

# Art sales: Whole lotta Burne-Jones

Colin Gleadell 05 February 2008



## Colin Gleadell on Rock Star collections

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The rock stars Jimmy Page and Gary Kemp are selling rare works of art in the largest-ever sale of British design from the 19th and 20th centuries, which is to be held at Sotheby's next month. Both have been collectors for several decades and are selling because their new homes do not properly accommodate the works.

Page, the Led Zeppelin guitarist, is offering a spectacular 24ft-long Burne-Jones tapestry, *The Quest for the Holy Grail: The Achievement*, which is estimated to fetch a record £1 million.

He is also selling five stained-glass windows designed by Burne-Jones, estimated at £25,000 to £35,000 each. Kemp, the guitarist and lyricist for the 1980s New Romantic band Spandau Ballet, is selling furniture from the 19th-century Arts and Crafts movement, which, centred on the pioneering figure of William Morris, sought to equate the status of the craftsman with that of the fine artist.

Examples from Kemp's collection include a group of works by Edward William Godwin, the pre-eminent architect and designer who designed houses for Oscar Wilde and James Whistler. A typically stylised 1875 ebonised hanging bookcase by Godwin is estimated to fetch between £60,000 and £80,000 - a record for a piece of furniture by the designer.

The auction, worth more than £3 million, is the first either at Sotheby's or Christie's to be organised by a dealer; and there can be few dealers more able to add rock-star

glamour to a sale than Paul Reeves. Reeves originally made his name as a clothes designer in the 1960s.

Among his clients were the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, the Who, David Bowie, T.Rex and Led Zeppelin. Reeves met Page in 1966 when the guitarist was playing with the Yardbirds. The two discovered they had a shared interest in the Pre-Raphaelites, 19th-century Gothic revival and Arts and Crafts design, and have remained friends ever since.

In 1973, Reeves was commissioned by Led Zeppelin's manager, Peter Grant, to decorate his home. This led to further commissions and in 1981 he opened a shop specialising in the decorative arts in Kensington High Street, from which he still operates. Here the roll call of celebrity clients increased from George Harrison of the Beatles and Roger Daltrey of the Who, to Bob Dylan, James Taylor, Barbra Streisand and Brad Pitt, not to mention numerous international museums.

The sale Reeves has organised underlines how rock stars have often played a pioneering role in the formation of taste, fuelling the market at the same time. Today, the trend might be more towards Damien Hirst or Banksy, but in the 1970s art history had more appeal. "The romance of the Arthurian legends and the bohemian life of the artists who were reworking these stories seemed very attuned to our time," says Page, who studied at Sutton College of Art in Surrey.

In 1972, just as scholarship in the Arts and Crafts movement was being revived, he bought William Burges's neo-Gothic Tower House, built a century earlier in Holland Park. Six years later, he acquired the Burne-Jones tapestry for what was then the princely sum of £40,000.

For Kemp, who began collecting in 1982, aged 22, late-Victorian Arts and Crafts design, with its "exotic connections with both Whistler and Wilde", appeared both modern and romantic. It was, he says, "the furniture of an impudent youth movement, set on outrage, hedonism and infamy - every pop star's dream". At the same time it incorporated "the medievalism and hippyness of Morris".

But how modern does it look now? Far from appearing outdated, Kemp's living room looked completely à la mode when featured in Sam Taylor Wood's 25ft-long *Five Revolutionary Seconds*, shown in the Turner Prize exhibition in 1998.

Gilbert and George, the so-called fathers of young British art, have also filled their house in Fashion Street, East London, with period furniture supplied by Paul Reeves. And for those who think the claims for contemporary design to be considered and valued as art are new, think again. In the 1860s and 70s, much was written about the "art furniture" of Godwin, Morris and Burges et al. There were even self-styled "art furniture" manufacturing companies.

Because so many Arts and Crafts designs were hand made, they are now extremely rare. The sale, which also includes classic works by Charles Rennie Mackintosh and William Morris, is therefore unusual in the abundance of material that has been made available. It will take place on March 20 and is preceded by a week-long selling exhibition at Sotheby's of designs from Paul Reeves's extensive stock.