession: Rossetti's Treatment of Arthurian and Dantesque Subjects in 1855', *Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature* 6 (1991), pp.37–54, esp. pp.40 and 54, note 9.

¹⁸ Fredeman, *op. cit.* (note 1), III, *The Chelsea Years, 1863–1867, Prelude to Crisis*, p.415, no.66.64, March 1866. Separate permissions were required for the Reading Room, the Department of Manuscripts and the Department of Prints and Drawings. The visitors books for the latter date from 1867 onwards, but some surviving letters of recommendation go back to 1802, kindly confirmed by Sheila O'Connell, Department of Prints and Drawings, in an email, 27th July 2010. However, a search did not reveal when or by whom Rossetti was introduced there. Having gained the privilege, Morris later wrote to Madden on behalf of George Warington Taylor,

taking details from an illumination in the 'Harley Froissart' to use in designs for embroidery dating from about 1857.¹⁵

Assumptions have sometimes been made regarding Rossetti's access to the Museum's illuminated manuscripts collection. For example, Rossetti's comment to his brother William in 1849 that he had 'wasted several days at the Museum, where I have been reading up all manner of old romaunts' has more than once been interpreted to mean that he had been studying manuscripts. As the continuation of the letter shows, Rossetti had in fact been studying printed books in the Reading Room, hoping 'to pitch upon stunning words for poetry'.¹⁶ Rossetti, who was first admitted to the Reading Room on 2nd July 1844,¹⁷ was well aware of the distinction between being a 'reader' with access to printed books, and a 'student' with access to manuscripts, as is shown by a letter of his to Ward on James Smetham's behalf:

you will remember my friend Mr Smetham who brings you this, as having met him one night at Sandys's. He wants to be a "reader" in Library & student in M.S. room. Will you kindly put him in the way. I thought you could probably do so personally instead of by his formal application.¹⁸

Rossetti maintained his connection with Ward, at least for a while. In 1861 he presented him with a copy of his *The Early Italian Poets* of which Ward wrote a lengthy and admiring review, and in 1865 he was expected as a guest at Cheyne Walk.¹⁹ In the 1870s Ward was of help to Morris when he was working on Icelandic literary subjects, the Icelandic language and literature being one of Ward's first specialisms. Indeed, Ward was praised for his linguistic ability, especially in Danish and Icelandic, at the time of his promotion in 1868 from the lower to the upper section of senior assistants.²⁰

The letter quoted above shows that Rossetti did not have the opportunity to study the illuminated manuscripts in the British Museum at first hand until 1856. That date is relevant to his treatment of romantic medieval subjects in the group of water-colours commissioned by Morris, as well as the oil painting of *St Catherine* (1857; Tate), which was commissioned and rejected by Ruskin, and Jane Morris's jewel box (Society of Antiquaries of London, Kelmescott Manor), which must date from between 1857 and 1862.²¹ The latter is an especially important example because one of the paintings on the box, a scene of two lovers in a garden, is the only example so far identified of Rossetti directly copying an illumination, one found in the manuscript poems of Christine de Pizan (Figs.1 and 2).²² As Treuherz argued, Rossetti's practice was usually one of assimilation rather than detectable borrowings.²³

the manager of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., seeking an entrée for him to the manuscripts; see N. Kelvin, ed.: *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, I, 1848–80, Princeton and Guildford 1984, p.41, no.29, 5th August 1865.

¹⁹ *National Review* 15 (1862), pp.60–95; Fredeman, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.479, no.62.44, note 1. Ward's copy is now in the Special Collections of the University of Virginia Library; *idem*, *op. cit.* (note 18), p.312, no.65.109, to Charles Augustus Howell, July 1865.

²⁰ Kelvin, *op. cit.* (note 18), p.243, no.260, Morris to Eiríkur Magnússon, 29th December 1874; London, British Museum, Central Archive, Bond (by then keeper in the department) to the Trustees of the Museum, 4th November 1868, kindly sent by Bryony Leventhall by email, 14th July 2010.

²¹ Surtees, *op. cit.* (note 1), no.89; possible sources for the pose of the saint are proposed by Faxon, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp.101 and 103, although the manuscript references given there are muddled; see J. Banham and J. Harris: exh. cat. *William Morris and the Middle Ages*, Manchester (Whitworth Art Gallery) 1984, pp.120–21, no.57.

²² As noticed by Banham and Harris, *ibid.*, and Faxon, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.142.

²³ Treuherz, *op. cit.* (note 3).