

[Andrew Lambirth](#)

Beguiled by a master

Hidden Burne-Jones, Leighton House Museum, 12 Holland Park Road, London W14, until 27 January

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It's always a pleasure to visit Lord Leighton's house and imagine oneself in a more spacious era, venturing into the artists' quarter of Kensington and paying a call on one of the most popular artists of the Victorian period. The remarkable architecture of the house with its famous Arab Hall always deserves another look, though the exhibitions mounted in the upstairs gallery are becoming an increasing draw for the art public. Last year it was Leighton's drawings, now brilliantly followed up by a show of little-known Burne-Jones drawings from Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98) was friendly with Leighton and used to attend musical evenings at Leighton House. According to Walter Crane, he and Burne-Jones were to have been responsible for the decoration of the dome of the Arab Hall, but this never transpired. Burne-Jones was subsequently rather dismissive of what was done, but this coolness notwithstanding there couldn't be a more appropriate setting for a small intimate show of his drawings. You approach through a dimly lit antechamber in which a pink watercolour of a woman with flowers greets the visitor. To its left is a full-length study for 'The Garland Weavers', a draped standing figure in coloured chalks. It's quite charming but has a certain awkwardness to it (look where the right knee is suggested, unbelievably far down the leg). For a more crisp and convincing delineation, turn to the study of Pygmalion for 'The Soul Attains' nearby. A Leighton nude (chalk on brown paper) is hung here for useful comparison.

Burne-Jones used watercolour a lot but some of his sepia ink and wash drawings are more impressive and beguiling. I particularly liked the intricate 'Legend of Good Women: Hysiphile and Medea' (1864), a subject from Chaucer, in which the figure of Medea is based upon a watercolour of Morgan Le Fay (King Arthur's wicked half-sister) hung next to it. For an even more interesting and complex surface look at 'King Mark and La Belle Iseult', done in watercolour heightened with bodycolour and gum Arabic. It's scraped back in places to the paper support, elsewhere diaphanous washes predominate or a more opaque build-up of pigment. Luscious.

In the main gallery are three flat cabinets of books and sketchbooks, including small drawings and caricatures. On the walls are a stimulating variety of images, ranging from a series of studies showing the development of a composition ('Charity'), to stained-glass designs. There's an exquisite pencil drawing for The Song of Solomon and in one corner an intriguing little study for the Second Day in 'The Days of Creation'. Small and intense, it's done in watercolour as a design for a woodcut and looks curiously modern, like something by Paul Nash. It must have been influenced by Blake and Palmer, but is almost abstract in

construction. Equally arresting, but in quite a different way, is 'Landscape', a curiously subject-less watercolour from 1863. It depicts a fringe of Surrey woods at Cobham and was painted from nature, though softened and hazed to make it more atmospheric and idealised.

Some of the larger figure studies are rather dreary and lumpy in outline, but 'King René's Honeymoon: Sculpture' is a superb example of Burne-Jones's inspired use of mixed media. Done in pen and ink and wash over coloured chalk and pencil, it has that combination of definiteness and lack of finish that we find so attractive today. By contrast, the much-lauded red chalk 'Study for the Angel's Head in The Star of Bethlehem' I find rather vacuous, while the section of the show given over to portraits contains the least interesting work here and includes a lamentable oil of the artist's wife never intended for exhibition.

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