

Letters reveal artist's silly side

Maev Kennedy, arts and heritage correspondent

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It is hard to see what Helen Mary Gaskell was so worried about, unless she was even ruder about fat ladies than Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, one of the most revered artists of 19th century England.

There are no fat ladies in his famous paintings. The Pre-Raphaelite artist was famous for his idylls of a medieval world, peopled by swooning maidens and valiant knights.

However, a volume of unpublished illustrated letters, to be auctioned at Sotheby's in London at the end of this month, reveals an alternative Burne-Jones: teasing, gossipy, and endlessly mocking fat ladies.

There is no clue as to how Helen Mary responded. Both were married, though their increasingly intimate relationship - one sketch shows the artist with head in hands, moaning how dull the day is without her - was apparently platonic.

Nevertheless she begged him to destroy all her letters, and alas, he obeyed. However, she kept every scrap of paper, and after his death in 1898, collected many into an opulent gold-tooled cream vellum hand-bound volume.

The Important British Pictures sale on November 28 has more familiar Burne-Jones images, including *The Cumaean Sibyl*, based on his model, muse, and lover Maria Zambaco, estimated at £1.2m. However the letters expose a Burne-Jones who could have worked for *Viz*.

Frau Doctorinn Schwumpf and Dr Paulus Schwumpf made regular appearances. The painter added a tissue overlay to one page, showing him suitably artistically occupied, adding tattoos to a fat lady in her underwear.

The painter and Mrs Gaskell met at a dinner party in 1892, when he was a 60-year-old art superstar, and she was in her 30s, a pretty, intelligent, and bored society wife. Almost 40 years after his death, Mrs Gaskell gave his letters to a friend, Lord Balniel, writing to him: "If you are like me you will take them out and laugh when you are an old man, as you did the first time you read them."

He did indeed keep them until his death in 1975. They are now being sold by his estate, estimated at £30,000.