

Costume Designs by Burne-Jones for Irving's Production of 'King Arthur'

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Costume designs by Burne-Jones for Irving's production of 'King Arthur'

Seven of the original costume designs by Burne-Jones for Henry Irving's production of J. Comyns Carr's *King Arthur* (1895) have recently been discovered in a private collection;¹ the play was the only one for which Burne-Jones designed costumes and scenery, and little else has survived to show the extent of his contribution. All the scenery and apparently all the props, except for the Excalibur sword now in the Theatre Museum, were destroyed in a fire at the Lyceum storage, Southwark in February 1898.² Of Burne-Jones's designs for scenery only one rough preliminary sketch (reproduced by Georgiana Burne-Jones in *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*)³ is known to exist. No costume designs, except for the seven reproduced here, appear to have survived.

Burne-Jones's designs played a major part in the success of the production, and are also important in the context of his Arthurian interests. Since the beginning of his career, he had used Arthurian legend as a primary source of subjects in the Oxford murals (1857-58); in a series of stained-glass panels illustrating the story of Sir Tristram for Harden Grange, Yorkshire, by Morris and Company (1862); and in the Stanmore Hall tapestries of the Holy Grail (1891-94), also by Morris and Co. Notable among his numerous Arthurian paintings are *The beguiling of Merlin* (1872-77, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight; Fig. 20) and the monumental but unfinished *Arthur in Avalon* (Puerto Rico; Fig. 21), begun in 1881, on which he was working while designing the costumes and sets for *King Arthur*.

This preoccupation can be set against a wide public interest in Arthurian legend, which began in the 1850s. The legends became most widely known through Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, which were published in instalments between 1859 and 1889, achieving enormous popularity. Carr's *King Arthur* had in fact all the potential elements of a great success: a well-known and popular theme, Irving directing and taking the title rôle, Ellen Terry as Guinevere, Forbes Robertson as Lancelot, designs by Burne-Jones, and music by Arthur Sullivan. Clement Scott, in his *Daily Telegraph* review written as a running commentary on the first night, describes the high expectations and excited anticipation which preceded the play:

The curtain is about to rise on 'King Arthur', a drama by James Comyns Carr. At last 'King Arthur' is to be

acted at the Lyceum; at last Henry Irving is to be the "half-divine" ruler and founder of the Table Round! At last Ellen Terry is to be the Queen Guinevere we have pictured in our imaginations these countless years... Everyone known and unknown had a dreamy undetermined view of how 'King Arthur' ought to be done. The poets, and the sentimentalists, and the aesthetes, pestered poor Mr. Irving with their ideas on 'King Arthur'.⁴

Irving had wanted to produce a play about King Arthur since the 1880s and had hoped that Tennyson would write one for him, 'but the latter could not see his way to it. He had dealt with the subject one way and did not wish to try another. Then he [Irving] got W. G. Wills to write a play; this he purchased from him in 1890. As, however, he did not think it would act well, he got Comyns Carr to write another one some three years later'.⁵ Sadly Carr, now better known for his part in founding the Grosvenor Gallery and the New Gallery, was a mediocre playwright, but it seems to have been he who first thought of asking Burne-Jones to act as designer for the production.⁶ They knew each other well: Burne-Jones exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery and had followed Carr and Hallé when they resigned as directors and founded the New Gallery in 1888. Mrs Comyns Carr describes how 'with trepidation' her husband put the proposal to Burne-Jones, then engaged on his *Arthur in Avalon*: 'as he worked at it Joe read him his own King Arthur, and when he had finished, Burne-Jones agreed to undertake the work, stipulating only that he should not be required to superintend the carrying out of his designs in detail'.⁷ This compromise was due not only to Burne-Jones's lack of experience in stage design. His determination not to become involved with the minutiae of the production arose partly out of his deep and personal feeling for the legend which formed the basis of the play: 'it is such a sacred land to me that nothing in the world touches it in comparison'.⁸ This combination of detachment from the day-to-day working-out of the designs and concern that his idealistic concept of the legend should not be violated was later to lead to difficulties for Irving and disappointment for Burne-Jones.

Practical problems concerning the scenery soon arose. Georgiana Burne-Jones recalled that 'the drawings that Edward made for the scenes were but slight, with a rough suggestion of colour, and were actually painted by the

Inscriptions on the designs (see captions to illustrations) are noted in clockwise order beginning in the lower left corner of each design. The only hand which can be identified with certainty is that of Burne-Jones; where this occurs it is noted. There are two other hands, one in English and one in French. The hand in English can be identified as that of someone working for L. & H. Nathan as the same hand appears on their designs for *Tristram and Iseult*; it is therefore very likely to be that of Charles Karl. The hand in French, which appears on the designs for Arthur's armour and Excalibur, can be accounted for by the fact that some of the armour was made in Paris.

¹ I gratefully acknowledge assistance from the following people: Jennifer Aylmer and Dr James Fowler of the Theatre Museum; John Christian; Dr Andor Gomme of the University of Keele; Stephen Wildman of Birmingham City

Museum and Art Gallery. I am deeply indebted to Mr B. E. A. Vigers for kindly allowing me to examine and photograph the designs discussed in this article.

² B. STOKER: *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*, London [1906], I, pp.297, 301.

³ G. BURNE-JONES: *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, London [1904], II, p.247 facing.

⁴ C. SCOTT: *From 'The Bells' to 'King Arthur': A Critical Record of First-Night Productions at the Lyceum Theatre from 1871 to 1895*, London [1896], p.373.

⁵ STOKER, *op. cit.* at note 2 above, I, p.253.

⁶ It was not, however, the first time that a well-known artist had collaborated with Irving: in 1892 Ford Madox Brown had acted as production adviser for his *King Lear*.

⁷ MRS J. COMYNS CARR: *Reminiscences*, London [n.d.], p.207.

⁸ BURNE-JONES, *op. cit.* at note 3 above, II, p.247.



20. *The beguiling of Merlin*, by Edward Burne-Jones. 1872-77. 186 by 111 cm. (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool).



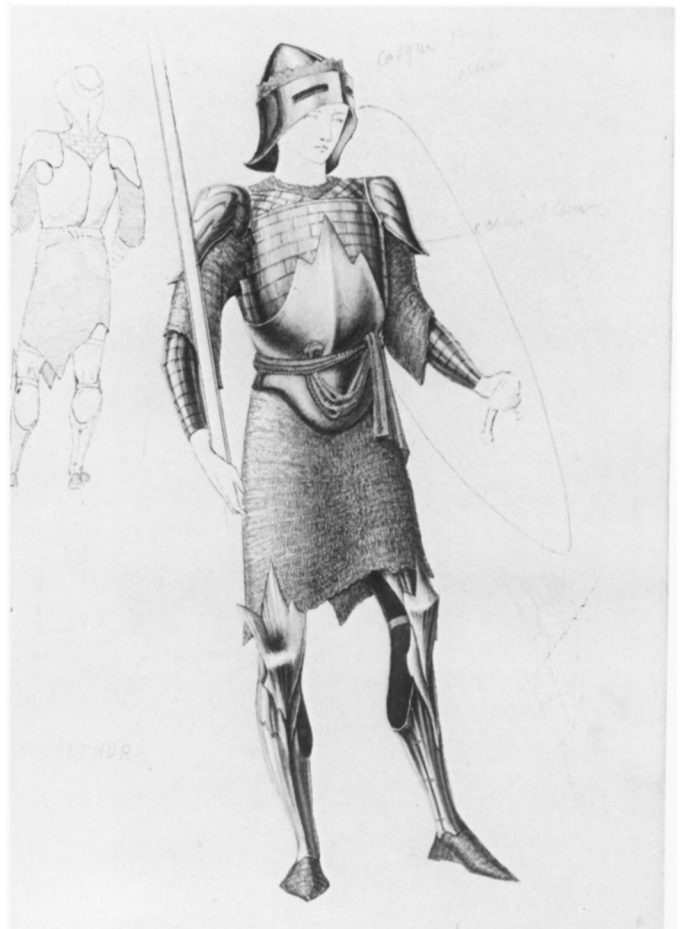
21. Detail from *Arthur in Avalon*, by Edward Burne-Jones. (Ponce Art Museum, Puerto Rico).



22. Cover of a souvenir programme of J. Comyns Carr's *King Arthur*, illustrated by Hawes Craven and J. Bernard Partridge. 1895. (Theatre Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum).



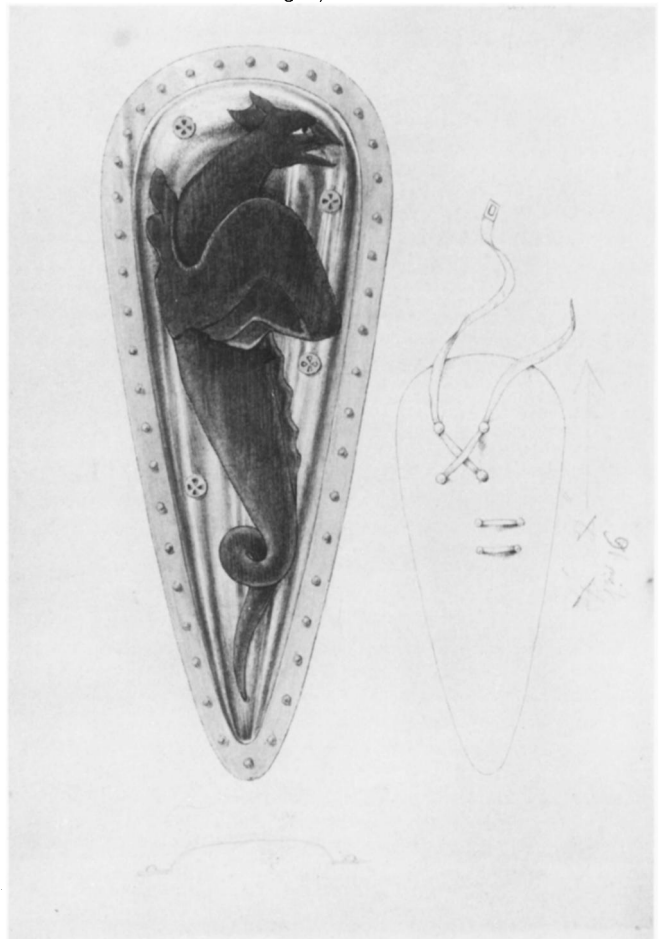
23. *Merlin*, by Edward Burne-Jones and (?) Charles Karl. 1894. Inscribed D within a circle; Merlin in Burne-Jones's hand. Pencil, pen and ink, with water-colour, body-colour and gold paint, 35.5 by 25.3 cm. (Collection Mr B. E. A. Vigers).



24. *Arthur*, by Edward Burne-Jones and (?) Charles Karl. 1894. Inscribed ARTHUR in Burne-Jones's hand; 1 within a circle; casque H. l'oiseau; ecailles s[il] [abbreviation of sauf meaning but or except?] cuir. Pencil, pen and ink, with water-colour, body-colour and gold paint, 35.4 by 25.4 cm. (Collection Mr B. E. A. Vigers).



25. *Soldiers standing by the King at back of throne*, by Edward Burne-Jones and (?) Charles Karl. 1894. Inscribed C within a circle; soldiers standing by the king at the back of / throne. Pencil, pen and ink, water-colour and body-colour, 35.6 by 25.3 cm. (Collection Mr B. E. A. Vigers).



26. *Arthur's shield*, by Edward Burne-Jones and (?) Charles Karl. 1894. Inscribed Arthur's Shield in Burne-Jones's hand; 4' 2" deleted and 1. [indecipherable] 16 [this is presumably a conversion of feet into metres, even though the measurements do not quite correspond]. Pencil, pen and ink, with water-colour, body-colour and gold paint, 35.4 by 25.3 cm. (Collection Mr B. E. A. Vigers).

artists of the theatre, in consultation with Mr Comyns Carr'.⁹ Two professional scene-painters, Hawes Craven and Joseph Harker, had the work of translating Burne-Jones's rough sketches into stage-sets; at first they were dismayed and unco-operative. Bram Stoker, acting manager at the Lyceum, tempered his account of the resulting contretemps with tact:

Burne-Jones's suggestions were new lights on stage possibilities... [but] great scene-painters like to make their own designs. But Burne-Jones' genius together with his great reputation... accompanied by Irving's persuasion carried the day. When it was objected that the suggested scenes were impossible to work in accordance with stage limitations, Irving pointed out that there was in itself opportunity for the ability of the scene-painters' skill and invention. Burne-Jones suggested the effect aimed at; with them rested the carrying it out.¹⁰

Translating Burne-Jones's costume designs into reality proved equally perplexing for Mrs Comyns Carr, who was responsible for Ellen Terry's costumes. She had never worked on anything so elaborate before and she was dealing with designs which largely ignored the necessity for actors to wear their costumes in performance. One particularly splendid cloak of silver embroidered with gold and turquoises had to be substantially altered before Ellen Terry could wear it.

At the dress-rehearsal when I made my entrance the cloak swept magnificently and I daresay looked fine, but I knew at once that I should never be able to act in it. I called out to Mrs Nettleship and Alice Carr, who were in the stalls, and implored them to lighten it of some of the jewels.

'Oh, do keep it as it is,' they answered, 'it looks splendid'.

'I can't breathe in it, much less act in it. Please send someone up to cut off a few stones'.

I went on with my part, and during a wait, two of Mrs Nettleship's assistants came on stage and snipped off a few jewels here and there. When they had filled a basket I began to feel better!

But when they tried to lift that basket, their united efforts could not move it!¹¹

All the costumes, with the exception of Ellen Terry's, were worked out in detail by Charles Karl, the leading designer of the theatrical costumiers, L. & H. Nathan, who late in 1894 spent four months in Burne-Jones's studio working under his direction. 'Some fifty to sixty suits of armour, all different, were designed for the purpose, and carried out in various places, some in London, others in Paris, Vienna, or Italy; in short, wherever the most suitable craftsmen for each particular example could be found'.¹² Four pieces of armour which were not used in the production remained in the artist's possession and are reproduced by Aymer Vallance.¹³

At a recent Sotheby's sale, 4th March 1982, thirty-five costume designs for *King Arthur* were sold to the Theatre

Museum.¹⁴ These were working copies, mostly in pen and ink on tracing paper, and cannot be attributed to a particular artist. Three, showing costumes for Merlin, Arthur and two soldiers, are clearly tracings of the original designs, seven of which are illustrated here.

These original designs, bought in an unknown studio sale by the present owner's father, are now in a private collection and were identified as designs for *King Arthur* only in 1980. The pencil under-drawing, some of the faces, and the titles are certainly in Burne-Jones's hand, but the other inscriptions and the water-colour and body-colour appear to be in another. Nevertheless, there are good grounds for supposing that these designs represent Burne-Jones's original intentions. They differ considerably from the costumes which are known to have been used in the production; for instance Irving decided on black for Arthur's armour instead of the bluish grey of the design (Fig.24). It was entirely in character for Irving to reject the more subtle colour in favour of dramatic impact, but the muted tonal range of these designs is far more appropriate to Burne-Jones's concept of the legend. This discrepancy implies that the water-colour was applied before Irving's final decisions were made and that the designs represent Burne-Jones's early ideas. The water-colour, which is too tight and fussy for Burne-Jones at this date, is likely to be by Karl, working under Burne-Jones's direction.¹⁵ A collection of designs by Nathans for a production of Comyns Carr's *Tristram and Iseult*, recently on sale at Sotheby's Conduit Street Galleries,¹⁶ have overpainting stylistically very similar to that on the *King Arthur* designs suggesting that in both cases it is Karl's hand.

The designs published here throw new light on Burne-Jones's intentions and also on the reasons for his dissatisfaction with the production. He was particularly annoyed about changes to the costume of Merlin, one of the characters from Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* to whom he was most drawn. As well as the Port Sunlight painting of *The beguiling of Merlin* he had chosen the subject of Merlin's betrayal by Nimue for his Oxford mural and for two small paintings in 1861 and 1884.¹⁷ He saw Merlin as essentially a tragic figure and designed for him a costume which is austere in style and colour, consisting of a silver-grey tunic under a blue-grey cloak, and a close-fitting black cap (Fig.23). The severity is relieved only by gold embroidered slippers and by two thin vertical stripes of gold running down the tunic. The general effect is rather monastic and suggests a man set apart from worldly pomp and display. The figure's features, fine-drawn, aesthetic, and troubled, reinforce this impression. Burne-Jones's concept had not changed much since *The beguiling of Merlin* twenty years before; there are similarities both in the blue-grey tones of Merlin's dress and in the faces, more anguished and hollow-eyed in the oil painting, but of the same type.

Merlin's final costume therefore was an acute disappointment to Burne-Jones: 'they behaved badly about Merlin and dress him not as I designed him, so I have

⁹ *Ibid.*, II, pp.248-49.

¹⁰ STOKER, *op. cit.* at note 2 above, I, pp.253-55.

¹¹ E. TERRY: *The Story of My Life*, London [1908], pp.350-51.

¹² A. VALLANCE: 'The Decorative Art of Sir Edward Burne-Jones', special number of *Art Journal* [Easter 1900], pp.26-28.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Figs. 44, 47, 48, 49.

¹⁴ Lot 26, the property of Mrs Molly Nathan.

¹⁵ I am most grateful to John Christian for his advice on this point.

¹⁶ 16th March 1984, lot 228.

¹⁷ *Merlin and Nimue*, gouache, 64 by 50.6 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum; and *Merlin and Nimue*, oil on board, 34.9 by 19 cm, private collection.

made a row and now they are going to alter it'.¹⁸ A letter to Mary Gaskell makes clear the reasons for his disapproval both of the costume and the way the character was presented: 'Merlin I designed carefully – they have set aside my design & made him filthy and horrible – like a witch in Macbeth – from his voice I suspect him of being one of the witches. . . Morgan Le Fay is simply dreadful – you remember she is half divine in the ancient story – as Merlin is – here they are scandal mongering gossips.'¹⁹ Clement Scott agreed; Merlin was 'swathed like one of the old witches in *Macbeth*'.²⁰ The cover of the souvenir programme of the first night of *King Arthur*, illustrated by Hawes Craven and J. Bernard Partridge, shows this Merlin: a wizardly figure with long, white hair and beard, wrapped mysteriously in a flowing cloak with incense fumes swirling around him (Fig.22).

Fig.24 shows Arthur in armour, Irving's costume for the opening scene of the play, in which, guided by Merlin, Arthur claims Excalibur. The costume is blue-grey, except for the gold sash and indented crown of the helmet, and the brown stockings. The armour is similar to designs which Burne-Jones made for the *Perseus* series, commissioned in 1875, the spiked knee-greaves corresponding closely to a study for armour for *The finding of Medusa* in Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery (46'98); he was drawing on his long experience of designing props for his pictures. Opinion about this costume, which was black not grey in the production, was generally favourable. For Graham Robertson it was the most memorable aspect of the play: 'it is curious how little I can recall of the whole production beyond Irving's figure in black armour, which seemed as though it had stepped from the canvas of Burne-Jones'.²¹ Mrs Comyns Carr claimed that 'Irving's unusually becoming black suit of armour, with its raised visor, was one of his [Burne-Jones's] greatest triumphs'.²²

In his robes of kingship (Fig.27) Arthur wears, over a tunic of gold, a royal-blue cloak edged with a band of gold set with pearls. The crown is gold, set with large blue stones within a square design of pearls. Illustrations in the souvenir programme and pencil notes on the design, suggesting measurements and materials to be used, indicate that the costume was made up according to Burne-Jones's specifications. Although the effect must have been sumptuous, contemporary accounts make no special mention of it. Guinevere's costumes were often commented on and probably their splendour put Irving's costume in the shade.

The design inscribed *Arthur's shield* (Fig.26) shows a shield decorated with the Pendragon motif, Arthur's heraldic device. The ground is painted in the same blue-grey tones as Arthur's armour with the dragon a reddish brown. The studs on the rim and the stylised rosettes are picked out in gold. A sketchbook in Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery (P6'52) contains studies for this shield, including two alternative means of attaching it to the body of the wearer; one of these fastenings is adopted

in the pen-and-ink drawing of the back of the shield shown here.

The sword made from the design for Excalibur (Fig.29) is now in the Theatre Museum and is the only prop known to have survived. It corresponds closely to this design, although the decoration has been simplified. The fine detail would have been superfluous for a stage prop which needs to be convincing only from a distance and for which a bold effect is more appropriate. On the sword itself a mistake made by Burne-Jones has been rectified. In the design the scabbard is decorated with the figure of a king, which would have appeared upside down when the sword was actually worn. On the stage prop the series of kings that runs down the scabbard in continuation of the pattern begun in the design is now the right way up. In the design the sword is predominantly gold with bands of decoration in red, blue, and green. The stage prop is made of wood and copper on base metal with the figures in low relief and bands of decoration in red and blue, closely following the design.

The drawing reproduced in Fig.25 is inscribed *Soldiers standing by the King at the back of throne*. The soldier on the left carries a sky-blue banner and holds the Pendragon shield; the other carries Excalibur, both shield and sword corresponding to the designs in Figs.26 and 29. The sword now has the kings the right way up. Both soldiers are dressed simply and rather sombrely, one in pale green, the other in a brown tunic covered by a pale blue cloak. On the verso of this design (Fig.28) is a study for a soldier's costume, which probably gives a good impression of what the designs looked like in their first stages.

Burne-Jones intended the costumes for at least two of the principal characters to consist principally of greys, silvers and blues; in Merlin's case the costume was to be very simple. This understatement was deliberate, according with his concept of the legend as mystical, remote and precious. He felt that it should not be presented merely as an entertaining spectacle and remarked of the play, 'I see that people like the pageant in it and are civil to me about that – it only shews how useless it is to make pictures for them; they need to be roared at or they can't hear; sickening thoughts be these'.²³ Understandably Irving could not be expected to take this point of view. He must have felt that the delicate tones of the designs would not be dramatically effective: hence black armour instead of grey and the elaboration of Merlin's costume.

Irving's methods as manager and producer were notoriously autocratic, but Burne-Jones would have had a greater chance of preventing the introduction of distressing elements had he played a more active rôle as designer. He occasionally visited the theatre while preparations were in progress, but more as a spectator than a collaborator. He did not care for the theatre and was in any case temperamentally reluctant to criticise anyone else's work. As for the costumes it was not until the first dress rehearsal that he was fully aware of how far they

¹⁸ BURNE-JONES, *op. cit.* at note 3 above, II, p.248.

¹⁹ Burne-Jones to Gaskell, (n.d.), Additional Collection 54218, British Museum.

²⁰ SCOTT, *op. cit.* at note 4 above, p.375.

²¹ W. GRAHAM ROBERTSON: *Time Was: The Reminiscences of W. Graham Robertson*, London [1931], p.157.

²² CARR, *op. cit.* at note 7 above, p.208.

²³ BURNE-JONES, *op. cit.* at note 3 above, p.248.

were removed from his concept of them. Mrs Comyns Carr recalled:

Irving spared no one when he was at work, but he only once came up against Burne-Jones in the matter of costume.

Genevieve Ward, as Morgan-le-Fay, was crossing the stage in the heavy robes and truly magnificent head-dress which had seemed to me to accord well with her Eastern type, when Henry suddenly shouted, 'Moses and Aaron rolled into one! Take the thing off!'

... So strictly had Burne-Jones's proviso – that he was not to be called upon to superintend detail – been carried out that when he attended one of the final rehearsals he was shocked to discover how much that was purely theatrical had unavoidably crept into the execution of his poetic conception.²⁴

King Arthur opened at the Lyceum on 12th January 1895. It ran for 105 performances in London, twelve in the provinces, and was then taken on tour in America. It would probably have been revived, had it not been for the loss of the scenery in 1898. The play was well received, and Burne-Jones's costumes and sets were generally regarded as the production's most successful aspect. Mrs Comyns Carr recalled that 'however far short of Burne-Jones's expectations the settings for *King Arthur* fell, they created a very real sensation, for nothing like them had ever been seen before, even on Irving's stage, which held the palm for such effects'.²⁵ Bernard Shaw's reference to the play as a 'splendid picture' seems to sum up the general reaction, even among the most critical, to the visual effect created by Burne-Jones's designs.²⁶

Part of Burne-Jones's disappointment must have stemmed from a realisation that the play itself was at odds with his 'peerless and beloved *Morte D'Arthur*'.²⁷ Comyns Carr follows Tennyson in omitting certain inconvenient but essential elements of the legend. In Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* Arthur unwittingly commits incest with his half-sister, Margawse, and fathers Mordred, who brings about Arthur's tragic downfall. Tennyson ignores this, makes his Arthur morally flawless and throws the full weight of the blame for the dissolution of the Round Table and the death of Arthur on the adulterous love of Launcelot and Guinevere. Discerning critics easily located the fault in the play. Graham Robertson, a friend of Burne-Jones, wrote:

It was not precisely the author's fault, for J. Comyns Carr had pieced together a very workmanlike frame in which to set the series of Burne-Jones pictures which formed the real attraction of the play. It was the fault of Tennyson, whose 'blameless king' of the Idylls has taken such root in the public mind that Mr. Carr no doubt feared to dig him up.

Unfortunately a blameless Arthur knocks all meaning out of Arthurian legends...²⁸

The eighteen-year-old Augustus John was less severe,

and *King Arthur* ranked as one of his most memorable theatrical experiences: 'my sister Gwen and I went to see an Arthurian drama in which Irving figured, and on reaching our lodgings, still under the spell of the master, I seized a heavy walking stick, raised it above my head, while reciting appropriate lines, and smashed the chandelier! Excalibur had struck again...'²⁹

Burne-Jones remained deeply dissatisfied: 'it isn't as I think of it, at all – no – not for one glimpse', he wrote to Mary Gaskell after attending a dress rehearsal.³⁰

After the play had been produced he said very little about it, and when taxed with this, in a letter from a friend, he answered: "No – I didn't say a word about the *King Arthur*, not quite knowing what to say, for friends are involved in it: Irving is lovable, and Carr is an old friend now... In the main I should like to keep all the highest things secret and remote from people; if they wanted to look they should go a hard journey to see. Yes, that is what I mostly feel, but now and then in weak moments I give way; weak moments come to me through friendship... So when Irving came and softly waylaid me I relented."³¹

He admitted, however, that he did not regard the play as a total failure: 'the armour is good – they have taken pains with it – made in Paris and well understood... the dresses were well enough if the actors had known how to wear them... the architecture will do – & the furniture... Percival looked the one romantic thing in it – it is good enough for its purpose the whole thing.'³² He implies that this purpose is not a high one, but he had sense enough to know that his expectations were to some extent unrealistic; his ideals were impossible to realise except in his own imagination and perhaps in his paintings, over which he had complete control. A whimsical remark in his letter to Mary Gaskell suggests his awareness of this: 'Percival looks beautiful – some of them are terrible greys but I didn't design their faces did I? Such a careless artist did that – carried away perhaps by a morbid love of variety.'³³

In view of Burne-Jones's early misgivings and his lack of interest in the theatre, it seems curious that he should have undertaken the designs in the first place. No doubt friendship did play a part in his decision, although the collaboration between two such opposites as Burne-Jones, sensitive, unassuming, shy of publicity, and Irving, flamboyant and forceful, was certain to be an uneasy one. But Burne-Jones was probably also motivated by the hope that, through the play, some of the inner meaning of the *Morte D'Arthur* might be conveyed to a wider audience than could be reached through his paintings and tapestry designs. Although the production would inevitably fall short of his ideal, enough might remain to fire the imagination of others: 'he [Irving] thinks it is better for people to see an Arthurian play than not – that there are enough people who like romance and that they might be fed – and perhaps he is right.'³⁴ He may have felt that, if he refused,

²⁴ CARR, *op. cit.* at note 7 above, pp.207-09.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.208.

²⁶ B. SHAW: *Our Theatres in the Nineties: Criticism Contributed Week by Week to the Saturday Review from January 1895 to May 1898*, London [1941], I, p.19.

²⁷ BURNE-JONES, *op. cit.* at note 3 above, II, p.276.

²⁸ ROBERTSON, *op. cit.* at note 21 above, p.157.

²⁹ A. JOHN: *Autobiography*, London [1973], p.381.

³⁰ Burne-Jones to Gaskell, (n.d.), B.M. manuscript cited at note 19 above.

³¹ BURNE-JONES, *op. cit.* at note 3 above, II, pp.247-48.

³² Burne-Jones to Gaskell, (n.d.), B.M. manuscript cited at note 19 above.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ BURNE-JONES, *op. cit.* at note 3 above, II, p.248.

the designs would be carried out by someone whose approach would be less sympathetic to the legends. At least his involvement would enable him to exercise some influence over the visual side of the production. Even apart from these considerations, the request by Irving and Carr would have been difficult to resist, as he himself must have felt that he was the most suitable person to carry out the work.

For forty years the legends had occupied a special place in his imagination and they were now dominating the last years of his life. Up to his death in 1898 he was working on *Arthur in Avalon* (Fig.21); according to Georgiana Burne-Jones, 'Time never touched his feeling for the Quest. "Lord", he wrote, "how that San Grail story is ever in my mind and thoughts continually. Was ever anything in the world beautiful as that is beautiful? If I might clear away all the work that I have begun, if I might live and clear it all away, and dedicate the last days to that tale – if only I might."' ³⁵

³⁵ *Ibid.*, II, p.333.

Shorter Notices

George Stubbs: two rediscovered enamel paintings

BY JUDY EGERTON

THE *Lion on a rock* (Fig.31) and the *Portrait of Mrs French's lap-dog* (Fig.30) each reappeared at the end of 1984, unfortunately too late for inclusion in the *George Stubbs* exhibition at the Tate and the Yale Center for British Art, 1984-85. Each is painted in enamel colours; each is signed and dated, like all Stubbs's known work in enamels (but unlike all his oils). Their reappearance reduces the number of Stubbs enamels still 'lost' to approximately fifteen.

The *Lion on a rock*¹ appears to be dated 1775, though conceivably the last digit is 8, not 5. Its subject was hitherto known only from the engraving by Stubbs, published 1st May 1788.² Stubbs first worked in enamels on supports of copper (becoming dissatisfied with the small size to which the weightiness of copper restricted him); his first known work in enamel on copper is the Tate's *Lion attacking a horse*, dated 1769. If *Lion on a rock* is indeed dated 1775, then it is the earliest of his enamels to be painted on a surface other than copper.

Ozias Humphry records³ that when Stubbs was seeking hard,

non-porous supports other than copper, he applied to 'the artificial Stone manufacture', before finding that Josiah Wedgwood, not without trial and error, could provide him with ceramic 'canvases'. Stubbs's first work in enamel on Wedgwood ware was presumed to be the small oval *Sleeping leopard*, dated 1777, painted on what is evidently the cut-out base of a Wedgwood dish. Bruce Tattersall makes (in correspondence) the interesting suggestion that *Lion on a rock*, evidently dated two years earlier than *Sleeping leopard*, may in fact be painted on Coade stone. Certainly its colours are more muted and its surface more matt than in most of Stubbs's enamels; no doubt chemical analysis would establish the composition of its support with certainty. On its appearance in the London saleroom in 1984, *Lion on a rock* appeared uncharacteristically dull in tone. Removal of varnish and old retouchings revealed an austere beautiful range of greys and browns, a silvery-blue sea and a sky just flushed with pink – softer colours than in most of Stubbs's enamels. If the work is indeed on ceramic, Tattersall suggests (again in correspondence) that the explanation may be that Stubbs had not yet correctly gauged the exact degree of firing ('the hardly biddable force of fire', in Basil Taylor's memorable phrase)⁴ needed to retain the brilliance of enamel colours while fusing them to a support other than copper.

The *Portrait of Mrs French's lap-dog*, undoubtedly on Wedgwood ceramic, is dated 1782, and was exhibited at the Royal Academy that year.⁵ It has survived in virtually perfect condition, justifying that faith in the permanence of colour and imperviousness to deterioration in surface condition which seems not only to have prompted Stubbs to essay the medium of enamel but also determined him to persevere in it despite lack of popular success. The *Lap-dog* was painted from nature and, unlike most of Stubbs's enamels, is known only in this medium. Humphry lists it among Stubbs's works in enamel as 'a white dog the size of Life (small Shag Lap Dog) for Mrs French . . . from nature'. The O.E.D. quotes the use of 'shag' (now archaic) to mean 'having shaggy hair', as in 'shag-dog'. The dog is of the Spitz family but, given Humphry's note that Stubbs has portrayed a lap-dog 'the size of Life', may have been cross-bred to keep its size diminutive: but a dog did not need to be thoroughbred to catch Stubbs's eye.

In 1781 Stubbs's sole exhibit at the Royal Academy had been '*Two horses: in enamel*' – presumably the *Horses fighting*, dated 1781 – which provoked Horace Walpole to comment 'There is a picture at the exhibition in which Stubbs has invented enamelling oil paintings, and it looks as if he would succeed – not that our painters will adopt it. They are as obstinate as mules or farmers'.⁶ In the following year, 1782, Stubbs evidently made a deliberate attempt to demonstrate the full potential and variety of his work in enamel. He exhibited seven works at the R.A. in 1782; five of these were in enamel, and all except one of these was 'painted from nature'. The *Lap-dog*, itself dated 1782, was presumably the '*Portrait of a dog, enamel*' (363). The self portrait in enamel now in the National Portrait Gallery was exhibited as '*Portrait of an Artist*' (173). A '*Portrait of a young lady Isabella Saltonstall in the character of Una, from Spenser's Faerie Queene*' (70) is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum; 'its companion' (according to Humphry), '*Portrait of a young gentleman shooting*' (79), is in a

⁴ 'Stubbs and the Art of Painted Enamel', Introduction to B. TATTERSALL: *Stubbs & Wedgwood*, Tate Gallery, exh. cat. [1974], p.13.

⁵ 'Portrait of a dog – enamel', R.A. 1782 (363). Previously known to the author only from a photograph, it was sold by Leggatt Brothers to a private Austrian collection in 1937, and seemed untraceable until its emergence in a private American collection in 1984, from which it was purchased by Agnew; it is now in the Paul Mellon Collection.

⁶ Horace Walpole to William Mason, 6th May 1781, ed. W. S. LEWIS *et al.*: *The Correspondence of Horace Walpole*, Vol.29, Yale [1955] p.137.

¹ Untraced since Stubbs's studio sale, 27th May 1807 (85), it emerged from a private Sussex collection in 1984, sold Bonham's, 13th December 1984 (213, repr.), bt. Rafael Vals; sold by Colnaghi to a private collection, Switzerland.

² B. TAYLOR: *The Prints of George Stubbs*, London [1969], No.7, repr. p.35.

³ Ms. Memoir of the Life of George Stubbs, Picton Collection, Liverpool City Libraries, from which all quotations from Humphry are taken.



27. *Arthur*, by Edward Burne-Jones and (?) Charles Karl. 1894. Inscribed 56;49; 75 behind; On Elastic Bracelets-/Stockinette 5 1/2"/Top 8"; 49; L within a circle; cloak be purple/with hem-gold in Burne-Jones's hand; Neck 18./Chest 38./Waist; Sleeve 7 1/2-22-31 1/2/Top Sleeve 17.; 34.; 47; Boots 11-Bunhill/Bond St. Pencil, pen and ink, with water-colour, body-colour and gold paint, 35.5 by 25.3 cm. (Collection Mr B. E. A. Vigers).



28. Verso of Fig. 25: *Soldier*, by Edward Burne-Jones. 1894. Inscribed nq/nq; ?yinyj. [the meaning of these inscriptions is unknown]. Pencil.



29. *Excalibur*, by Edward Burne-Jones and (?) Charles Karl. 1894. Inscribed excalibur in Burne-Jones's hand; 5 sujets; tête dans le haut; Gothique Byzantin. Pencil, pen and ink, with water-colour and body-colour on paper mounted on card, 35.5 by 25.3 cm. (Collection Mr B. E. A. Vigers).