

Dress & De Morgan

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A perhaps under-considered aspect of Evelyn De Morgan's art is the dress, or costume, of her models. The distinction between 'dress' and 'costume' is debatable at the intersection of art history and fashion history, as these terms lead us to assume either that an artist's model appears in their everyday apparel, or instead that they had played dress-up for the artist, as was the case with many Pre-Raphaelite models. Thankfully, as many works in De Morgan's *oeuvre* are mythological or ethereal, 'costume' is a safe assumption for the garments we see on the human form. However, there are still a few parallels to be drawn from Victorian alternative fashion, as opposed to what was considered mainstream.

Artists featured in this Curation: Anaïs Colin-Toudouze (1822–1899), A. Leroy, Evelyn De Morgan (1855–1919), Sandro Botticelli (1444/1445–1510), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) and Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898)

9 artworks

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The fine art style 'Aestheticism' led to the development of the alternative fashion of Victorian 'Aesthetes' - 'Aesthetic Dress.' Around 1860, a number of British artists (including original Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti) opted to reject academic tradition, where art was supposed to include layers of hidden meaning, in favour of '*art for art's sake*.' (There to look nice, in other words.) This was not without criticism, as art critics, trained to scour art for meanings which were not necessarily there in the first place, could not always appreciate why some artists had deviated from tradition. Another issue was the hypersexualised undertones of many 'Aesthetic' works, at odds with 'respectable' Victorian middle-class sensibilities.

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High Fashion...

This fashion plate (c.1856) shows one example of *haute couture* garments for women who could afford to follow fashion. Depicted here are evening ensembles, as wealthy women were expected to dress appropriately depending on the time of day as well as the activity being undertaken. The venue here appears to be a box at the opera, as one woman holds a pair of opera glasses. They are wearing corsets to provide a structured foundation to the rest of the outfit.

Fashion Plate* 1856

Anaïs Colin-Toudouze (1822–1899) and A. Leroy (active c.1856)

Hand-coloured steel engraving on paper

H 26.5 x W 17.1 cm

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust)



'The Gilded Cage'

Like the caged canary, this wealthy lady is confined indoors, excluded from the merrymaking she so desperately wants to join outdoors. Her material wealth is a guise for lack of joy, for instance, the Renaissance-esque draped gown. The Pre-Raphaelites, particularly Dante Gabriel Rossetti, favoured this type of costume for their female models, once Pre-Raphaelitism had branched into 'Aestheticism.' It evoked a world away from consumerism, industrialisation and artificiality, all of which these artists despised about their society. 'Aesthetic Dress' took inspiration from costumes such as these, in rejection of Parisian *haute couture* with its layers upon layers of rigid undergarments and heavy fabrics.

The Gilded Cage probably 1901–1902

Evelyn De Morgan (1855–1919)

Oil on canvas

H 910 x W 108.7 cm

De Morgan Collection





Botticelli's 'Portrait of a Lady'

This portrait by Sandro Botticelli made sometime in the 1470s features the type of Renaissance garment which Pre-Raphaelite artists based their models' costumes on. Depicted here is a loose-fitting and semi-transparent coral gown with detail on the wrists and kimono sleeves. Compared to the contemporary fashions of the Victorian era, this mode of dress would have seemed simplistic but all the more beautiful and favourable for that reason, hence its references in fine art Aestheticism and Aesthetic Dress.

Portrait of a Lady 1470s

Sandro Botticelli (1444/1445–1510)

Tempera on panel

H 65.7 x W 41 cm

Paintings Collection





D.G. Rossetti's 'Lucrezia Borgia'

Rossetti's depiction of Lucrezia Borgia (1480-1519) was part of a long-standing male artist fascination with the 'evil' woman or villainess. Lucrezia's dress is another example of a Renaissance-inspired gown making an appearance in the art of the Pre-Raphaelites. Although it is known that the original Pre-Raphaelites (including Rossetti) utilised Camille Bonnard's *Costume Historique* (1829-30) to inform historical dress in their works, it cannot be certain that a book produced in the 19th-century depicted medieval and Renaissance male and female clothing in a completely authentic way.

Lucrezia Borgia 1860–1861

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882)

Graphite & watercolour on paper

H 43.8 x W 25.8 cm

Tate





'Queen Eleanor and the Fair Rosamund'

This painting centres around the myth of Henry II and his mistress, allegedly poisoned in a labyrinth by his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine. 'Fair Rosamund' is depicted here as the archetypal Pre-Raphaelite woman, with her luxuriant red hair. The costumes seen here are just that - fantastical revisions of medieval garments, vastly different to Victorian mainstream fashion, which was modest but at the same time cumbersome. Alternative fashion took inspiration from much older styles of dress, as these facilitated movement and self-expression. Stage

actress Ellen Terry once likened fashionable Victorian ladies, with their distorted bustled forms, to 'upholstery.' Terry and the infamous Oscar Wilde both embraced 'Aesthetic Dress.'

Queen Eleanor and the Fair Rosamund probably 1901–1902

Evelyn De Morgan (1855–1919)

Oil on canvas

H 75.6 x W 66.7 cm

De Morgan Collection





'The Hourglass'

Pre-Raphaelite supermodel Jane Morris models here as an elderly woman realising that her time on Earth is rapidly expiring. Her sumptuous garment is reminiscent of the late-Victorian/Edwardian tea gown, which became the ideal outfit change between outfit changes for upper-class women. The tea gown's connection to the 'Aesthetic Movement' (c.1860-c.1900) and its 'Aesthete' adherents in their 'Aesthetic Dress' was that it allowed the wearer freer movement, unstructured by the form-destroying corset, crinoline or bustle.

Unfortunately, respectable tea gown wearers risked association with debauched, depressed Aesthetes, in love with China vases (search 'Acute Chinamania') and parading about in quasi-dressing-gowns.

The Hourglass 1904–1905

Evelyn De Morgan (1855–1919)

Oil on canvas

H 121.2 x W 108.2 cm

De Morgan Collection



'The Cadence of Autumn'

These five women represent the four seasons - the woman in mauve depicts Spring; the two central figures, harvesting an abundance of fruit, symbolise Summer; finally, the women in robes of sage and blue represent Autumn and Winter. De Morgan's characteristically Pre-Raphaelite choice of earthy tones coincided with the decision of wearers of Aesthetic Dress to reject artificial fabric dyes (which were often plain dangerous due to arsenic content) in favour of a true-to-nature palette. This was a perfect example of fine art influencing fashion, as within more extreme circles of Aesthetes, art prompted women - and men - to dress and live their lives as though in a painting (the 'Aesthetic Movement').

The Cadence of Autumn 1905

Evelyn De Morgan (1855–1919)

Oil on canvas

H 93 x W 183 cm

De Morgan Collection

The odd contradiction here was that while followers of the Aesthetic Movement wished to emulate paintings steeped in autumnal colours, countless criticisms of Aesthetes and their lifestyle highlighted a tendency to waste away indoors, surrounded by their collections of fine art and ornamental vases. A frequent criticism of female Aesthetes was their alleged preference to appear ill as though they suffered from tuberculosis ('consumption'), consumed by an obsessive desire to own many beautiful things. Mental health also entered the equation - both artists (primarily Edward Burne-Jones) and their human subjects were regarded as suffering from extreme melancholy, i.e; depression, due to their alternative lifestyle.

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Burne-Jones' 'Laus Veneris'

Edward Burne-Jones consolidates the belief which prevailed about female Aesthetes and their sickly appearance. Venus (in orange) languishes with lovesickness despite wearing the contradictory colour which usually symbolises fire or passion. Her pallid complexion is exactly what Aesthetes were thought to be replicating off the canvas as they whiled away their time indoors - dressed beautifully - albeit feeling dreadfully morose.

Laus veneris 1873–1875

Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898)

Oil on canvas

H 122.5 x W 183.3 cm

Laing Art Gallery





'The Prisoner'

A richly-adorned lady sits in her prison, yearning towards the light beyond the prison window. The peacock feather on her arm is a symbol of immortality, though it also became a symbol of the Aesthetic

Movement, beginning c.1860. Adherents to the Aesthetic Movement embraced fine art Aestheticism but wished to further its influence to applied arts as well as fashion. In short, it became a lifestyle. American painter James McNeill Whistler took the peacock's association with Aestheticism to new heights when he co-designed the ostentatious 'Peacock Room' in the 1870s. By the Edwardian period, to which this painting belongs, the Aesthetic Movement had inspired the continental 'Art Nouveau.'

The Prisoner 1907–1908

Evelyn De Morgan (1855–1919)

Oil on canvas

H 83.6 x W 68 cm

De Morgan Collection