

ARTS & ANTIQUES

Edward Burne-Jones: Pre-Raphaelite Visionary By Abby Cronin



Love Among the Ruins

By the end of the 19th century, critics began to rail against Edward Burne-Jones's preoccupation with medieval fantasy. They felt his mysterious and intricate designs depicted "worlds that never were or never will be". But for art lovers unfamiliar with Burne-Jones' magical world and his Pre-Raphaelite visions, here's a chance to peek into this artist's studio. Step into the first gallery in Tate Britain where early sketches reveal his emerging greatness. As you progress through the exhibition you are bound to take in the brilliance of his paintings, cartoons, tapestries and stained glass.

Who Was Edward Burne-Jones?

He was the last major artist associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood formed in 1848. The Brotherhood was a small group of British artists repelled by the ugly effects of industrialisation they saw emerging all around them. What drew them together was

their shared love of nature and the ideals of beauty together with poetic myths and the legends of medievalism. Their art and philosophy stood in stark contrast to the harsh reality of Victorian industrial change. They took their name from the artistic vision inspired by early Italian painters - before Raphael - thus 'Pre-Raphaelite'. Burne-Jones shared these views and was intellectually drawn to similar subject matter: enchanting medieval myths and legends, Roman architecture, poetry and especially, notions of beauty. These themes served to inspire and drive his artistic compositions.

Born in Birmingham, Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898) (EBJ) was an only child from modest circumstances. Yet he rose to achieve artistic acclaim, international fame and great wealth. A studious child, he entered the undergraduate world at Oxford intending to find a career in the Church. It was when he met William Morris, a fellow student at Exeter College, they both abandoned their

religious studies and set out to develop their artistic visions. Even at a young age Burne-Jones knew he would be an artist and meeting Morris at university sent him firmly on that path. Both men shared a love of medieval romance, the decorative arts and architecture. Their friendship and collaboration was confirmed when Morris set up the design collection Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. in 1861 with Burne-Jones as a founder member. EBJ provided designs for stained glass, tapestries and other decorative elements. Eschewing the conventions of studio training, EBJ's education and outlook were entirely independent of the art school system and the art establishment. His intellectual curiosity was nourished from his study of Renaissance works of art. Spending time in Italy enabled him to absorb the beauty and designs of early Italian masterpieces. His understanding was further enhanced from great collections in the National Gallery in London and other museums and libraries.

Find The Legends, Poems, Music And Decorative Art In The Work Of Burne-Jones

Burne-Jones' love of poetry and legends were important influences in the subjects he chose to portray. *King Cophetua and the Beggar Girl*, 1884, one of EBJ's most famous paintings, is a stunning interpretation of Tennyson's poem, *The Beggar Maid*, 1883. Here the king and beggar maid are presented in a tall vertical canvas. She is placed in the centre and is the focus of his attention. This simple beautiful maid is elevated in the king's view. Seated below, he looks up at her, enraptured by her beauty and simplicity. He has removed his crown and placed it on his lap indicating that her lower status is irrelevant. They are equals. Here love wins out over status and



The Golden Stairs 1880



King Cophetua & the Beggar Maid, 1884
Photo by Abby Cronin

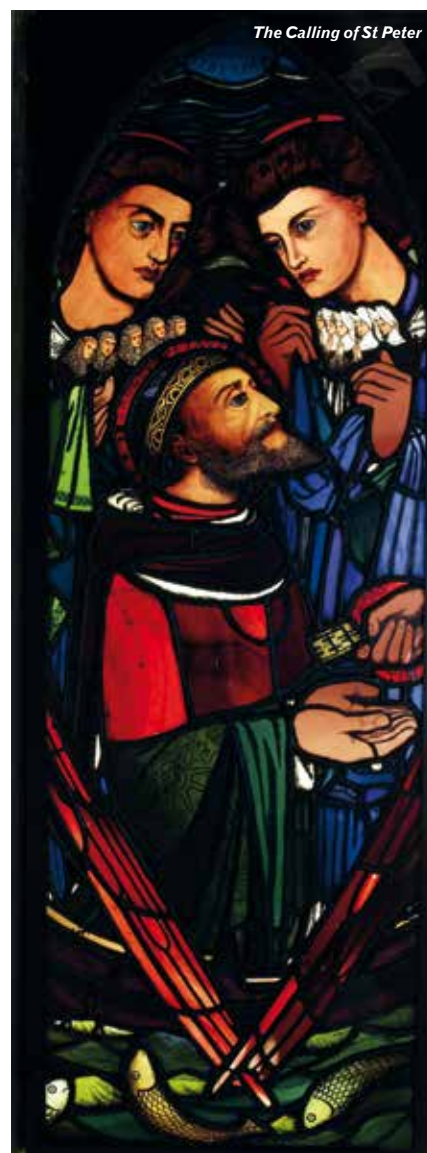
money, a core theme reflecting EBJ and William Morris' egalitarian ideas of social reform. *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* was well received when it was exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in the spring of 1884, and when it was exhibited in 1889 at the Paris Universal Exhibition, Burne-Jones received a Cross of the Legion of Honour from the French government. It was during the 1890s that Burne-Jones became a celebrity in Europe.

The ever-intriguing painting, *The Golden Stairs*, 1880, is an extraordinary vertical composition. While there does not appear to be any specific subject, what we see is an endless stream of beautiful women whose passive faces are typical of Burne-Jones. The more we look, the more the viewer can sense a timeless mood within this monochromatic palette. The 18 women are clothed in classically inspired robes in shades of gold and silver. They move gracefully down the curved stairs, each holding a musical instrument. A dreamlike quality pervades the painting and a musical dimension complements a harmony of colour. The musical mood suggests a particular story, but a story is absent. So- we viewers are left to

*For EBJ a picture is
“a beautiful dream
of something that
never was and
never could be”*



Burne-Jones & William Morris
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The Calling of St Peter

our own interpretative devices as we gaze at *The Golden Stairs*. The figures in this painting firmly established Burne-Jones as a painter who captured images of slender and wistful young women: many were women EBJ knew. The painting has a symbolic quality and reflects the aesthetic standard of beauty admired by Victorians. Contemporary art critics and scholars have noted that *The Golden Stairs* may have influenced Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Stairs*, 1912, an early 20th century cubist depiction of human movement.

For EBJ a picture is “a beautiful dream of something that never was and never could be”. His exquisite painting *Love Among the Ruins*, 1870-1873 epitomises this sentiment. The inspiration for this work comes from Robert Browning's poem of the same name. The poem is the story of two lovers reunited in the ruins of a once great city. Architectural features frame the couple, who are dressed in classically patterned draperies. Thus the picture's theme is the ephemerality of love and youth; it portrays the lovers among the ruins of Cythera with the briar rose around them. It has an obvious similarity with the 'Briar Rose' series of paintings of the Sleeping Beauty legend (1873 and 1890) which are at Buscot

Park, Oxfordshire (National Trust) Both the Briar Rose series and the Sleeping Beauty legend are in the exhibition.

Occasionally Victorians commissioned major artists to decorate their pianos. So it is a great treat to become acquainted with *The Graham Piano*, which EBJ's patron William Graham wanted for his daughter. The piano is on loan from the Victoria and Albert Museum and features prominently in the middle of the exhibition. Visitors can walk around it and study the illustration of Orpheus and Eurydice and the underside of the lid with its vivid representation of Mother Earth and her children. Further details of this piano can be found on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRrZcxgvEy8).

Stained glass church windows were very popular in this period and there was a



The Graham Piano, photo by Abby Cronin

vibrant market for them throughout Britain and the Empire. A few superb examples of EBJ's windows are included in the Tate exhibition. EBJ was a major designer of stained glass commissioned from Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. If readers find they are curious to see EBJ's windows in situ, note that these original windows are alive in churches all over the country. Not long ago I had a delightful tour of Christ Church, Southgate in North London where an enthusiastic and knowledgeable guide showed me the EBJ windows. If you fancy an opportunity to view them, you can contact the church for an appointment.

Edward Burne-Jones was an exceptional artist who bridged the gap between the fine and decorative arts and crafts

Edward Burne-Jones was an exceptional artist who bridged the gap between the fine and decorative arts and crafts. More than 150 of his works are displayed in seven themed galleries, each of which features different aspects of EBJ's fine and applied art. Since this is the first major retrospective of Edward Burne-Jones's art in London for over 40 years, now is the time put a date in your diary to visit. You will learn about and absorb the exquisite art and designs of this unique late Pre-Raphaelite visionary.

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Get in Touch:

I am available to consult if you are interested in collecting or researching the decorative arts and arts heritage.

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