

Elihu Vedder's Rubáiyát: Art and Enterprise

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Elihu Vedder's *Rubáiyát*

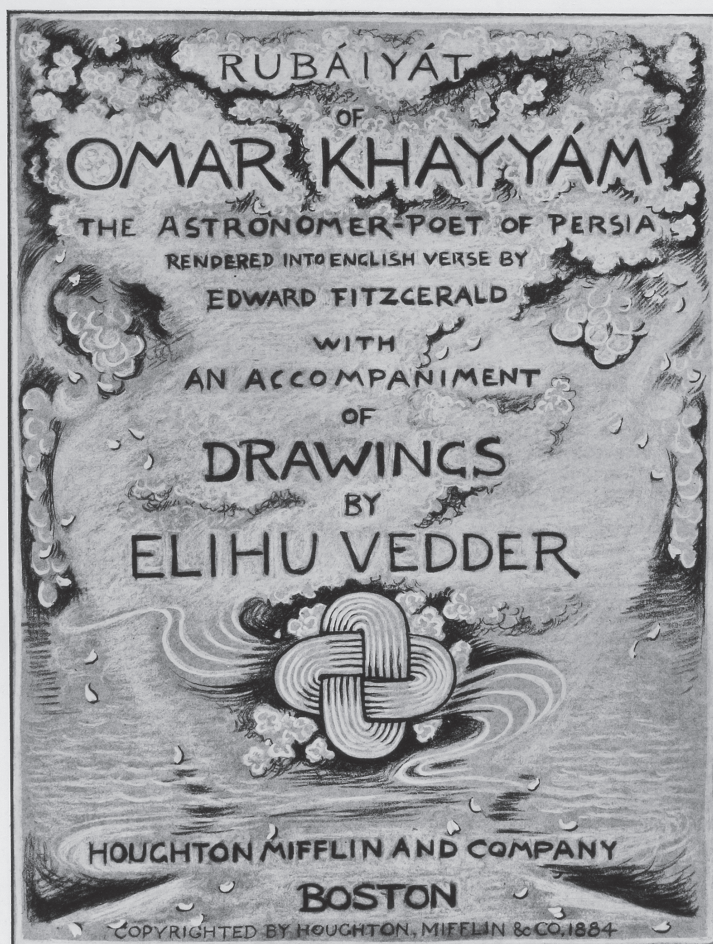
Art and Enterprise

Sylvia Yount

The distinctive work and career of Elihu Vedder have proven difficult to categorize in the history of American art. Part academic naturalist, part progressive symbolist, the artist is best remembered for his allegorical and literary paintings. Yet a more contextual examination of Vedder's production challenges the standard view of him as a visionary out of step with the art world of his time and unconcerned with the broader cultural reach of his work. Vedder's masterpiece, the artist-designed book *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (fig. 1), offers a touchstone for exploring his varied creative practice. The fifty-four drawings he made for a deluxe edition of Edward FitzGerald's translation of the twelfth-century Persian text—as well as the related paintings and decorative designs inspired by them—reveal Vedder's deep engagement with the late nineteenth-century Anglo-American Aesthetic movement as both an artistic and a commercial enterprise, aimed at a wide range of viewers and consumers.

For most of his professional life a respected member of the American art colony in Rome, Vedder descended from a family with seventeenth-century Dutch roots. Born in New York City, he began to study painting in his late teens and soon sought further training in Paris, then Florence. Vedder spent the Civil War years in New York's Greenwich Village, where he joined a bohemian circle of artists and writers that included Herman Melville and Walt Whitman. While taking classes at the National Academy of Design and supporting himself through commissions for magazine illustrations, Vedder produced a number of enigmatic paintings of fantastical subjects—several inspired by exotic tales from the *Arabian Nights*. Such works of uncanny realism disturbed many viewers but were strong enough to lead to the artist's election to the National Academy. These probing intellectual pictures found even greater favor in Boston (where Vedder resided briefly in 1865), the literary city that decades later would enshrine his *Rubáiyát* project.¹

On an 1870–71 stay in London, Vedder encountered members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, and Edward Burne-Jones, as well as other English artists also associated with Aesthetic culture, such as Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Frederic Leighton, George Frederic Watts, and Walter Crane. All of these influential figures would cast a shadow on the expatriate's future work, but it was English poet and illustrator Edwin J. Ellis—a disciple of Eastern mysticism and scholar of William Blake—who supposedly introduced Vedder to FitzGerald's



1 Elihu Vedder, Title page from *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* by Edward FitzGerald (Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1884). Deluxe edition; number 77 of 100. Mechanical reproduction. Image: 12 x 10 5/8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Gift of Perry and Judith Linder, 2011.⁴²

by themes of spiritual unrest, loss, and psychological struggle in both personal and professional terms (see Reason's essay in this issue). The peripatetic artist returned to New York from Europe in 1881 and remained there through 1883, a period that coincided with the flourishing of the American Aesthetic movement. This widespread cultural phenomenon championed beauty as a social and moral force, and encouraged a nonhierarchical and collaborative approach to art-making among painters, sculptors, designers, and architects. Vedder's early introduction to English Aestheticism led to his avid pursuit of the American variant. Socializing with other progressive artists in organizations such as the Tile Club—formed in direct response to the fashionable taste for Aesthetic design—Vedder, with “the cry of money always in my ears,” explored a variety of decorative projects as both artistic and commercial ventures at a time when the market for American painting had softened.⁴ From greeting cards and stained-glass designs to ceramic tiles and picture frames, Vedder's marketable experiments reflect the consumerist character of the Aesthetic movement. Moreover, these decorative projects demonstrated a collaborative impulse that would come to characterize many of his subsequent efforts. Vedder's first Aesthetic endeavor, in 1881,

1859 *Rubáiyát* when they met in Italy. This loose translation of 101 quatrains from the Persian mathematician, astronomer, and poet Omar Khayyám's nearly 1,000 epigrams reflected on celebrations of life and mysteries of death.

Vedder learned from the visual symbolism of such earlier English “visionaries” and applied those lessons to his own painting, design work, and poetry. Sharing with these figures a certain artistic sensibility, which Vedder described as arising from the “rich, romantic sadness of youth,” he admitted that, since his student days, he was “always looking for things with a tinge of romance in them. . . . I had been reading Tennyson, and my mind was full of the gleaming Excalibur.”² While Vedder embraced these Aesthetic practitioners' interest in romantic fables, he also absorbed the anti-narrative, art-for-art's-sake gospel of the avant-garde expatriate James McNeill Whistler. Indeed, Vedder's use of the musical term “accompaniments” to describe his *Rubáiyát* drawings surely was informed by Whistler's innovative titling of his own work.³

During the 1870s, moving between Rome, London, and New York, Vedder was increasingly consumed

was a prize-winning entry in Louis Prang's second annual Christmas Card competition. The artist paired his Renaissance-inspired illustration of a smiling Italianate maiden with the first line of a poem by his friend and fellow Aesthetic enthusiast Celia Thaxter, with whom he shared the one-thousand-dollar cash award.⁵ In another collaboration, with his longtime friend John Low, Vedder patented a novel method for producing metal-framed ceramic tiles. The artist later designed a number of tiles that were distributed by Low's Boston-based pottery, the Chelsea Tile Works.⁶

This fertile involvement with various Aesthetic circles led directly to Vedder's greatest critical and financial success: the *Rubáiyát* project. It was Joseph Millet—brother of fellow Tile Club member Francis Davis Millet and part of Boston's publishing firm of Houghton Mifflin and Company—who, in 1882, encouraged Vedder to produce an artistic book.⁷ Within a year the agreement was signed. The volume, which featured an embossed cover depicting the so-called cosmic swirl of life (fig. 2), endpapers, the core drawings, and lettering designed entirely by Vedder, appeared in Boston on November 8, 1884. The execution of the book benefited from a new photographic printing process that translated the nearly monochromatic drawings—produced in black and white chalk with pencil, ink, and watercolor highlights on soft gray paper—to the printed page with little loss of their subtle tonality. The book was first issued in two formats: a large, limited edition with a stamped leather cover for one hundred dollars, and a more affordable version with a printed cover and typeface text for twenty-five dollars. Sales of the original, deluxe edition of the book constituted nearly all of Vedder's earnings for 1884 and 1885. Subsequent editions, aimed at broadening the market, provided the artist with a steady income until his death in 1923. In 1887 he exhibited the original

- 2 Elihu Vedder (illustrator) and Edward FitzGerald (author), *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1884). Deluxe edition; number 77 of 100. 17½ x 15½ x 2 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of Perry and Judith Linder, 2011.42



RUBÁIYÁT OF OMAR KHAYYÁM



Sometimes I think that never blows so red
The rose as where some buried Cæsar bled
That every hyacinth the garden wears
Dropped in its lap from some once lovely head
XIX
And this delightful herb, whose tender green
Fledges the river's lip on which we lean —
Ah, lean upon it lightly! for who knows
From what once lovely lip it springs unseen
XX
Ah, my Beloved, fill the cup that clears
To-day of past regrets, and future fears!
Tomorrow? Why, tomorrow I may be
Myself with Yesterdays' seven thousand years.

3 William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and Charles Fairfax Murray, *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, 1872. Illuminated manuscript page, 11 ¼ x 8 ¼ in. Image courtesy The British Library

influenced by another English project—Walter Crane's illustrated songbook *Pan Pipes: A Book of Old Songs* (1883)—specifically in its oblong shape, diminutive scale, and harmonious combination of word and image.¹⁰

Despite the varied sources that informed Vedder's drawings, many critics found them to be "marvels of invention and composition," lauding them as a "rare instance of the perfect sympathy that may exist between poet and painter."¹¹ Significantly, both Crane and Vedder met Morris and Burne-Jones around the time they were completing their version of the *Rubáiyát*. All four artists continued to explore Omani subjects, although none would hew as closely to the original source material as Vedder.¹²

The *Rubáiyát* imagery marked a new phase in Vedder's career, providing him with rich thematic material for subsequent works, including large-scale paintings.¹³ In 1885

Rubáiyát drawings in Boston and New York to great acclaim, then sold them as a group to his important patron Agnes Ethel Tracy. He later produced a group of pastels from these drawings and arranged for many of the book's most popular images to be reproduced as inexpensive prints.⁸

More suggestive of a Christian Pre-Raphaelitism than the Eastern fantasy that characterized his earlier work, Vedder's illustrations for his *Rubáiyát* reveal the general influence of the English artists Morris and Burne-Jones, who had explored the subject over a decade before him. It is likely that Vedder was especially familiar with the published translation of the poem illuminated by Burne-Jones, Morris, and Charles Fairfax Murray around 1871–72 (fig. 3). In Burne-Jones's contributions to that version—designed to emulate the medieval manuscripts so admired by the Pre-Raphaelites, with image and text divided into separate registers—figures cling to each other in haunting nocturnal landscapes not unlike those in Vedder's 1884 illustrations. Yet the American's compositions are far more daring in their fragmentation and mournful tone of transience. For example, in Vedder's "Cup of Death" image (see fig. 1 in Reason's essay) the primary focus is on the supernatural angel and fading woman, enveloped in a nearly abstract moonlit setting, evocative of the accompanying poetic verse. In contrast, Burne-Jones's earthly romantic couple is more conventionally framed in a ruined medieval garden with little narrative specificity or formal relation to the text.⁹

The overall format of Vedder's *Rubáiyát* was



4 Elihu Vedder, *The Cup of Death*, 1885 and 1911. Oil on canvas, 44 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Gift of William T. Evans, 1912.3.3

5 Elihu Vedder, *The Cup of Death*, 1885. Oil on canvas, 44 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund. © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Photo, Katherine Wetzell

he produced two full-length oil versions of *The Cup of Death* (figs. 4, 5) inspired by the forty-ninth quatrain of the *Rubáiyát*: “So when the Angel of the darker Drink / At last shall find you by the river-brink, / And, offering his Cup, invite your Soul / Forth to your Lips to quaff—you shall not shrink.”¹⁴ As in his 1884 illustration of the theme, Vedder evoked the dream-like quality of FitzGerald’s verse in his depiction of two somnambulistic figures—the naturalistically winged, dusky-skinned Angel of Death, “full of might and mildness,” and the pallid young woman about to drink from the proffered cup, symbolizing the inevitability of death.¹⁵ In the half moonlight, the two draw quietly and easily toward the dark riverbank, their shroud-like draperies (the woman’s barely covering her body) rippling rhythmically with the tall, slender reeds that surround them.

These arresting and frankly sensuous paintings may be viewed as among Vedder’s most complete Aesthetic expressions—from their decorative visual source, nocturnal

landscape, and rhapsodic, melancholic mood to their distinctive frames. As noted earlier, such qualities evoke the Aestheticism of Whistler as well as that of Burne-Jones. Moreover, both versions of *The Cup of Death* are housed in elegantly carved gilded-oak frames, believed to have been designed by Vedder and his expatriate colleague and fellow Aesthete Charles Caryl Coleman.¹⁶ Like the reeded molding often found on Whistler's paintings, these frames were intended to harmonize with the canvases, creating a complete artistic experience for the viewer. Vedder's conceptual design, which fuses the ideal and the real, also invests the pictures with a restraint grounded in sober poetic verse that contrasts with the overt sentimentality of many Victorian representations of loss and death.¹⁷

According to Vedder's daughter and heir, Anita, the original oil of *The Cup of Death*—purchased by American collector William T. Evans in 1912 and donated to the Smithsonian the same year—was left unfinished by the artist until 1911 (fig. 4). Having become dissatisfied with its somber palette, Vedder decided to revisit the composition in a second canvas with “coloring more brilliant and rich.”¹⁸ That representation of *The Cup of Death*—now owned by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts—is also distinguished from the first in the more modulated definition of the differently draped figures, viewed at a greater distance and more harmoniously placed against a greater profusion of fluttering reeds (fig. 5).¹⁹ Vedder copyrighted the second version in 1899—and the first after repainting it in 1911—suggesting that his *Rubáiyát* imagery continued to have great resonance with the public. For example, the Boston firm of Curtis and Cameron offered modestly priced hand-colored reproductions of *The Cup of Death* oils more than a quarter century after the works were first produced.²⁰

Understanding Vedder's *Rubáiyát* and its creative offshoots—including his painted versions of *The Cup of Death*—as outcomes of the artist's active involvement with progressive Aesthetic culture identifies him as a figure very much of his time. Consumed by contemporary concerns of fashion, taste, and the market—as well as intellectual debates about culture, religion, and science in late nineteenth-century American life—this enterprising Aesthete suggested answers to both through evocative imagery that continues to fascinate and challenge.

Notes

Thanks to Akela Reason, with whom I have shared a longtime interest in Vedder, and to Emily D. Shapiro, for her thoughtful shaping of these paired perspectives.

- 1 The standard Vedder literature ranges from the artist's own colorful memoir (Elihu Vedder, *The Digressions of V.* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1910]) to important studies by Regina Soria (Soria, *Elihu Vedder: American Visionary Artist in Rome (1836–1923)* [Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1970]) as well as Joshua C. Taylor, Jane Dillenberger, and Richard Murray (*Perceptions and Evocations: The Art of Elihu Vedder* [Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979]). In Sarah Burns, *Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2004), 158–87, the author fleshes out Vedder's New York biography and brings additional critical perspective to his work.
- 2 Soria, *Elihu Vedder*, 110, 112, 183, 191. Vedder, *Digressions*, 145, 170.
- 3 “I do not intend the drawings to be a clear illustration of the text . . . they are an accompaniment to the verses, parallel but not identical in thought.” Soria, *Elihu Vedder*, 183.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 165.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 151–52.
- 6 Barbara White Morse, “John G. Low and Elihu Vedder as Artist Dreamers,” *Spinning Wheel* 32 (May 1976): 24–27; see also Soria, *Elihu Vedder*, 160–61.

- 7 Soria, *Elihu Vedder*, 171.
- 8 Vedder himself was surprised by the book's immense popularity; Vedder, *Digressions*, 231, 498. According to Soria (*Elihu Vedder*, 195), one of the artist's New York politician friends proposed some kind of "deal" to have the Metropolitan Museum of Art buy the *Rubáiyát* drawings, but Vedder rejected the "payola" idea. Instead, they were purchased privately, in 1888, by Tracy, preventing their being broken up and sold at auction by the artist himself; Vedder, *Digressions*, 487.
- 9 For an extensive discussion of the Pre-Raphaelites' *Rubáiyát*, see Michaela Braesel, "William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones and 'The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám,'" *Apollo*, n.s., 159, no. 504 (February 2004): 47–56. Just as Vedder later translated many of his *Rubáiyát* drawings into oil, Burne-Jones reworked his *Rubáiyát* watercolor as the oil painting *Love among the Ruins* (1894, National Trust Collections, Wightwick Manor, West Midlands).
- 10 Vedder described his concept for the book, including the reference to Crane, in an 1883 letter to Joseph Millet, Houghton Library, Harvard University; quoted in Soria, *Elihu Vedder*, 183–84, 269n2.
- 11 William H. Downes, "Elihu Vedder's Pictures," *Atlantic Monthly* 59, no. 356 (June 1887): 843; and "Vedder's Drawings for Omar Khayyám's Rubáiyát," *Atlantic Monthly* 55, no. 327 (January 1885): 111. Vedder himself described the book project as an unearthly "collaboration" with FitzGerald and Khayyám: "Certainly three kindred spirits have here encountered each other and though the first two missed each other on earth by eight centuries, and the last two by twelve months [FitzGerald had died in 1883, just a year before the first Vedder edition was published], still in the heart of the survivor lingers the hope that in life 'sans end' they may all yet meet." Quoted by Jane Dillenberger, "Between Faith and Doubt: Subjects for Meditation," in Taylor, Dillenberger, and Murray, *Perceptions and Evocations*, 130, 164n24.
- 12 Like Vedder, Crane lost two family members—an infant son and a sister—in the years he was exploring *Rubáiyát* imagery. Bob Forrest, "Omar and the Pre-Raphaelites," July 2012, <http://www.omarkhayyamnederland.com/archives/articles/omar-and-the-pre-raphaelites.html>.
- 13 In addition to *The Cup of Death*, Vedder's *Rubáiyát*-inspired paintings include *The Pleiades* (1885, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), *The Cup of Love* (1887, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), *The Fates Gathering in the Stars* (1887, The Art Institute of Chicago), and *The Sorrowing Soul between Doubt and Faith* (1899, Baltimore Museum of Art).
- 14 Edward FitzGerald, trans., *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1884).
- 15 Downes, "Elihu Vedder's Pictures," 844.
- 16 Vedder, *The Cup of Death*, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, curatorial files.
- 17 Vedder's image inspired its own poetic response: Louise C. Moulton, "The Cup of Death," *Alta Daily California*, June 12, 1887. The last lines of her verse read: "And she fares onward with thee willingly, / To dwell where no man loves, no lovers part, / So Grief that is makes welcome Death to come." <http://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc?a=d&d=DAC18870612.2.99>. In 1901 Vedder's wife, Carrie, proposed that Houghton Mifflin produce a book of poetry inspired by her husband's pictures as another money-making venture. Soria, *Elihu Vedder*, 229.
- 18 Anita Vedder to R. Rathburn, May 21, 1911; copy in Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, curatorial files.
- 19 *The Cup of Death* paintings differ from Vedder's *Rubáiyát* source in their full-length presentation of the figures—as opposed to the half-length composition of the drawing—visualizing the "river-brink" moment described in the quatrain.
- 20 Anita Vedder to Rathburn. See also "Vedder Subjects in The Copley Prints," brochure, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, curatorial files. Soria describes how Carrie Vedder strongly advised her husband to find ways to market his work through the sale of "colored reproductions" of his paintings in both Europe (through Fabbri of Rome) and the United States (through Houghton Mifflin and Curtis and Cameron); Soria, *Elihu Vedder*, 202, 270n2. The popularity of *The Cup of Death* in particular coincides with that of the Swiss symbolist painter Arnold Böcklin's *Island of the Dead* in the same years; see <http://wnyc.org/story/138443-isle-of-the-dead>.