

# Edward Burne-Jones

## Victorian Artist-Dreamer

### Directors' Foreword

The career of Edward Burne-Jones was in some ways typical of that of avant-garde artists throughout the last century. It began as a struggle for recognition in a hostile, conservative environment, where he was championed by a small group of aesthetically enlightened supporters, in this case led with singular effectiveness by no less a critical luminary than John Ruskin. Here ends, however, any similarity to such now better-known contemporaries as Vincent van Gogh or Paul Cezanne.

Within the sophisticated and rapidly changing climate of British intellectual culture of the late Victorian period, Burne-Jones's star rose rapidly from the 1860s until the decade of the 1880s, by which time he could be considered the establishment artist par excellence, possibly the most admired and sought-after painter anywhere in Europe. But as so often happens, his own success laid the foundations for his critical eclipse. Already in the 1890s, with the aging of a generation of patrons and collectors enthralled by his witty and highly literate allegories and mythologies, Burne-Jones ceded popularity to a growing taste for abstraction and subjectless painting. Through the first two-thirds of the twentieth century he was all but ignored, his accomplishments dismissed along with the whole of the Victorian period as a momentary, even embarrassing sidestep in the progress of modern style. As is its wont, however, the pendulum of critical fortune has of late swung resolutely back, and it is now, one hundred years after his death, possible once again to admire Edward Burne-Jones as the greatest British artist of the nineteenth century, after Turner and perhaps John Constable.

The revival of interest in Victorian art in general, and of Edward Burne-Jones in particular, has been spearheaded by British collectors and institutions; it is still far less well known outside Britain than, for example, French art of the nineteenth century is outside France. It was partly to redress this imbalance that The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Reunion des musees nationaux/Musee d'Orsay embraced the opportunity to join the Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, home to the largest collection in the world of Burne-Jones's work, in this centenary celebration. Edward Burne-Jones was the subject of a British Arts Council exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 1975 and of a smaller exhibition in Rome in 1986, but this exhibition will be the first comprehensive, monographic display of his work in the United States or in France. Our thanks is therefore extended first of all to the staff at these museums who contributed to making this exhibition possible, and in particular to MahrukhTarapor, Associate Director for Exhibitions, at the Metropolitan Museum; Jane Farrington, Principal Curator of Art, in Birmingham; Laurence des Cars, Conservateur, at the Musee d'Orsay, and at the Reunion des musees nationaux, Benedicte Boissonnas, Head of the Exhibition Department.

Selecting the works of art to be presented in a monographic exhibition of a major painter is an arduous if enviable task. Reviewing contemporary and posthumous criticism and scholarship, combing through archives, sifting auction house records and museum inventories to produce a list of acknowledged masterpieces – these are the lifeblood of a curator's work. Shaping and refining that list to balance the stages of an artist's career, always sensitive to the exigencies of requesting fragile works of art for loan, are labors of patience as well as discernment rarely appreciated or even perceived by the public; the more successful a curator's choices, the less obvious are

the efforts that made them possible and the more seamlessly inevitable they appear. We are thus extremely fortunate to have been able to call upon the rich experience and tireless dedication to their subject of two gifted scholars, Stephen Wildman and John Christian, in selecting, arranging, and cataloguing the present exhibition. Their task was daunting. Burne-Jones's restless inventive genius and will to create made him one of the most prolific artists of the nineteenth century. Mastering his accomplishments in media as diverse as tapestry, stained glass, and painted ceramics; integrating these with the vivid beauty of his drawings and watercolors and with the haunting mystery of his carefully finished oil paintings; organizing a chronology of works, some of which were labored over for periods of up to twenty years while others were reinvented in second and third versions spanning decades of a quickly evolving aesthetic intelligence; and presenting this confusing mosaic of artistic output in a rational and satisfying scheme was an immense undertaking, one in which they have succeeded to near perfection. In addition, John Christian's extended essay on Burne-Jones's life and career, broken up in a rather unorthodox fashion to accommodate the complexity of Stephen Wildman's catalogue, provides a lively and expertly guided tour through the little-known byways of the artistic world of Victorian England. Alan Crawford has synthesized, evocatively and concisely, the seminal importance of Burne-Jones's work in media traditionally considered decorative. And Laurence des Cars has addressed the international significance of this centenary exhibition by reviewing the sometimes forgotten or overlooked fascination Burne-Jones's paintings held for Continental artists at the end of the last century.

Within the Metropolitan Museum, the responsibility of managing the many interrelated details that lead to the

realization of the exhibition fell to Laurence Kanter, Curator in Charge, and to the staff of the Robert Lehman Collection, Dita Amory, Linda Wolk-Simon, Monique van Dorp, Francesca Valerio, and Manus Gallagher. Anna Riehl, in the office of the registrar, coordinated the myriad problems of transport and insurance, and Dan Kershaw applied his flair and artistry to the exhibition design. At Birmingham, thanks are due to Elizabeth Prettejohn, Glennys Wild, Helen Proctor, Brendan Flynn, Reyahn King, Elizabeth Smallwood, David Lucas, Richard Clarke, Haydn Roberts, Gill Casson, and David Bailey; and in Paris, to Ute Collinet, Juliette Armand, Anne Freling, Jean Naudin, Anne de Margerie, and Celine Julhiet-Charvet of the Reunion des musees nationaux.

One of the happiest responsibilities of a museum director is that of thanking the many lenders, public and private, anonymous and named, whose generosity has contributed to the success of an exhibition and its catalogue. Many of Burne-Jones's most important works were realized in experimental techniques, on unusual supports, or on a colossal scale that today render them highly fragile and difficult to transport. Our gratitude is therefore all the more heartfelt that so many people and institutions were willing to share the masterpieces in their collections with the public in New York, Birmingham, and Paris. Unusually, we must here also offer a special note of thanks to a number of lenders who expressed great willingness to share works of art that in the end were not included in the exhibition, and in particular to our old friend Don Luis Ferre and the staff of the Museo de Arte at Ponce, who could not contribute to the exhibition as they would have liked: Burne-Jones's last, and possibly his greatest work, *The Sleep of Arthur in Avalon*, simply proved too large to move from Puerto Rico.

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Irene Bizot, Administrateur general de la Reunion des musées nationaux

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