# Past and Present: Edward Burne-Jones, his Medieval sources and their relevance to his personal journey.

By William Waters and Peter Nahum

Edward Burne-Jones is unique amongst British 19th century artists in that he uses his creativity to explore and interpret his psyche. Many other narrative painters remain at the surface of the stories they illustrate giving the greater emphasis to compositional and decorative elements within the canvas. The earliest drawings from his childhood show how he withdrew into an alternative imaginary world in which he could find solutions to the family problems that encroached upon his emotional life.[1] As he matured he realised how the books he read provided opportunities for him to explore his experiences through interpreting them in his drawings. He thus began a system which he elaborated in his later career as a painter. Characteristically he returned to the same subjects over his entire career, repainting them repeatedly as he continued his introspective analysis searching for resolution and understanding.[2]

On the 28th of August 1833 Elizabeth Jones (née Burne) died in childbirth. Her only child Edward survived and had to be reared by a series of hired nurses. Edward Snr., the baby's father, laid the responsibility for his wife's death on the boy's shoulders and the guilt harried the artist for the rest of his life. Being reared in such a household had a lasting effect upon his art and his subsequent relationship with the women who became his intimate confidantes. His art became a quest for self-knowledge, finally resolving for him the perplexing relationship between the sexes and revealing the mystery of his sexual life. Medieval literature and art frequently deals with a symbolic journey in search of the answers to life's meaning. This questing spirit he discovered in the manuscripts he viewed at the Bodleian Library whilst a student at Oxford, almost certainly including the late 15th century *Roman de la Rose*, the French poem by Guillaume de Loris and Jean de Meung (1230-1275)[3] and his youthful interest was aroused by the richly decorated 13th century *Bible Moralisée*.

---
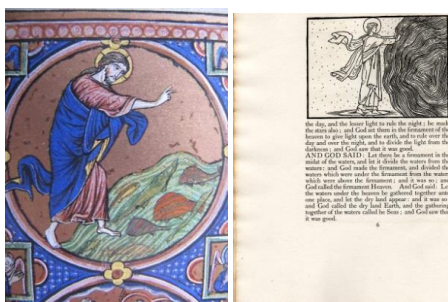
[1] Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, Macmillan, London 1904, p. 8 "Unmothered, with a sad papa, without sister or brother, always alone, I was never unhappy, because I was always drawing."

[2] Almost all his early subjects continued to be investigated throughout his career. Themes were developed and explored until they had reached the artist's satisfaction. Having created a world which nourished his imagination he was reluctant to leave it.

[3] Bodleian Library, *Roman de la Rose*, MS Douce 195. Decorated with miniatures attributed to Robinet Testard (fl 1475-1531)

Although records are not clear, during Edward's time as a student in 1853-5 he is most likely to have seen pages from the manuscripts on public display.[4] In addition, he discovered Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* (1485)[5] in a bookshop in Oxford, which he visited over a period of time to study. Morris on hearing this purchased the volume. It was from these sources, together with subsequent incunabula he found in the British Museum after his move to London, that the idea of presenting a series of related designs first occurred to him.

The young man proved to be highly intelligent and passed from King Edward's School Birmingham to Exeter College Oxford in order to become a clergyman within the Anglican church. Meeting William Morris, a fellow undergraduate at the same college, began their lifelong friendship and artistic collaboration. Meanwhile he continued to draw, especially cartoons to amuse his fellow undergraduates. A group of fellow students also from King Edward's School had entered Pembroke College and they, Morris and Burne-Jones frequently met for discussions of poetry, religion and topical concerns of the day. Over the period of stay at Oxford he gradually lost his belief in the traditional values of the church as he became absorbed with his own personal and aesthetic questions. Among the group was "Harry" Macdonald, one of a Methodist Minister's children whom Edward had been close to in Birmingham. Coming from an incomplete home life, Edward had become enamoured with the whole family and had literally fallen in love with all four of Harry's sisters. Later, in 1860, after deciding to commit himself to life as an artist and having fallen under Rossetti's spell, he married Georgiana, the second eldest of the four Macdonald sisters.[6]

Oxford, a community of like minds, youth and the excitement of discovering new fields of endeavour led the aspiring artist to discover the Bodleian Library. It was in that august institution that his lifelong passion for medieval art began. Georgiana and her sisters became the inspiration for this the first, most innocent period of his work. His skill as a draughtsman had developed under the tuition of Rossetti and George Frederic Watts and his childlike drawings are characterised by a gentle humour imbued with the optimism of youth. There is a sweetness in the virginal maidens that are centre stage in his annunciations, fairy tales and designs for stained glass and tiles that belong to the period up to 1865. For example, his painting "*Green Summer*" (1864)[7] deals with an idyll of maidens seated

---

[4] Dr Bruce Barker-Benfield writes that an entry appears in: "… at least one of the Library 'Entry-books' (showing book-fetches to the reading-room) for the 1850s, in particular the one which shows William Morris's presence here in April 1857. By then Morris was entitled to use the Library as a graduate, but there is a problem with the idea that Morris and Burne-Jones could regularly have consulted manuscripts here in the preceding years of their undergraduate period: undergraduates were not formally allowed access to the Bodleian as regular readers until 1856. However, perhaps this might not necessarily preclude glimpses of manuscripts as visitors, whether in glass cases or through the occasional supervised showing by a librarian." (n.b. Burne-Jones did not graduate from Oxford University but may have been allowed to accompany William Morris.)

[5] Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, first printed by Caxton in 1485, became his lifelong companion. It endorsed his idea of a pilgrimage or quest being a paradigm for life's journey and its attraction for him lay in its potential to express episodes of autobiography in a covert manner. Thus, from the 1870's onwards, he allegorised his relationships with the opposite sex in numerous compositions by taking episodes from the book.

[6] Alice (1837-1910) married John Lockwood Kipling, and was the mother of Rudyard Kipling; Georgiana (1840-1920) married Edward Burne-Jones; Agnes (1843-1906) married Edward Poynter, who became President of the Royal Academy; and Louisa (1845-1925) married Alfred Baldwin and was the mother of the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin.

[7] Private Collection, England

by a greenwood listening whilst one of them reads from an illuminated manuscript. A quiet introspection engrosses the figures and the atmosphere is one of early spring warmth. His models, as often at this time, were the four Macdonald daughters. In an earlier work-list, for 1860, he had written: "In the summer … I painted in watercolour three women. 1. Belle et Blonde et Colorée"[8], 2. Sidonia von Bork, 3. Clara von Bork".[9] Even when evil villainesses enter the scene their potential for harm is hardly convincing. "*Sidonia von Bork*" (1860) and "*Morgan Le Fay*" (1862) are more charming than threatening, but perhaps "*Clerk Saunders*" (1861), an episode from a Border ballad,[10] does have a darker expression of a battle of wills as the maid resists her lover's advances. The visual source for the design originated in a 14th century copy of the *Roman de la Rose* in the British Museum,[11] which is a different version from the one he is thought to have shown his friends on their visit to the museum on April 14th 1860. [12]

Clerk Saunders; BL Egerton 881 f6v

Edward's enthusiasm for all things medieval was contagious and it was he and Morris who, on their trips to London before 1856, encouraged Rossetti to research and absorb its influence by visiting the British Museum together to study the manuscripts there. In 1857, Edward was indirectly associated with the short lived Medieval Society which was attempting to make a collection of medieval artefacts and manuscripts. Amongst its members were Rossetti and his brother William, Holman Hunt, Madox Brown Morris and William Burges[13]. Illuminated manuscripts chiefly function as

---

[8] "Belle et Blonde et Colorée" was rediscovered by Peter Nahum in 1993 and first identified by Bill Waters. The model for the watercolour was the "tyrannously beautiful" Agnes Macdonald (as she was described by her brother-in-law Lockwood Kipling). See: John Christian, catalogue entry to catalogue no. 2, *Burne-Jones – A Quest for Love*, Bill Waters and Peter Nahum 1993, pages 43-4.

[9] "Sidonia von Bork" and "Clara von Bork", both Tate Galley

[10] Border ballads are 15th and 16th century tales from the feuding and lawless lands between England and Scotland.

[11] The composition for Clerk Saunders derives from: Guillaume de Loris (c.1215–c.1278) and Jean de Meun (c.1250–c.1305), *Roman de la Rose* (c.1230-c.1275); British Library, *BL Egerton 881 f6v*

[12] Diary of George Price Boyce April 14 1860: 'Met Jones and Henry and Joanna by appointment at the British Museum, Jones having promised to show us some of the most beautiful illuminated manuscripts in the collection. First the "Roman de la Rose" …' The manuscript mentioned by Boyce was almost certainly *BL Harley Ms 4425*. This splendid copy has four large illustrations and eighty-eight miniatures. The miniaturist responsible is the 'Master of the Prayer books of around 1500'.

[13] In 1855, William Burges had commissioned the artist Nathanial H J Westlake to copy in gouache fifteen miniatures from the British Museum Harley copy of the "Roman de la Rose" (*BL Harley Ms 4425*).

decoration to the page; missal artists have no use for a depth of field and so fill in the spaces between figures with flat abstract pattern. Both Rossetti and Burne-Jones explored this two dimensionality and decorative profusion in their drawings and watercolours of the late 1850s. As has been noted, his familiarity with *Morte D'Arthur* is well recorded, yet in all the later literature concerning Burne-Jones there are only two other references of actual medieval or renaissance works he is known to have studied: *Roman de la Rose* in the British Museum mentioned earlier and a copy of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* [14] which he owned.

Burne-Jones, *The Car of Love*; *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*; Burne-Jones, *Sketch for The Car of Love*

Evidence from his early work has already shown that he knew of the *Roman de la Rose* version in the Bodleian Library. His continued interest in these narratives centred upon his curiosity, roused by the prolonged search for sexual attainment contained within their narratives. The attraction lay once again in the erotic nature of the stories. Of course his erudition was far greater than this evidence would suggest. There are many more clues within his oeuvre which indicate the depth of his scholarship; but it is significant that these two tomes, one medieval the other renaissance, have become associated with his name and give more insight than any others to the nature of his psyche.

Stained glass design provided financial security throughout the artist's life. At a time when he abandoned his ambition to become a priest and had no other means of support, Rossetti introduced him to James Powell of Whitefriars, the firm that was pursuing a new direction in stained glass design. Without any experience in the field, Burne-Jones took advice from Rossetti's friend and fellow member of the Medieval Society, the architect William Burges. Like the young artist, Burges was a convinced gothicist and encouraged him to make his stained glass designs in full colour and, unusual for the time, in oils. In 1860 artist and architect worked on the restoration of the east end of

---

[14] Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Poliphilo's Strife of Love in a Dream), first published by Aldus Manutius in Venice 1499. Burne-Jones owned a copy (acquired before 1864) which had a considerable impact on his art. First, it is extremely erotic in content; second, he based the design and layout of the proposed illustrations to Morris's Earthly Paradise upon it; and third, the illustrations provided a source for later paintings, for instance, *The Passing of Venus* (The Junior Common Room, Exeter College, Oxford), *The Car of Love* (Victoria & Albert Museum) and *Poesis* and *Musica* (both private collections).

Waltham Abbey and Burne-Jones produced a magnificent window consisting of a "*Jesse Tree*" placed as a pendant to a set of "*Days of Creation*". Like many of his early works these subjects provided themes which he re-used many times in later life. His original inspiration for the compositions came from the illuminations illustrating the Creation story in Genesis in the Bodleian *Bible Moralisée* in the Bodleian Library.[15]

Bible Moralisée, Paris(?) *c*. 1235-45, *Opening of Genesis*, The Bodleian Library, Oxford (MS BODL 270b f2r); Burne-Jones, *Days of Creation* Window Middleton Cheney church, Northamptonshire; Burne-Jones, *Days of Creation* window executed by Adolf von der Heydt, in 1913, at the Franz Mayer'schen Hofkunstanstalt in Munich

Artist and architect were enraptured with all things from the middle ages and their collaboration is a major contribution to the gothic revival. A few years later in 1864, Edward made a series of "*Days of Creation*" for an illustrated book,[16] but more important was the stained glass set which he designed for the church at Middleton Cheney in Northamptonshire (1870).[17] Here he introduces something

---

[15] *Bible Moralisée*, Paris(?) *c*. 1235-45, Bodleian Library (MS BODL 270b f1r-5v). The manuscript is divided between the Bodleian Library, Oxford; the Biblioteque Nationale, Paris (MS lat.11560); and the British Library, London (MSS Harley 1526/1527). Coincidentally, The British Museum purchased a fourteenth century Genesis Picture Book at Christies London on 23rd March 1860 (BL Egerton 1894 f1 & f1v, England, Norwich or Durham?, 3rd quarter of the 14th century).

[16] *Dalziel's Bible Gallery: Illustrations from the Old Testament from Original Drawings*, London, George Routledge & Sons, 1881. The Dalziel brothers were keen to improve standards of illustration by commissioning promising artists, for whom book illustration provided a further means of income. The *Bible Galley* was published eighteen years after the first commissioned drawings.

[17] The window of three lights at the west end and shows Shadrach, Meshach and Abednigo in the furnace surrounded by extraordinary writhing flames, they are recorded in the bible as having had a vision of the days of creation hence the subject in the tracery above. When designing for stained glass he generally consulted Didron's *Iconographie Chretienne*.

totally new. In the tracery angels hold the divine creation within spheres. However, he believed that this new imagery which derived from medieval art deserved a more important role than existing solely in an obscure church in Northamptonshire and so he continued to work up the theme into an important series of six paintings which he exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877.[18] With their exhibition he made his name after years in comparative obscurity.

In the mid 1860s the artist had entered a time of disquiet and introspection. His search for wider experiences as a mature human being began. With his marriage at a critical stage, particularly after Georgiana suffered a miscarriage, and on encountering the more sophisticated and sexually complex figures of Swinburne and Simeon Solomon in addition to Rossetti, the artist in him became discontent with what his wife and a conventional marriage had to offer. At that moment he was commissioned to paint a portrait by Euphrosyne Cassavetti of her daughter Maria Zambacco, the estranged wife a Parisian doctor. Maria was an unusual person to find in respectable circles. She was liberated, talented, very beautiful and was considered "fast". She broke through the reticence of the artist and a passionate affair ensued. Once again the work he produced directly relates to the circumstances in his life. For a while he eschews cloistral medieval themes and introduces sensual neoclassical figures with loosely fitting clothes that stress the body beneath. He had embarked upon this neo-classical phase from studying the Elgin marbles in the British Museum. Nudity begins to take its place in his paintings and caused notoriety when he exhibited "*Phyllis and Demophoon*" at the Watercolour Society in 1870, where the semi-nude Phyllis (Maria) clasps the explicitly nude son of Theseus and Phaedra. Overt sensuality was intolerable to mid-Victorian society and the work had to be withdrawn. Unperturbed Edward proceeded with his personal iconography to the point that in 1881 he repainted the work on a huge scale as "*The Tree of Forgiveness*", where Maria, now totally naked, clasps Demophone, whose sexuality is discretely covered. Maria continued as his muse henceforward and either she or a model with similar features is often to be found within his works. "*Love among the Ruins*" (two versions 1870 & 1870-73) allegorises his mental state toward the end of the affair with Maria. Lovers clasped in an intimate embrace originated from a series of drawings he had made in the late 1860's and placing them amidst classical ruins derives from an image found in the *Hypnerotomachi*, but Burne-Jones chose to play down the sexually charged atmosphere contained in the illustration to develop an elegiac painting quite distinct from this point of departure. "*Love among the Ruins*" became the artist's public statement at this, the lowest point in his personal life. He exhibited it at the Dudley Gallery in 1873.

---
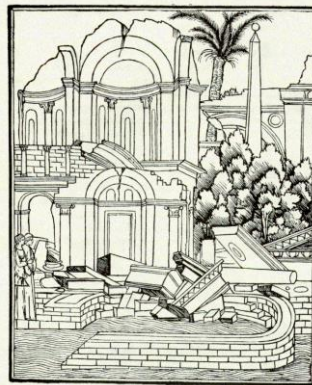
[18] The full set now in the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University (Day Four is missing as it was stolen in 1970)

Burne-Jones, *Love Amongst the Ruins*; *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*; *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*

However, privately he painted his anguish in a work to be shown to no one outside his most intimate circle. "*Souls by the Styx*" describes, in an artistic language that the Victorian public could not possibly understand, the despair of lost souls trapped in limbo. Here Dante was the medieval source[19] and the Renaissance supplied the foundation for his haunted figures. From this point forward he proceeded to overlay his medieval motives with those acquired from his study of Renaissance masters.[20]

Burne-Jones, *Souls by the Styx*; BL Egerton 943 f.7v

Burne-Jones, *Wheel of Fortune*; Michelangelo, *The Dying Slave* 1513-16, Marble, Louvre Museum, Paris

Mid-Victorian mores were not easily flouted and those who transgressed often suffered public humiliation. Burne-Jones, as a result, suffered from periodic bouts of depression and lapses from work, often caricaturing himself as either old or poverty stricken. After this Georgiana rarely featured in his paintings but one exception stands out, she was the model for the Madonna in "*The Annunciation*" (1876-9).[21] Significantly it recalls the portico of Chartres Cathedral which he visited when he was most in love with her; but in the background he portrays the expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

---

[19] British Museum, Dante Alighieri & Jacopo Alighieria*, Divina Commedia : Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso*, north Italy (Emilia or Padua), 2nd quarter of the 14th century (containing 261 small miniatures), *BL Egerton 943 f.7v* .

[20] For instance, Burne-Jones, *The Wheel of Fortune* (Musée d'Orsay), a favourite Medieval concept which occurs in innumerable manuscripts, the upper figure draws upon to Michelangelo, *The Dying Slave*, 1513-16, Marble, Louvre Museum, Paris

[21] Now in the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Wirral
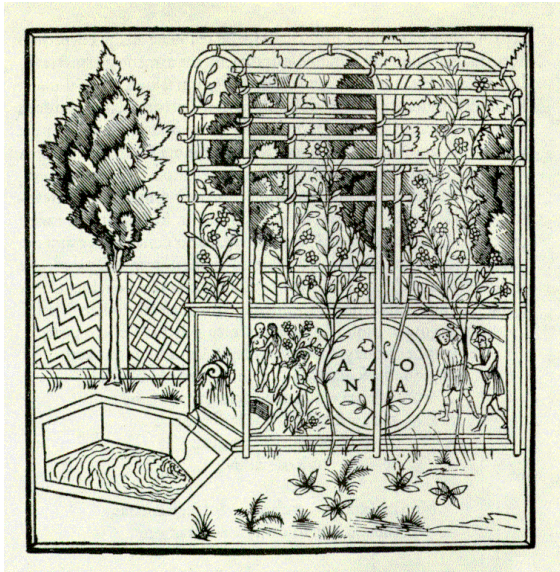
Hypnerotomachia Poliphili; Burne_Jones, *The Baleful Head*; BL Harley 4425 f.20

Throughout the 1870's the themes chosen had autobiographical content which relate to the pursuit of love and the depiction of female and male beauty. In the "*Troy Triptych*" (begun 1870)[22] he concerns himself with the disruption caused by the devastating *femme fatale* Helen of Troy and reflects upon his mental state during his infidelity. So too does he in the "*Pygmalion Series*" (1868-70)[23] wherein the sculptor rejects the beauty of the world for an ideal which he creates himself. "*Laus Veneris*" (1873-5),[24] the most colourful and resplendent of his middle period paintings, sums up the artist's philosophy following the first erotic phase of his affair. Beauty is victim, passion has faded and time is given to reflection. Medieval miniatures are recalled in its brilliant colours, yet the knights seen through the window are painted by contrast in cold blues. A tapestry on the wall emphasises the claustrophobic space, it carries an image of the passing of Venus, echoing the energy of first love ebbing away.

---

[22] (unfinished oil, mainly by assistants, now in Birmingham City Art Gallery)

[23] Pygmalion, The first series in a private collection; the second series (1878): *The Heart Desires*, *The Hand Refrains*, *The Godhead Fires*, *The Soul Attains*, now in Birmingham City Art Gallery.

[24] Now in The Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Burne-Jones, *Laus* Veneris; ;BL Harley 4425

His impish humour is frequently manifested in the comic drawings that decorate letters to his dearest friends and their children. More subtly, it appears as a disguised *double entendre* in "*The Briar Rose*" series (1870-1894)[25] as an exquisite rose protected by lethal thorns, [26] which cover almost the entire surface of the painting. The series consists of four paintings which are elaborations of designs first made for a set of tiles for the Morris firm[27] in 1864 in which there is no hint of perplexity; merely a naive presentation of the fairy tale. Interestingly, they parallel the medieval manuscripts he had studied where the use of an illustrated storyline presents a chain of episodes from a single narrative. His reflection on his bitter experience of sexual adventure is expressed as the central theme of the series: life completely dormant waits to be revitalised by a single watchful knight, who seems quite reluctant to awaken the sleeping world. On another level the painting can be interpreted as a wish to halt the course of time. Margaret, the artist's daughter was the model for the sleeping princess. The artist had great difficulty in coming to terms with his daughter's transition

[25] This began in a playful set of tile designs made in 1863 and re-emerged during the late 1860's as four oil paintings with a more sinister element (Museo de Arte de Ponce, Puerto Rico and National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin). In 1890 he finished and exhibited a further set in which the decorative accomplishment was hardly equalled within his lifetime's work (Farington Collection Trust, Buscot Park, Farington). But a single studio version (1870, Liverpool Art Gallery) contains disturbing foreshortened naked male figures

[26] Burne-Jones's powerful symbolism of the *femme fatale*, a beautiful flower lethally protected by the sharpest thorns, was superseded by that of the European *Symbolistes* who follow him. Their *femme fatale* is the Sphinx, who seduces the male in a tight embrace only to lacerate him with deadly claws.

[27] Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., founded by William Morris in 1861 with Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Ford Madox Brown and Philip Webb as partners, together with Charles Faulkner and P. P. Marshall.

into adulthood, especially when she announced her intention to marry. For obvious reasons he portrays her as the sleeping princess whom he suspends in the innocence of youth forever.

Being chiefly self taught with no formal academic training Burne-Jones always felt the need to perfect his drawing technique; constantly returning to the life model to study and develop his competence. Under Ruskin's influence he first visited Italy in 1859 to copy and assimilate the grander manner, which resulted in a lifetime analysis of early composition and form. Italy continued to draw him with further visits in 1862, 1871 and 1873. Thus, hardly equalled by his contemporaries, he integrated and perfected a draughtsmanship which derived from Raphael, Michaelangelo, Mantegna, Signorelli, Leonardo and many others. Drawing is at the core of his genius from which everything else emanates and an interesting aspect of his resolute researches was the placing of his model in poses derived from these renaissance painters. Not content however with echoing his antecedent's design, he then proceeded to draw the model at different angles, thus paying homage to the great masters but at the same time allowing himself a degree of originality within an established tradition**.** Respect for these traditions encouraged him to remain within an iconography that leads back through the Middle Ages as far as classical times. His scholarship in these matters became recognised by his contemporaries who regarded him as an authority, and within the depths of this learning lays the key to his adaptability. The wide range of media in which his art appears is a tribute to this. Thus a natural progression for him as an artist was the formation of a studio workshop based upon Renaissance practice. The numerous assistants he employed from the later 1860s were able to take a drawing from the master and transfer it into a cartoon for stained glass, a tapestry and, more importantly, an under-painting on canvas. [28] In reality his paintings are coloured drawings which have been elaborated into the completed work. However, this is not to denigrate the final paintings where, like a craftsman, he builds up magical complexes of media and pigment into breathtaking multi-layered almost iridescent surfaces. More spontaneous are his watercolour sketches which convey a fresher and often more sensual expression of his subject than could be conceived for a final work intended for public exhibition.

 "*The Morning of the Resurrection*" (1882)[29] is unusual amongst Burne-Jones's finished paintings in that it takes its subject from the bible. It is true that biblical subjects took up a large portion of his time, as his rich production of stained glass designs attest, but they rarely entered his painted work.

---

[28] Burne-Jones's employment of assistants has caused a considerable problem of authorship. In 1866, when he first employed Charles Fairfax Murray (1849-1919), the studio depended upon extra help. Harry Ellis Wooldridge (1845-1917) and Thomas Matthews Rooke (1842-1942) joined in the late 1860s and the numbers increased from the mid 1870s. Francis Lathrop (1849 -1909), an American, worked from 1871-73, John Melhuish Strudwick (1849-1935) was active in the later 1870s and as the artist's fame grew many young artists became associated with the studio. Hence the extensive output raises many questions regarding the authenticity and evaluation of unfinished works and sketches that exist today. Projects that required additional skills to the artist's own obviously meant the involvement of other workers and Burne-Jones relied heavily upon assistants to execute replicas, to which he intended to add finishing touches. A good number of these were put aside and remained in an unfinished state at the artist's death, untouched by the master, as were the assistants' under-paintings. As the artist's vision continually outpaced his capacity to finalise his projects, many fine drawings were executed and handed over to assistants who, artists in their own right, made exceptionally good copies. These today may easily be mistaken for the work of the master. Furthermore, at the two posthumous studio auctions of Burne-Jones's studio contents (1898 & 1919), all studio works were catalogued as by the master's hand, whether touched by him or not. Additionally, the many Burne-Jones works sold by his assistant, Fairfax Murray between 1903-07 merit careful scrutiny.

[29] Now in a private collection

This particular painting with its tight composition based upon four rectangles, each occupied by a single figure, derives once again from a miniature in a medieval manuscript: the Shaftesbury Psalter.[30]

Burne-Jones, *The Morning of the Ressurection*; BL Shaftesbury Psalter, Lansdowne 383 f.13
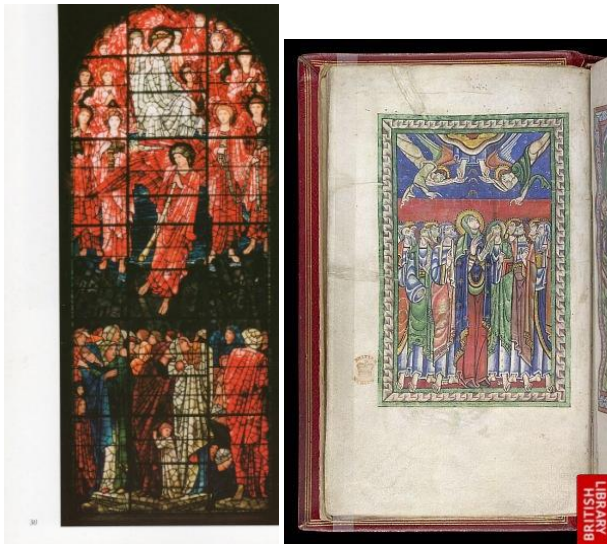
Burne-Jones, *Last Judgement*, Birmingham Cathedral, West window; BL Shaftesbury Psalter, Lansdowne 383 f.13v

It deals with death, resurrection and a transcendent moment of intensity between male and female figures. Set against a tomb and cavernous rock the figures exchange gazes which bind them together

---

[30] *Holy Women at the Tomb*, The Shaftesbury Psalter, 12th Century (British Library, Lansdowne 383 f.13). (Also from the same manuscript compare Lansdowne 383 f.13v *The Ascension* with the *Last Judgement* Window (1896) at the east end of Birmingham Cathedral.)

across the shallow depth of the canvas. From his discovery of the importance of the gaze in medieval illuminations Burne-Jones had used this device to create a dynamic between the protagonists. It is often the key which enables scholars to locate an unidentified drawing within his output, as a glance in a specific direction can only characterise a unique relationship. Placed behind the standing Christ are writhing branches of a hawthorn bush – a reference to the crown of thorns. The artist had observed how the hawthorn becomes contorted as it matures and its presence in his compositions became a favourite device to increase the tension. Equally attractive to him were the magical attributes with which the hawthorn was associated in ancient legend. It appears in flower over the whole canvas in "*The Beguiling of Merlin*" (1872-4).[31] Subsequent artists were to admire the tensile lines that Burne-Jones used in these paintings developing them into the Art Nouveau style of the 1890's.

A painting may communicate on many levels and Burne-Jones made effective use of this. At the most obvious are both the immediate narrative impact and the craftsmanship through which the artist manifests his public persona. Underpinning those, Burne-Jones also created a secret communication, by the utilisation of imagery understood only by his chosen intimates. As we have seen, the story itself had a personal relevance for him, but he also incorporated '*The Language of Flowers*', where each flower portrays a cryptic message; transmitting through mystical floral subtexts significant personal messages. Once again this derives from an ancient tradition, inherited since pre-medieval times. [32] Thus whenever the artist introduces a flower into a painting it not only performs a decorative purpose but it also enforces the evident theme or has relevance beyond the apparent subject matter. For example, in the "*Le Chant d'Amour*" (1865)[33] yellow tulips grow immediately below a portrait of Maria. They signify "hopeless love". In "*Arthur in Avalon*" where forget-me-nots litter the foreground they symbolise *true love and memories*, obviously a message to his love of that time, Helen Mary Gaskell. Whether Georgiana completely understood the role of the flowers is not known but above her portrait in "*The Annunciation*" (1876-9) is a vase of myrtle leaves which signify love and is the Hebrew emblem of marriage. His idiosyncratic relationship with the names and the emblematic potential of flowers found its apogee in T*he Flower Book*, a series of thirty-eight small gouache roundels begun in the 1880s.[34] These images, drawn from the artist's own profound artistic journey, are a series of secret almost religious meditations that ponder man's response to the world in a manner similar to those of St Francis, whom he greatly admired.

 In later life mermaids become a preoccupation with the artist. A watery environment can be interpreted as a metaphor associated with the sexual act. Burne-Jones painted one of his most

---

[31] Now in the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Wirral

[32] See, for example, BL MS Stowe 955 **ff. 5v-6.** Pierre Sala's *Petit Livre d'Amour*: dedication and miniature of Pierre Sala dropping 'his' heart in a marguerite [Marguerite Builloud], which also represents the sexual act.

[33] The first watercolour version now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

[34] Published posthumously by the artist's wife Georgiana in a limited edition of three hundred copies: Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, *The Flower Book*, Henri Piazza et Cie. for the Fine Art Society, London 1905. The originals gouaches are in the British Museum and a pair, made for his daughter Margaret, were exhibited by Peter Nahum At The Leicester Galleries in "*Burne-Jones, the Pre-Raphaelites and their Century*", London 1989, nos. 81 & 82.
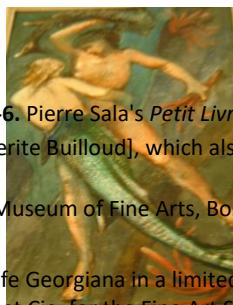
esoteric canvases in 1886 entitled "*The Depths of the Sea*".[35] The subject matter had arisen from his experience with Maria. A beautiful female sea creature falls in love with a human and in her passion draws him down to his death.

Burne-Jones, *The Depths of the Sea*, watercolour (Ashmolean)

However, his ironic humour led him to show it the only time he was invited to exhibit at the Royal Academy, on his election as an Associate Academician. Here it represented for him the seduction of the conservative academy subsuming his freedom of expression. He resigned a short while afterward. At this time he had surrounded himself with numerous young society beauties. Laura Lyttleton, who like the others had a platonic relationship with him, is seen in the exhibited work as the mermaid entwined with a naked man – erotic enough - but the watercolour study[36] is more explicit in its use of expressive diagonals, nakedness and genital contact between the figures.

As we have seen he had known of the version of the *Roman de la Rose* in the British Museum from 1861 and he had drawn upon it from time to time since then: for instance for "*The Passing of Venus*" (tile design 1861, oil 1873) and for "*Pygmalion*" (two versions: 1868-9, 1875-8). Medieval sources now reappear in an unambiguous revisit to his love of early manuscripts and literature.

Burne-Jones, *Pygmalion and Galatea*; BL Harley 4425 f177v; Bodleian MS Douce 195 f149v

"*The Romaunt of the Rose*", the most obvious example, began as a series of embroidery designs for tapestries to decorate the dining room of Raunton Grange, Northallerton, Yorkshire (1874-82). His literary source was Chaucer's poem with added inspiration from the Queen's Manuscript,

[35] Private collection, Germany

[36] Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

14

commissioned by Isabeau de Bavière in 1441.[37] In his version of the story Burne-Jones deals with the figure of Pilgrim, guided by Love[38] through trials encountered on the journey, to the quest's achievement, symbolised by a rose garden in which the pilgrim is about to pluck the rose.


Burne-Jones, *Love Leading the Pilgrim*; BL Egerton 1069 f8

He gives play to his delight in beautiful maidens and allows the pilgrim a relatively easy passage to the conclusion. This is in sharp contrast to a series of illustrations to "*The Earthly Paradise*" of 30 years before in the story of Cupid and Psyche, where Burne-Jones gave Psyche a punishing journey before she achieves entry among the gods*.*

---

[37] British Library, BL Harley 4431.

[38] The composition for "*Love Leading the Pilgrim*" (1896-7, Tate Britain) derives directly from the medieval miniature: British Library: BL Egerton 1069 f8.
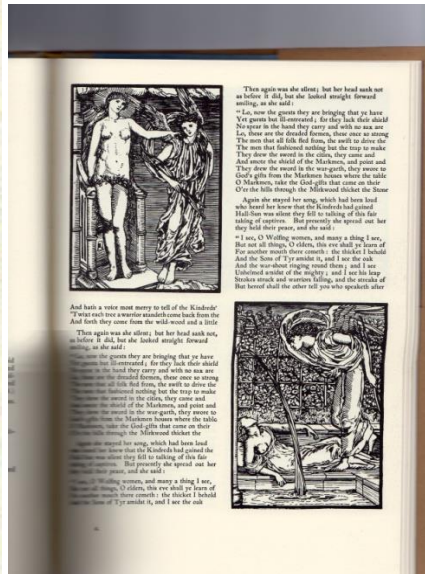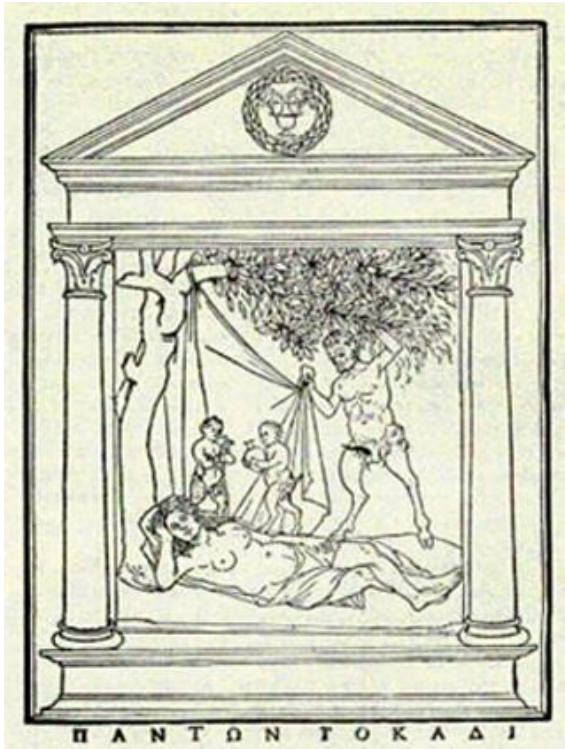
Hypnerotomachia Poliphili; *The Book that Never Was*, Joseph R Dunlap, *How William Morris and Burne-Jones attempted make of the Earthly Paradise a Big Book …*, Oriole Editions New York 1971 p.33; Burne-Jones, *Cupid Finding Psyche* (British Museum)

The painted versions of the "*Romaunt*", dating from the 1890's, are in the artist's gentler palette that characterises his late works. Here Burne-Jones replaces medieval inertia with a trance-like state, typifying his frame of mind at this time toward objects of desire. The sadness that envelopes his maidens amplifies the stillness. Only one scene displays vigour: "*Love Leading the Pilgrim*", in which the pilgrim emerges from a tangle of thorns and reaches for Love's hand. When compared with the illumination in the Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung *Roman de la Rose*,[39] the painting shows

---

[39] British library, BL Egerton 1069 f.8

how the artist transforms an initial medieval illumination into his vision of the story. A late pastel variant portrays the rose as an actual maiden whilst in a further version, as a tapestry cartoon, a female head lays within the petals that resemble a vagina. The culmination of his interest in the story is found in the Kelmscott Chaucer (1896) in which his mastery of design in black and white and his ability to create atmosphere is amply demonstrated. The seventeen illustrations follow Chaucer's text, yet have a surreal intensity and combine to make a unique interpretation that becomes Burne-Jones's final commentary on the narrative, which had played a central role in his life since his days in Oxford.

Fully aware of the visionary potential of his art, Burne-Jones saw himself in a similar position to that of a tribal shaman who, through powers of self-knowledge and alternative realities, reveals his world of enchantment to his fellow men. In what he saw as a grey industrialised world Burne-Jones used his art to reintroduce the vitality that beauty invokes. In "*The Wizard*" (1890s, Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery)[40] he encapsulated this mystery. He portrays himself as such a being, revealing a magic mirror to a spellbound maiden who stands in awe of the powerful scene conjured before her eyes.

Burne-Jones, *The Wizard*; BL Harley 4425 f114

Naworth Castle is situated on the border of England and Scotland. In the later 19th century it was owned by Edward's close friends George and Rosalind Howard, the Earl and Countess of Carlisle (George had been Burne-Jones's pupil in the mid 1860's). It was they who, in 1881, commissioned "*Arthur in Avalon*",[41] in which King Arthur's body lies in state on the "island of apples". The subject chosen had a particular relevance for them since many of the Arthurian legends were believed to have connections with the Cumbrian locality. Incidentally, during its lengthy creative process, in a fascinating parallel to the painting was the production of Joseph Comyns Carr's play *King Arthur* which was produced at the Lyceum Theatre in London on the 12th January, 1895 with Henry Irving as King Arthur, Ellen Terry as Guinevere and Forbes Robertson as Sir Lancelot. Carr was also a co-director of the Grosvenor Gallery, Burne-Jones's favourite exhibition space which had contributed greatly to his public success. For the play Burne-Jones designed the costumes and the stage sets and on occasions wielded a large brush with the scene painters; so at times he felt was actually being transported into the land of his imaginings.

---

[40] The medieval composition which Burne-Jones drew upon for *The* Wizard can be found in the British Library, the "*Romant of the Rose*", Harley 4425 f114

[41] Museo de Arte, Ponce, Puerto Rico

17

Theatre design after Sir Edward Burne-Jones, *The Passing of Arthur*

Carr's blank verse, which is not of the first rank, enabled the artist to explore a three dimensional animation of his beloved story, where the death of Arthur is described thus:

Guinevere: He's gone, the light of all the world lies dead.

Merlin: Not so; he doth but pass who cannot die

         The King that was, the King that yet shall be;

         Whose spirit, borne along from age to age,

         Is England's to the end.

Sir Edward Burne-Jones, *The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon*

It had been George Howard's intention to place the large canvas in the library of his 14th century castle and thus artist and patron had chosen a subject which evoked mystical resonances for them. Large numbers of drawings bear witness to the importance Burne-Jones gave to Avalon, as do the numerous compositional oil studies and sketches. At first a raging battle was presented on either side of the Arthur's resting place but this was rejected as being incompatible. Then the artist experimented with a triptych form, where within the side panels beautiful male and female 'hill fairies' are grouped amongst rocks, but this too was discarded although the full size under-painted oil sketches were in the studio at his death.[42] Finally it took the form we see it today, an elegant commanding composition which beckons the viewers and leads them through a door into his imagined and enchanted island. The huge canvas, the largest Burne-Jones ever made, depicts the king, surrounded by beautiful young women, lying in a Byzantine styled mausoleum beneath a canopy decorated with scenes from the *Morte d'Arthur*. The king's head lies in Morgan le Fay's lap (the artist's daughter Margaret was the model) and, interestingly, one of the "watchers" was Helen Mary Gaskell with whom he was deeply attached at this point in his life. It was to her he confided his most intimate thoughts and it was with her he discussed this, his last great work and it was she who suggested covering the foreground with large swathes of flowers. The women in the painting are in fact queens who await the call to reawaken Arthur who will once again lead his kingdom to overcome the invaders. Burne-Jones began identifying with the King to such an extent that he asked his friend to relinquish the commission and continued to work on the painting until he died. Georgiana noted how her husband, when he slept, began to adopt a similar position to the one in which he had placed the king. In his correspondence he wrote as though he was already on the Isle of Avalon. In this way he began to face the inevitable closure of his own pilgrimage. The allegory contains a reference to his own mortality but it is also a resolution to the guilt imposed by his father on his mother's death by reversing their positions. Arthur lies dead but is surrounded by feminine youth and vitality. Unfinished, the painting was never meant to be sold. Its future was hardly a concern for the creator; Avalon had become the reality into which he metamorphosed on death.

---

[42] Peter Nahum & Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones – A Quest for Love*, pp 23-4, 56-7, catalogue no. 25, illustrated p. 25