

Burne-Jones's *King Cophetua* and the Beggar Maid

Sir,

I would like to add a footnote to Mr. W. S. Taylor's article in your February issue on Burne-Jones's *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*. That the artist returned to this subject between the oil painting of 1862 and the gouache study dated c. 1883 by Taylor can be seen in a double page of sketches in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. They occur in one of the artist's sketch-books (No. 1085) presented to the Museum by Sir Philip Burne-Jones and Mrs. Mackail in April 1923. The size of each sheet is 25.5 x 36 cm., and the pencilled identification of the subject is in the hand of Sir Sydney Cockerell, then Director of the Museum.

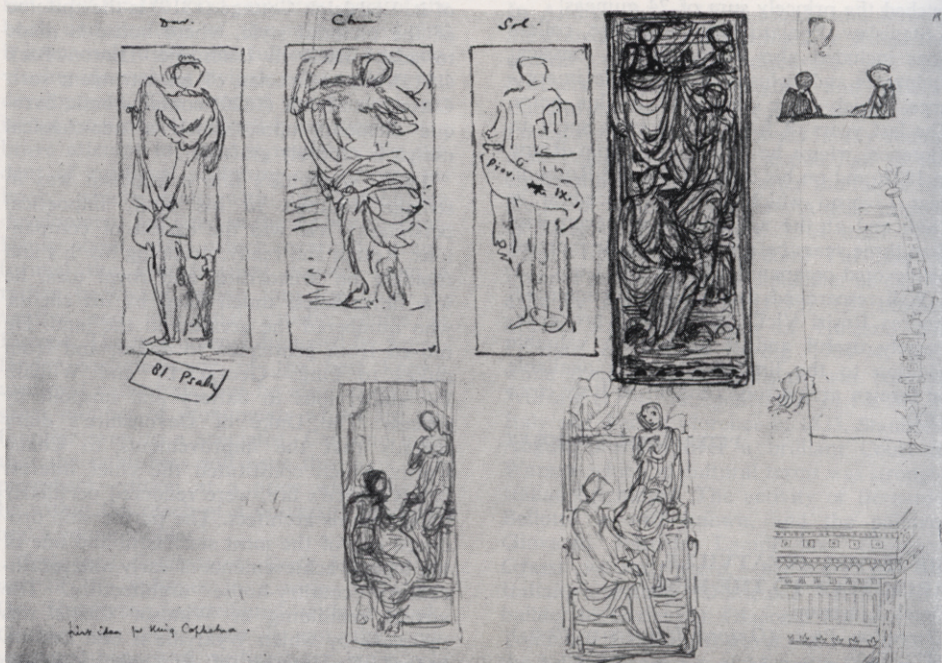
In the two nude studies on the far left of the double sheet (Fig. 1), Cophetua's right arm reaches out towards Penelophon, a survival of his active pose in the 1862 canvas. He has been seated and made to gaze upwards at her, but they are not yet isolated by the pictorial space they occupy. The Beggar Maid seems to be literally within arm's reach, her figure turned towards that of the king. The first hint of detachment appears in the heavily draped study to the right of the left-hand sheet, in which Penelophon stares outwards and away from Cophetua's admiring gaze. This is studied in several of the single figure drawings on the same sheet, together with the alternatives for the position of the crown. In three of the sketches Cophetua offers it to the Beggar Maid with his raised left hand, an alternative that is less submissive and less consistent with the passive adoration of the final pose. After the first two nude studies, the Beggar Maid becomes heavily draped, and in the two drawings to the lower right of the right-hand leaf (Fig. 2), the neck-line of her dress is close to that in the gouache study. One of her arms, that on the right, hangs down as in the final composition, though the other is raised, sometimes entangled with the drapery, towards her breast in a gesture of shrinking humility characteristic of the Virgin Annunciate. As the sequence of the sketches progresses, roughly from left to right, the principal features of the final composition are established. Even details such as the draped balustrade behind the main figures with two or more attendants appear.

It is difficult to give a precise date to the Fitzwilliam sketches. The paper in the sketch-book bears a watermark dated 1864. Fortunately the book contains a number of other studies which can be assigned with reasonable certainty to the years c. 1875. There is a sketch for the composition of *Perseus and the Graiae*, for instance; Bell records the completion of a cartoon of the same subject in 1877, and an intermediate pencil drawing for it in the Fitzwilliam Museum is dated 1876. The sketch-book also contains studies for *The Fountain of Youth*, on which Burne-Jones was working during the same years, and for a number of sibyls;



1. Sketch for *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* by Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98), c. 1875. Pencil, 25.5 x 36 cm.

Figures 1 and 2 are from a double sheet in a sketch-book (No. 1085) in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.



2. Sketch for *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* by Burne-Jones, c. 1875. Pencil, 25.5 x 36 cm.

cartoons of those prepared for decorations in Jesus College, Cambridge are recorded between 1873 and 1875.

There is evidence to suggest, therefore, that Burne-Jones returned to the subject of *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* before 1880, the date suggested by Bell. In fact the

composition of the picture he finished in 1884 was decided in the sketches made roughly nine years earlier.

Yours faithfully,
DUNCAN ROBINSON

Fitzwilliam Museum,
Cambridge.