

Edward Burne-Jones as sculptor: His gesso pieces

Author(s): Anja Silke Gerritzen

Source: *The British Art Journal*, Autumn 2005, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Autumn 2005), pp. 71-75

Published by: British Art Journal

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41614628>

---

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](mailto: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>



*British Art Journal* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The British Art Journal*

JSTOR

# Edward Burne-Jones as sculptor

## His gesso pieces

Anja Silke Gerritzen

Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98), the 'Victorian artist-dreamer'<sup>1</sup> of the second generation of Pre-Raphaelites, is mostly known as a painter of enigmatic women and fairy-tale like medieval subjects. As a friend of William Morris and co-worker at his company *Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co*, he is also known as an artist of the Arts and Crafts Movement designing stained glass windows, tapestries, music instrument, jewellery, books, interiors, stage costumes and even shoes. Compared to these achievements, his work in sculpture is mostly unknown but, since he worked in almost every other medium, it would be surprising if Burne-Jones had not been experimenting with sculpture as well. However, his sculptural works positively lack of attention and scientific research, particularly compared to the vast scientific literature investigating his painting and applied arts.

This article focuses on Edward Burne-Jones's sculptural work, and mainly his gesso reliefs. After Burne-Jones's exploration of sculptural media is examined, his sculptural advances are contextualised with his decorative work as well as his pictorial oeuvre. In fact, his sculptural work can be fittingly described as three-dimensional transformation of his paintings. As a master of ornamental linearism, Burne-Jones transcribed his decorative language of delicate outlines and surfaces into reliefs. Inspired by Italian renaissance shallow-relief carving, he developed a filigree, intricate, style of independently flowing lines. His sculptural pieces were therefore very much in tune with contemporary sculptural developments and anticipated Art Nouveau.

### Burne-Jones and sculpture

Although initial research on his sculptural work started more than a decade ago,<sup>2</sup> interest in Burne-Jones's sculpture only recently re-emerged.<sup>3</sup> The lack of scholarly investigations on Burne-Jones's sculpture – mainly reliefs – is not unexpected. Little is known about the reliefs, they are difficult to access, do not exist any longer, or are supposedly destroyed. Although a list of his sculpture, now in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, names several plaster reliefs, most of these are lost because plaster or gesso are such an ephemeral medium. Or they are in quite remote places: some important pieces are in Cumbria; his major work in gesso, the Lyttelton relief, is in the church of St Andrews in Mells, Somerset; and the *Garden of the Hesperides* is in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, but currently not on display. Recently, however, the coloured version of the *Lyttelton Memorial* has been on permanent display in the British Galleries in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Burne-Jones started working in sculptural media in the mid-1870s. Several pieces of the *Perseus Series* were executed as plaster reliefs. As stated by Kurt Löcher, *Perseus and the Graiae* was among other reliefs of gilded plaster on oak panels.<sup>4</sup> But when Burne-Jones exhibited these 1882 in the Grosvenor Gallery, they were severely criticized.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Burne-Jones retained his interest in the medium. The 1878 list of Burne-Jones's works in the Fitzwilliam Museum mentions additional three panels, *Wood-*



The illustrations are of works by Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898) unless otherwise stated

1 Memorial to Laura Lyttelton, 1886. Gesso relief, 119.5 x 82 cm. St Andrews, Mells, Somerset. Photograph Anja Gerritzen

*nymph*, *Water-nymph* and *The Hesperides*. While the first two were abandoned as sculptural projects but taken further as paintings, Burne-Jones executed two versions of *The Hesperides* in 1882 and 1888. In the 1880s, he also worked on reliefs in cooperation with the sculptors Joseph Edgar Boehm (1834-1890) and Alfred Gilbert (1854-1934), which usually meant Burne-Jones drafting the designs for the sculptors to execute. These joint projects were usually bronze works.<sup>6</sup> With Boehm, he worked on the *Howard Memorial* (Lanercost Priory, Cumbria) and afterwards on *The Battle of Flodden Field* (Naworth Castle, Cumbria) between 1879 and 1881; with Alfred Gilbert, he executed the *Graham Memorial* in the Cathedral of Glasgow (1886-91).<sup>7</sup>

Burne-Jones also executed several pieces himself, with help from assistants, all of them gesso works. Gesso is the plaster-like material that Burne-Jones originally employed in frames and furniture designs (see below), but he developed this decorative work into independent pieces. As an example,



2 Memorial to Laura Lyttelton, 1886. Painted and gilded gesso relief, 119.5 x 82 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

3 *The pelican in her piety*, 1880. Coloured chalks and gold, 172.2 x 57.2 cm, William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow. © William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow

4 *King Copbetua and the beggar maid*, 1880-84. Oil on canvas, 290 x 136 cm, Tate Gallery, London. © Tate Gallery, London



*The Garden of the Hesperides* originally covered the front of a chest, but was separated from the furniture design into an individual relief. Since Burne-Jones's gesso pieces have been so little studied, I will focus on these and one piece in particular, the *Lyttelton Memorial*.

### Burne-Jones's gesso work: the Lyttelton Memorial

Burne-Jones's 'most ambitious essay in the medium'<sup>8</sup> of sculpture is the *Memorial to Laura Lyttelton*, executed in 1886, which commemorates a friend of the artist who died in childbirth at the age of twenty-three. Tragically, Laura Lyttelton, née Tennant, was only in the first year of her marriage to Alfred Lyttelton when she died – and so enchanting and stunningly beautiful that she was called 'The Siren'.<sup>9</sup> Laura's memorial exists in two different versions (Pls 1, 2). The original white version belongs to the church of St Andrews in Mells, Somerset; but Burne-Jones designed a second, painted, version for his own house The Grange, a version that is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Georgiana Burne-Jones remembers the production of the relief:

He did make a tablet, employing in its execution a kind of material and workmanship quite new to him. It was a bas-relief in gesso: 'durable as granite and enduring till the Judgement Day,' he described it. 'It is eight feet high, and is an effigy of a peacock as a symbol of the Resurrection, standing upon a laurel-tree – and the laurel grows out of the tomb and bursts through the sides of the tomb with a determination to go on living, and refusing to be dead'. This was left pure white and put up in a church, but for ourselves a cast was made which Edward painted in full, deep colour, and we kept it in the entrance hall at the Grange.<sup>10</sup>

The inscription on the memorial reads:

Non est hic sed resurrexit recorda  
 Mini qualiter locutus est vobis  
 In memoriam Laura Lyttelton quae in domino obdormivit  
 APD XXIV AS MDVVV LXXXVI  
 Te dilectissima longe tenet thule at tui  
 Etiam hic memores inexplabilis signam desiderii  
 Hoc monumentum posuimus.<sup>11</sup>

The uncoloured version is characterised by a shiny, smooth and marble-like surface, and the remarkable flatness of the relief is accompanied by extremely fine lines that appear almost as though drawn on the material.

### From painting to sculpture

This emphasis on outline and surface had been anticipated in Burne-Jones's paintings, and had been noted by his contemporaries. When Henry James visited the summer exhibition in the Grosvenor Gallery in London in 1878, he commented on Burne-Jones's figures, remarking that they were 'too flat, ... they exist too exclusively in surface. Extremely studied and finished in outline, they often strike one as vague in modelling – wanting in relief and in the power to detach themselves'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed his contemporaries perceived Burne-Jones as an artist of contour and surface. John Ruskin, at times a close friend of the painter, noted the very same qualities of Burne-Jones's work, though in a more positive way: 'An outline by Burne-Jones is as pure as the lines of engraving on an Etruscan mirror'.<sup>13</sup> John Christian has observed: 'Many have commented on Burne-Jones's tendency to think in terms of line... ; and it is a commonplace of art history that while he was inspired by that master of line, Botticelli, his own art was a source for Art Nouveau'.<sup>14</sup> This linearism indeed connects painting and sculpture, and in a sense his reliefs might be described as three-dimensional pictures. As the *Perseus Series* already suggests, Burne-Jones derived his reliefs from paintings, and he took this *modus operandi* further.

*The Pelican in her piety* is a characteristic painting by Burne-jones (Pl 3). The swirling, whirling and twirling lines create hair, dresses, even tree trunks. The *Pelican* beautifully illustrates Burne-Jones constant interest in the 'conversion of organic form – drapery, wing, or plant – into a satisfying and energetic two-dimensional arrangement'.<sup>15</sup> His lines establish an ornamental contour enclosing planes of diversified structures, and so they display a remarkable flatness and evenness. Through this 'serpentine and wavy use of line',<sup>16</sup> Burne-Jones's paintings were transformed into reliefs. The *Pelican in her piety* parallels the Lyttelton relief in the same fine lines enclosing surfaces, a similar elegant curvature, a comparable very narrow upright format and a similar composition of ornamentally flowing lines in the front of a perspective background. Here, Burne-Jones develops an art of line that anticipates Art Nouveau's vibrantly swirling curves and the abstract use of natural forms.



Furthermore, the use of colour connects the two media. The painted version of the Lyttelton Memorial displays the same Byzantine-inspired colouring as Burne-Jones paintings of the 1880s. *King Cophetua and the beggar maid* (Pl 4), painted in 1882 at the height of the Aesthetic Movement, shows a similar, golden and bronze colouring with green and turquoise, and a similar composition and narrow but upright format. Significantly, *King Cophetua* has a very elaborate and ornate renaissance frame of the sort Burne-Jones preferred at the time.

### The influence of Italian renaissance sculpture: 'rilievo schiacciato'

The Italian Renaissance is the second key to Burne-Jones's sculptural developments. Like *King Cophetua*, the Lyttelton Memorial is also set into an ornate renaissance frame.<sup>17</sup> Fully aware of the importance of a frame to its



picture, Burne-Jones took care of his frame designs himself, and he had been familiar with frame decoration since early childhood as his father was a gilder and framer in Birmingham. How important the frame design was to Burne-Jones is revealed in a letter he wrote to his father. Impatiently he asks for two missing picture frames: 'How soon can I have those frames? I am waiting for two of them now to sell the drawings they belong to – *it makes such a difference having them in frames, that I don't care to shew [sic] without*'.<sup>18</sup>

The material used for the ornate picture frames was gesso – the material Burne-Jones later employed in his relief designs. Gesso was quite fashionable at the end of the 19th century (see below), yet it was not at all a new medium. It dates back to ancient times and was widely used in the Renaissance: Both as a foundation and for modelling specific elements of the surface, such as raised haloes, gesso was used in thirteenth and fourteenth century panel-painting; and later found new lease of life in the further elaboration of picture frames. As 'a painter's art rather than a sculptor's',<sup>19</sup> gesso enabled the painter to give the allusion of reality to a painting, a three-dimensional touch to a two-dimensional medium. The rediscovery of ancient gesso techniques in the 19th century lead to theoretical discussions, practical advice and descriptions in artists' handbooks. One such handbook from the year 1901 describes the use of gesso. Usually, a surface was prepared with a mixture of whitening, glue and linseed oil, then gesso with the consistency of thick cream was applied to the surface. This process took quite some time, and when the gesso eventually dried, it could be painted and decorated:

To be done well enough to be worth doing at all, and done with durability, gesso is a slow process. For this reason gesso work should be justified by design worth spending time over: worthy not only in respect of symbolic significance which, in appeal to the eye, matters not so much; but worthy in respect of designful beauty which does matter much in that domain of sentiment, soaring above thought, apprehended of the sensuous eye as in music of the ear.<sup>20</sup>

As his assistant Thomas M Rooke recalled, Burne-Jones explored the exquisite collection of Italian renaissance sculpture of the South Kensington Museum to get inspirations for his frames.<sup>21</sup> And Burne-Jones was certainly not unaware of what was set *into* the frames. Sculpture is another source for Burne-Jones's reliefs. Indeed, they were very much influenced by Florentine low-relief sculpture, executed in what was called '*rilievo schiacciato*'. This means 'flattened relief' and was a technique used by Italian masters such as Donatello (1386-1466) and Agostino di Duccio (1418-1481). Donatello famously introduced this technique on a relief at the base of the statue of St George on the façade of

Or San Michele in Florence (1416/17), showing the saint's fight with the dragon. The *rilievo schiacciato* creates a fine, 'painterly' graduation of the surface, but ensuring the careful creation of a perspective background. One of Donatello's most famous works of this type is in fact to be found in the Victoria and Albert Museum: the *Ascension of Christ and the giving of the keys to St Peter* (Pl 5).

Donatello's *Ascension*, as it was in Burne-Jones's time, is regarded as one of the most important pieces of Italian sculpture outside Italy. It has been on display at the museum since 1861 after it was acquired from the Campana Collection.<sup>22</sup> Burne-Jones was evidently influenced by it in his refined execution of extremely shallow relief, as though the forms were 'drawn on marble'.<sup>23</sup>

Agostino di Duccio belonged to Donatello's circle, and was probably Donatello's disciple between 1435 and 1440. Although Vasari's account of Agostino is quite confusing, he records the fact that the marble block that Michelangelo employed for his David had been 'spoiled' by Agostino di Duccio.<sup>24</sup> Among Agostino's works are reliefs at the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini and, more importantly in the context of Burne-Jones, in Perugia.

Agostino's *Poverty* is a relief on the façade of the Oratorio di San Bernardino in Perugia (1457-61). Burne-Jones not only saw this relief when he visited Perugia in 1871, but he also possessed a reproduction of this very piece. It appears among other reproductions of works by Agostino in a scrapbook with reproductions of Italian masters in the special collection of the University College of London, and thus demonstrates his familiarity with work of this kind.<sup>25</sup> Agostino's style is in marked contrast to Donatello's, and it is easy to see what Burne-Jones gained from looking at this work in particular: similar parallel, spiralling lines in energetic movement can be seen in the drapery of *Poverty* and also in the tail of the peacock in the Lyttelton relief.

In addition to the delicate linearism they share, the reliefs of Donatello, Agostino and Burne-Jones are also distinguished by the particularly shiny and subtle, 'precious', surfaces they create. The difference lies in the material. The Florentine reliefs are of marble, where the lines would have been cut with a chisel and only appear as though they might have been 'drawn'; Burne-Jones, however, modelled in gesso, on which he could quite literally have drawn with any suitably pointed instrument. Gesso was 'the best vehicle for any but the lowest relief',<sup>26</sup> and in addition it was possible to work on it to produce precisely the polished, precious surface that was so characteristic of the marbles of the Florentine Renaissance: 'By it the most subtle and delicate variation of surface can be obtained, and the finest lines pencilled'.<sup>27</sup>

5 *Ascension of Christ and the giving of the keys to St Peter* by Donatello (c1386-1466), c1425-1430. Marble, 40.6 x 114.3 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

6 *Poverty* by Agostino di Duccio (1418-81), c1457-61. Marble, approx 130 cm high. Oratorio di San Bernardino, Perugia. Photograph Anja Gerritzen

## Burne-Jones and Art Nouveau

In his response to Florentine shallow-relief carving, Burne-Jones was very much *en vogue*. The *rilievo schiacciato* as a 'new and exciting direction'<sup>28</sup> influenced other artists such as George Frampton and Robert Anning Bell, both of whom used the method in architectural designs or in applied arts. Their reasons for doing so were similar to Burne-Jones's: while 'sculpture's illusion of reality' was maintained in the relief, painting's 'colour and line'<sup>29</sup> could be used as well. The shallow reliefs of the 1880s are equally visually and sensually appealing, and their 'mysterious, elusive harmony of the sensual and the austere'<sup>30</sup> are characteristic of the late 19th century art and the *avant garde*. But Burne-Jones's reliefs go even further: they anticipate features of Art Nouveau.

At the turn of the century, Art Nouveau's 'whiplash', a sinuous, independent line, created an international style of 'modernity'. As a *Leitmotif* of the modern style, the elegantly flowing lines were incorporated equally into the fine and applied arts, and entire houses including paintings and furniture were built and designed in the Art Nouveau style. Margaret and Frances MacDonald in artistic partnership with their husbands were especially accomplished in creating such kinds of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the specific two-dimensional Art Nouveau manner so typical of the Glasgow School. In contrast to the three-dimensional approach to French Art Nouveau, the Scottish style made use of flatness and evenness while their abstract use of natural forms developed an independent flowing line that looks remarkably like Burne-Jones's style. Furthermore, the MacDonald sisters used the same material: gesso.



1 Edward Burne-Jones, *Victorian Artist-Dreamer*, exh cat (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), New York, 1998.

2 John Christian, 'Burne-Jones and Sculpture', *Pre-Raphaelite Sculpture. Nature and Imagination in British Sculpture 1848-1914*, exh cat, The Mathiesen Gallery London, 1991, pp77-91.

3 Katherine Haslam, 'A funny childish thing': the Flodden Field Bas Relief and the Redesign of the Library at Naworth Castle', *Journal of the William Morris Society*, vol xiv (2000), pp67-75; and Mark Stocker, 'Edward Burne-Jones, Edgar Boehm and The Battle of Flodden Field', *Apollo* (2003), pp10-14.

4 *Perseus and the Graiae*, relief with inscription, gilded plaster on oak panel, 149 x 167 cm, The Earl of Balfour, The Tower, Whittingehame, East Lothian, Scotland. See: Kurt Löcher, *Der Perseus-Zyklus von Edward Burne-Jones*, Stuttgart, 1973, p99,

cat no. 2e.

5 Christian, op cit, p84.

6 Except for *Flodden Field* in Naworth Castle, which is a painted gesso panel, but was also executed in bronze.

7 See Richard Dormant, *Alfred Gilbert*, New Haven & London, 1985, pp86-88.

8 Christian, op cit, p84.

9 See Margot Asquith, *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith*, London, 1962, pp13-40 and Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 2 vols, New York, 1912, I, 1912, p166.

10 *Ibid*, pp166-67.

11 'She is not here, but resurrected (and) says that you should remember her. / In memory of Laura Lyttelton who died on the 24th April 1886. You, dearest, are kept aloof by Thule, but here we erected as a sign of our unappeasable desire a monument for you.'

12 JL Sweeney, ed, *The Painter's*

*Eye. Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts by Henry James*, London, 1956, p164.

13 ET Cook and A Wedderburn, ed, *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols, London, 1903-12, XXXIII, 1908, p301.

14 Christian, op cit, p77.

15 Stephen Wildman & John Christian, ed, *Edward Burne-Jones. Victorian Artist-Dreamer*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art New York, 1998, p282.

16 Stephan Tschudi Madsen, *Sources of Art Nouveau*, Oslo, 1956, p236.

17 See Paul Mitchell & Lynn Roberts, 'Burne-Jones's Picture Frames', *The Burlington Magazine*, CXLII (2000), pp362-370.

18 Burne-Jones, op cit, p214/15; author's italics.

19 Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, ed, *Arts and Craft Essays*, New York, 1893, p180.

20 Henry Snowdon Ward, ed, *Useful Arts and Handicrafts*, 4 vols, London, 1900-01, III, 1901, p240.

21 Memories of Edward Burne-

Jones's studio assistant Thomas M Rooke, unpublished manuscript in the Birmingham Museums and Art Galleries.

22 Wildman & Christian, op cit, p152. Information on the display of the Donatello pieces provided by Peta Motture, Senior Curator of Sculpture of the Victorian and Albert Museum, London.

23 Charles Avery, *Donatello*, London, 1994, p42.

24 Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, 2 vols, New York & Toronto, II, 1996, pp653-54.

25 University College of London Special Collection, 3010 FOLIOS ME BUR.

26 Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, op cit, pp180-81.