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The Medieval Fantasies Of Edward Burne-Jones

Matthew Gabriele Former Contributor ⓘ*medieval history, nostalgia, apocalypse, pop culture*

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English artist Edward Burne-Jones, one of the late members of this movement, whose glorious medievalist fantasies in paint and stained glass still stun more than 120 years after his death



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There have always been several versions of the European Middle Ages, as subsequent periods looked back in curiosity, disdain, or reverence. There was, of course, no natural,

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"middle" but a space in-between things that had to be invented. Prof. Brian Stock, way back in 1974, once [famously noted](#):

The Renaissance invented the Middle Ages in order to define itself; the Enlightenment perpetuated them in order to admire itself; and the Romantics revived them in order to escape from themselves. In its widest ramifications "the Middle Ages" thus constitutes one of the most prevalent cultural myths of the modern world.

Indeed, we in the 21st century owe a lot of how we look at the Middle Ages now to those Romantics. This is particularly true of the visual culture, the colors that wash over our mind when we try to conjure the medieval past. We see knights and damsels, ruins and castles. In other words, we almost always see the [Pre-Raphaelites](#).

An [exhibition](#) at the Tate Britain in London highlights the work of the English artist Edward Burne-Jones, one of the late members of this movement, whose glorious medievalist fantasies in paint and stained glass still stun more than 120 years after his death  .

Edward Burne-Jones | Trailer



Burne-Jones, who studied theology at Oxford and almost became a minister, turned instead to art. Religion, of course, still featured heavily among his themes but nothing is more important to him than the European Middle Ages. What's particularly interesting though is that it isn't a historical Middle Ages so much as an invented one, pulled from the late medieval fantasy *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Thomas Malory and [inspired by \(a 19th-century version of\) medieval mysticism](#).

Even when the subject isn't strictly "medieval," the Middle Ages shine through.

His [Perseus series](#), for example, and on display at the exhibition, features a hero from classical mythology but portrayed as a figure out of time. He's dressed as a knight in

shining armor, riding a white horse, surrounded by medieval architecture, in scenes that look like they've jumped straight from a late medieval [Book of Hours](#).

Another piece, a tapestry about the grail quest, features a scene from Malory in which Sir Galahad (with the help of some angels) is able to see the grail, and the completion of his quest. The medieval world here is quite explicit, the framing powerful - so powerful that it [moved Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin to purchase it](#) at auction in 1978.

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A lady walks in front of 'The Attainment: The Vision of the Holy Grail to Sir Galahad, Sir Bors and... [+] GETTY

Having seen the exhibition, the pieces still can entrance. But as a medieval historian, I was struck - in a way I had never been before looking at these pre-Raphaelites - by the sameness of the images. The world is one of constant danger. Disaster always seems to threaten. The women tend to be almost unbearably white and they (unless they're angels) are often the ones who are the source of the danger.

The mermaid drags a sailor down to his death. A female figure spins the wheel of fortune that grinds men under it. Merlin is seduced and trapped by Nimue.

So maybe, if this was a sort of escape, if the Middle Ages were a space of refuge for Burne-Jones, the danger we see in his art was one that followed him from his own time. Once

again, we see that oftentimes what we think about the Middle Ages [tells us more about ourselves](#) than it does about the actual past.

Check out my [website](#).



Matthew Gabriele

Matthew Gabriele is a professor of Medieval Studies and Chair of the Department of Religion and Culture at Virginia Tech. He researches the European Middle Ages, as well as how that period is remembered in the modern world – both in formal history writing and in pop culture - with a focus on the Crusades, kingship, nostalgia, and apocalypse. He earned his PhD from the University of California-Berkeley (2005). **Read Less**

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