

'Antagonism to the Academy': A Letter from Edward Burne-Jones to Edgar Boehm

Author(s): Mark Stocker

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48. Detail of Fig.40.



49. Detail of Fig.44.



50. Detail of Fig.47.

this point, in the form of a diagonal black line immediately to the right of the little reserve of unpainted ground (Danloux does not allow such reserves) at the junction of the hat and coat, from which breaks at virtually a right angle a much broader sweep of lean whitish grey. Two crossed strokes of the same mixture immediately above this create a tiny explosion of paint. The area as a whole is free and open, although on a small scale, in a way that typifies Raeburn's distinctive style.

Passages like these are found in such abundance throughout Raeburn's works that comparative examples could be chosen almost at random. One that contains a whole range of such markings is the extreme lower-left corner of the full-length portrait of *Major*

William Clunes (Fig.47) which hangs in the National Gallery of Scotland not far from the portrait of Walker. This relatively insignificant part of the image, being more or less free of the constraints of description and allowing unconscious (or unpremeditated) forces to come into play, enables us to see Raeburn's handwriting in its most abstract, most relaxed, even most innocent, form. The rectilinear strokes, the short, squarish concoctions of marks, and the swift, deft highlights (Fig.50) are all precisely akin to those we have noted in our analysis of the portrait of Walker.

When stylistic features such as these are taken in conjunction with a good provenance, one can only wonder why a re-attribution of this unusual, and now iconic, painting was ever attempted.

'Antagonism to the Academy': a letter from Edward Burne-Jones to Edgar Boehm

by MARK STOCKER, *University of Otago, New Zealand*

IN THE 1880s Edward Burne-Jones (Fig.51) received numerous honours, including the honorary degree of Doctor of Civil Law at the University of Oxford (1881) and, together with William Morris, honorary fellowship of their alma mater, Exeter College, Oxford (1883). This was followed by Burne-Jones's election to associate membership of the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in June 1885. The news came as a complete surprise to the artist, while his wife, Georgiana, initially believed that it was a trick.¹ This reaction was perfectly understandable, as Burne-Jones had never exhibited there, a point not lost on the Academy's president, Frederic Leighton, who told his friend: 'I am not aware that any other case exists of an Artist being elected who has never exhibited, nay has pointedly abstained from exhibiting on our walls.'² 'Pointed abstention' is indeed the operative term, as between 1870 and 1877 Burne-Jones had

deliberately refrained from publicly showing his work anywhere, with only one isolated exception.³ This standpoint arose from his personal diffidence and an acute sensitivity to criticism: 'he well understood and to some extent shared the repugnance that painter friends such as Rossetti and Ford Madox Brown felt for public exhibitions and the processes to which artists resorted to try to gain the esteem of critics and collectors'.⁴ All that changed, however, with Burne-Jones's triumph at the first Grosvenor Gallery exhibition in 1877, when his status was transformed virtually overnight from that of an obscure cult figure to the celebrated artist 'of culture, of reflection, of intellectual luxury, of aesthetic refinement', as Henry James put it.⁵ Such was Burne-Jones's fame, and such were the inroads that the Grosvenor Gallery had made as a competitor with the Royal Academy, that even conservative members of the latter institution regarded his election to their ranks as highly desirable.

In her *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (1904), Georgiana Burne-Jones describes in vivid and credible detail the circumstances behind the election and her husband's considerable misgivings about acceptance. Leighton enthused to Burne-Jones about how 'a spontaneous act of justice has been done at Burlington House – the largest meeting of members that I ever saw has by a majority elected you an Associate of the Royal Academy'.⁶ Excerpts from letters by the academicians Briton Rivière – who had nominated Burne-Jones – George Frederick Watts and Joseph Edgar Boehm are also

¹ G. Burne-Jones: *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones: Volume II 1868–1898*, London 1904, p.150.

² *Ibid.*

³ C. Newall: 'Jones, Sir Edward Coley Burne-', in H.C.G. Matthew and B. Harrison, eds.: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford 2004, XXX, p.479. His sole exhibit during this period was *Love among the ruins*, shown at the Dudley Gallery, London, in 1873.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*

⁶ Burne-Jones, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.150.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.120. For the collaborations of Boehm and Burne-Jones, see M. Stocker: 'Edward Burne-Jones, Edgar Boehm and "The Battle of Flodden Field"', *Apollo* 158, (August 2003), pp.10–14.

⁸ Burne-Jones, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.153.

quoted by Georgiana Boehm, who was the most popular and prolific sculptor in Britain at the time, was not an intimate friend of Burne-Jones, as his focus was on portrait sculptures of royalty and the aristocracy. However, the two had collaborated in several joint commissions, all of which came from their amateur artist friend and patron, George Howard, 9th Earl of Carlisle. Burne-Jones wrote warmly of the sculptor: 'Boehm I did heartily like . . . and could have loved if we had been thrown together'.⁷ In his letter, Boehm had begged Burne-Jones 'not to refuse the offered Associateship. So many of us are frightened that you may do so'.⁸

Burne-Jones's lengthy reply to Boehm has not hitherto been published. Conserved in the Getty Research Institute Library, Los Angeles, it is one of the most significant items in the institute's extensive collection of Boehm material. The letter, which is undated but was almost certainly written in July or August 1886, reveals Burne-Jones's opinions on the Royal Academy and the Grosvenor Gallery, his philosophy of artistic 'seclusion', his firm resolve at this early stage to be a good academician and his well-known – indeed obsessive – concerns for his health:

The Grange,
West Kensington, W.
My dear Boehm,

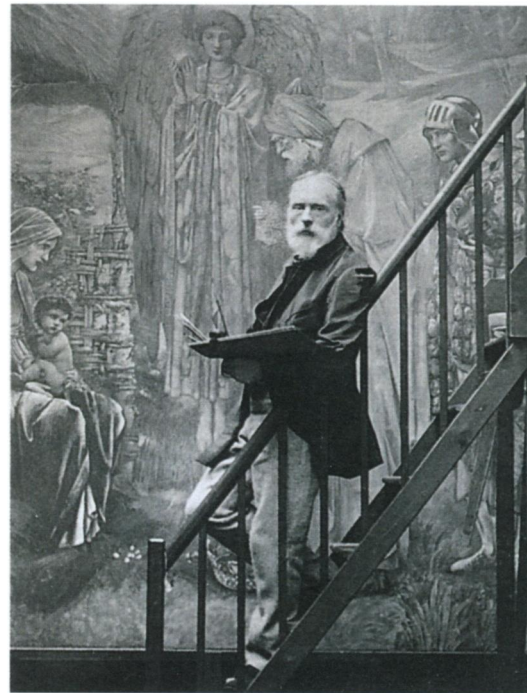
I took advantage of your postscript not to answer – knowing that with friends many liberties are possible: but in the first lull I must send for[th] a line to thank you for the kind words your letter is so full of.

Of course I feel that it is a great honour and I am sorry that it could have been thought I should be so ungracious as not [*deleted*] to hesitate in accepting it – for indeed it is altogether a figment that I ever set myself in antagonism to the Academy. I never thought of the Grosvenor Gallery for one moment in that light – though my debt to them for their courtesy to me and their championship I look upon as kindly to me always. I hope in speaking to any of the Academy who voted for me the other evening in the face of doubts about my action, you will say how doubly grateful I feel to them for their generosity if I have seemed to stand aloof my course has been dictated by self distance and the base of seclusion natural to a man out of harmony with his time & therefore with himself – and never for a moment on any unworthy conceit – I know that you believe this.

As to my duties which as time goes on may fall to my share I shall try to fulfil them & when I fail I dare say I shall be forgiven – it is no secret that I have poor capricious health and am in many ways afflicted for more work than is needed to bring my pictures to some show of completion – and dear Boehm you must suspect me of humbug when I say that it will always be a wonder to me that anyone thinks more of them than I do myself: and this spontaneous vote of credit is a surprised delight to me.

Yours very sincerely,
E Burne Jones⁹

Burne-Jones's 'surprised delight' was eroded over the next few years and was replaced by disaffection. Matters were certainly not



51. Photograph of Edward Burne-Jones before his *Star of Bethlehem*, by Barbara Leighton. 1890. (National Portrait Gallery, London).

helped by the unfortunate but not untypical hanging of what proved to be his sole Royal Academy exhibit, *The depths of the sea* of 1886. The *Times* critic dryly noted its juxtaposition with 'two portraits of modern ladies in red, with small landscapes below them, and above a rather ghastly picture of the end of a stag hunt'.¹⁰ By 1887 Burne-Jones privately confessed to Watts that he felt 'a bit offended with the Academy, not much but enough to make me a bit indifferent to the affair. It's a rude old habit of theirs, this of offering unsolicited honours to men who can do without them, and then, instead of perfecting their act of grace, waiting till the day of graceful action is past – but it is an infinitely little matter'.¹¹ Burne-Jones was perhaps alluding to the failure to make him a full member, but given his failure to exhibit there after 1886, the Academy could hardly be blamed for this. The claim that 'embarrassment on both sides intensified' certainly seems plausible in this context.¹² In February 1893 Burne-Jones resigned his associate membership of the Royal Academy, claiming: 'you on your part have never asked me to enter further than the threshold which you invited me to cross, and I, on mine, have found that it was too late to change the direction of my life and work'.¹³ In a letter to Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Burne-Jones could be more jocular: 'You see, dear friend, I am particularly made by nature not to like Academies. I went to one when I was a little boy, and didn't like it then, and thought I was free for ever when I grew up, when suddenly one day I had to go to an Academy again – and now I've run away'.¹⁴ Leighton's response to the resignation was predictably one 'of pain and distress . . . It has been a constant sorrow and a deep disappointment to me, and the one dark spot in the term of my Presidency, as your election was its brightest'.¹⁵ The reaction of Boehm, who had died two years earlier in December 1890, would have surely been similar, as his loyalty to the Royal Academy, as well as his admiration of Burne-Jones, ran almost as deep as Leighton's.

⁹ Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute Research Library, Special Collections and Visual Resources, Joseph Edgar Boehm MSS, Edward Burne-Jones to Edgar Boehm, undated [1885]. I am grateful to Wim de Wit of the Getty Research Institute for making Boehm's correspondence available to me.

¹⁰ Quoted in S. Wildman and J. Christian, eds.: exh. cat. *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer*, New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art) 1998, p.266.

¹¹ Burne-Jones, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.181.

¹² Wildman and Christian, *op. cit.* (note 10), p.198.

¹³ Letter from E. Burne-Jones probably to Frederick Eaton, 10th February 1893, in Burne-Jones, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.232.

¹⁴ E. Burne-Jones to Alma-Tadema, 1893, in *ibid.*, p.234.

¹⁵ F. Leighton to E. Burne-Jones, 1893, *ibid.*