

PETER LANG

Edward Burne-Jones' Mythical Paintings

THE PYGMALION OF
THE PRE-RAPHAELITE PAINTERS



LIANA DE GIROLAMI CHENEY
FOREWORD BY ALICIA FAXON

This book focuses on Sir Edward Burne-Jones' mythical paintings from 1868 to 1886. His artistic training and traveling experiences, his love for the Greek-sculptress, Maria Zambaco, and his aesthetic sensibility provided the background for these mythical paintings. This book analyzes two main concepts: Burne-Jones' assimilation of Neoplatonic ideal beauty as depicted in his solo and narrative paintings, and Burne-Jones' fusion of the classical and emblematic traditions in his imagery.



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PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cheney, Liana.

Edward Burne-Jones' mythical paintings: the Pygmalion of the Pre-Raphaelite painters /
Liana De Girolami Cheney; foreword by Alicia Faxon.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Burne-Jones, Edward Coley, 1833–1898—Criticism and interpretation.
2. Art and mythology. 3. Pre-Raphaelitism—England. I. Title.

ND497.B8C49 759.2—dc23 2013039941

ISBN 978-1-4331-1876-0 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-4539-1266-9 (e-book)

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**.

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the “Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie”; detailed bibliographic data is available
on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de/>.

Cover image: Edward Burne-Jones, *Female Musician*, 1866.
Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability
of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity
of the Council of Library Resources.



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29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006
www.peterlang.com

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Printed in Germany

For Brendan Cole

Natura potentior Ars

Horace, *Ars Poetica*

Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Foreword by Alicia Faxon.....	xxi
Acknowledgments	xxiii
Introduction	xxv

Part I. *Paragone*: Edward Burne-Jones and Italian Renaissance Artists

Chapter One: <i>Paragone</i> : Edward Burne-Jones and Italian Renaissance Artists	3
Chapter Two: Edward Burne-Jones' Interpretation of Botticelli's Female Imagery: <i>Paragone</i> and <i>Rinascita</i>	5
Chapter Three: Edward Burne-Jones' <i>Love Among the Ruins</i> and Francesco Colonna's <i>Dream of Poliphilo</i> : A Paragone of Love	11

Part II. Mythical Cycles: Sagas of Love, Enchantment, and Strife

Chapter Four: Sagas of Love, Enchantment, and Strife	21
Chapter Five: Edward Burne-Jones' <i>Pygmalion and Galatea</i> : A Transformation of Love	23
Chapter Six: Edward Burne-Jones' <i>Cupid and Psyche</i> : An Ardent Tale	34
Chapter Seven: Edward Burne-Jones' <i>Romaunt of the Rose</i> : A Quest for Love	41
Chapter Eight: Edward Burne-Jones' <i>Andromeda and Perseus</i> : An Ovidian Tale	56
Chapter Nine: Edward Burne-Jones' <i>The Story of Troy</i> : A Saga of Love and Strife	82

**Part III. Narrative Paintings: Love, Music,
and the *femme fatale***

Chapter Ten: Edward Burne-Jones' Love Songs: Art, Music, and Magic.....	103
Chapter Eleven: The Fair Lady and The Virgin in Pre-Raphaelite Art: The Evolution of a Societal Myth	118
Chapter Twelve: Edward Burne-Jones' <i>The Sirens</i> : Magical Whispers	132
 Illustrations	 143
Notes	215
Selected Bibliography.....	255
Index.....	265

Illustrations

Cover: Edward Burne-Jones, *Female Musician*, 1866

Fig. 94. Edward Burne-Jones, *Female Musician*, 1866. Whitworth Art Gallery (inv 4654), Manchester, UK Photo credit: Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK

Fig. 1. Johann Zofanny, *Charles Towneley's and Friends in his London Library at 7 Park Street, Westminster*, 1782..... 143

Towneley Hall Art Gallery and Museum, Burnley, Lancashire, UK Photo credit: Towneley Hall Art Gallery and Museum, Burnley, Lancashire, UK, The Bridgeman Art Library

Fig. 2. Frederick Hollyer, *Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris*, 1874 144

Photograph Inv. 771. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK/ Art Resource, NY.
Photo credit: Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK/ Art Resource, NY

Fig. 3. Edward Burne-Jones, *Maria Cassavetti Zambaco*, 1866 145

Wightwick Manor, Warwickshire, UK. Photo credit: National Trust Photo Library, Art Resource, NY

Fig. 4. Botticelli, *Primavera*, 1475 146

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Photo credit: Uffizi Gallery/ Art Resource, NY

Fig. 5. Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, 1485 146

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Photo credit: Uffizi Gallery/ Art Resource, NY

Fig. 6. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Three Graces*, drawing, 1880s..... 147

Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Photo credit: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery (1898P22)

Fig. 7. Edward Burne-Jones, *Venus Concordia*, 1871 148

Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester, UK Photo credit: Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester, UK/The Bridgeman Art Gallery (WHT 162241)

Fig. 8. Edward Burne-Jones, *Venus Discordia*, 1871..... 148

Photo credit: Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester, UK Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester, UK/The Bridgeman Art Gallery (WHT 162242)

- Fig. 9. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Garden of the Hesperides*, 1870–73..... 149
Hamburg Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany. Photo credit: The Bridgeman Art Gallery (XKH 141605)
- Fig. 10. Edward Burne-Jones, *Venus Epithalamium*, 1871..... 149
Courtesy of Julian Hartnoll. Photo credit: The Bridgeman Art Gallery (HTL 59287)
- Fig. 11. Edward Burne-Jones, *Love Among the Ruins*, 1870–1894..... 150
National Trust, Wightwick Manor, Wolverhampton, West Midlands, UK Photo credit: National Trust Photographic Library/Derrick E. Witty/The Bridgeman Art Gallery (USB132404)
- Fig. 12A. Francesco Colonna, *Poliphilo Among the Ruins, Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Aldus Manutius, Venice 1499 151
Photo credit: Linda Fierz-David, *The Dream of Poliphilo* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1950)
- Fig. 12B. Francesco Colonna, *Polia and Poliphilo Among the Ruins, Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Aldus Manutius, Venice 1499 151
Photo credit: Linda Fierz-David, *The Dream of Poliphilo* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1950)
- Fig. 13. Edward Burne-Jones, *Lament*, 1868..... 152
William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow, UK Photo credit: William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow, UK
- Fig. 14. Edward Burne-Jones, Design for a Musical Instrument..... 152
Philip Burne-Jones' Collection. Photo credit: Aymer Vallance, *Sir Edward Burne-Jones: His Decorative Works* (London: Art Journal, 1900), p. 30, Fig. 54
- Fig. 15. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Soul Attains*, 1867..... 153
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, UK Photo credit: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, UK
- Fig. 16. Edward Burne-Jones, *Cupid and Psyche*, 1865–72 (reversed image) 153
Trustees, Cecil Higgins Art Gallery, Bedford, UK. Photo credit: Trustees, Cecil Higgins Art Gallery, Bedford, UK
- Fig. 17. Edward Burne-Jones, *Briar Rose Cycle* (det), 1864–90..... 154
Buscot Park, Oxfordshire, UK Photo credit: Artdaily.org, Public Domain in Wikimedia Commons
- Fig. 18. Edward Burne-Jones, *Pilgrim and Love Through the Briars*, 1877–87 154
Private Collection, UK. Photo credit: Art Resource, NY

- Fig. 19. Francesco Colonna, *Architecture* (det), *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*,
Aldus Manutius, Venice 1499 155
Photo credit: Maurizio Calvesi, *Il sogno di Polifilo prenestino* (Rome: Officina Edizioni,
1980).
- Fig. 20. Francesco Colonna, *Singing Tree*, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*,
Aldus Manutius, Venice 1499 155
Photo credit: Maurizio Calvesi, *Il sogno di Polifilo prenestino* (Rome: Officina Edizioni,
1980).
- Fig. 21. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Tree of Forgiveness (Phyllis and Demophoön)*,
1870 156
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Photo credit: Birmingham Museums and Art
Gallery
- Fig. 22. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Tree of Forgiveness*, 1882 156
Lady Lever Gallery, National Museum, Liverpool. Photo credit: Lady Lever Gallery,
National Museum, Liverpool, UK
- Fig. 23. Edward Burne-Jones, *Cupid and Psyche Asleep*, 1872 157
Yale Center for British Art, Yale Art Gallery Collection, New Haven, Mary Gertrude
Abbey Fund. Photo credit: Yale Art Gallery Collection, New Haven, Mary Gertrude
Abbey Fund
- Fig. 24. Francesco Colonna, *Fountain of Adonis*, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*,
Aldus Manutius, Venice 1499 158
Photo credit: Maurizio Calvesi, *Il sogno di Polifilo prenestino* (Rome: Officina Edizioni,
1980).
- Fig. 25. Edward Burne-Jones, *Maria Zambaco*, 1870 159
Clemens-Sels-Museum (Neuss), Germany. Photo credit: Clemens-Sels-Museum
(Neuss), Germany
- Fig. 26. Francesco Colonna, *Lovers* (reversed image), *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*,
Aldus Manutius, Venice 1499 160
Photo credit: Maurizio Calvesi, *Il sogno di Polifilo prenestino* (Rome: Officina Edizioni,
1980).
- Fig. 27. Edward Burne-Jones, *Love Among the Ruins*, 1872 160
in *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* by William Morris. Photo credit: William Morris Public
Domain in Wikimedia Commons

- Fig. 28. Agnolo Bronzino, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, 1529–30 161
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Photo credit: Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence/Art Resource, NY
- Fig. 29. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Heart Desire*, 1868–70 162
Joseph Setton Collection, Private Collection, Paris. Photo credit: The Bridgeman Art Gallery (HTL 11909)
- Fig. 30. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Hand Refrains*, 1868–70 162
Joseph Setton Collection, Private Collection, Paris. Photo credit: The Bridgeman Art Gallery (HTL 11910)
- Fig. 31. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Godhead Fires*, 1868–70 162
Joseph Setton Collection, Private Collection, Paris. Photo credit: The Bridgeman Art Gallery (HTL 11911)
- Fig. 32. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Soul Attains*, 1868–70 162
Joseph Setton Collection, Private Collection, Paris. Photo credit: The Bridgeman Art Gallery (HTL 11912)
- Fig. 33. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Heart Desire*, 1868–78 163
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Photo credit: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery
- Fig. 34. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Hand Refrains*, 1868–78 163
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Photo credit: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery
- Fig. 35. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Godhead Fires*, 1868–78 163
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Photo credit: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery
- Fig. 36. Edward Burne-Jones, *Study for the Soul Attains*, 1870 163
Garman Ryan Collection at the New Art Gallery Walsall, UK. Photo credit: Garman Ryan Collection at the New Art Gallery Walsall, UK
- Fig. 37. Edward Burne-Jones, *Cupid Finding Psyche Asleep*, 1865, drawing 164
The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Photo credit: Ashmolean Museum, Oxford/Art Resource, NY
- Fig. 38. Edward Burne-Jones, *Cupid Finding Psyche Asleep*, 1865–87, watercolor 165
Manchester City Art Galleries. Photo credit: Art Resource, NY

- Fig. 39. Edward Burne-Jones, *Cupid Finding Psyche*, 1866, watercolor..... 165
British Museum, London. Photo Credit: British Museum, London, PD 1954-5-8-8, AN36942001
- Fig. 40. Edward Burne-Jones, *Cupid Finding Psyche Asleep*, 1872..... 165
Palace Green, Kensington, now Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Photo credit: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery/Art Resource, NY
- Fig. 41. Henry Blundell, *Sleeping Venus*, 1809, engraving..... 166
Private Collection, UK. Photo credit: author
- Fig. 42. *Mars and Rhea Silvia* sarcophagus, 190..... 166
Palazzo Mattei, Rome. Photo credit: Art Resource, NY
- Fig. 43. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Hero-Poet, La Romance de la Rose*, 1236, watercolor..... 167
British Library, London. Photo credit: British Library, London/Art Resource, NY
- Fig. 44. Francesco Colonna, *The Fountain of Adonis, Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Aldus Manutius, Venice 1499 167
Photo credit: Maurizio Calvesi, *Il sogno di Polifilo prenestino* (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1980).
- Fig. 45. Edward Burne-Jones, *Chant d'Amour*, 1868–77 168
Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. Photo credit: Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY
- Fig. 46. Otto Vaenius, *Cupid Watering His Garden, Amorum Emblemata*, Antwerp 1608 169
Photo credit: author
- Fig. 47. Andrea Alciato, *De morte et amore, Emblemata*, Paris 1542 169
Emblem 156, engraving. Photo credit: Emblem Collection, Glasgow, UK
- Fig. 48. Edward Burne-Jones, *Pilgrim and Love Cycle* (det), 1870s, embroidery 170
Victoria and Albert Museum. Photo credit: Victoria and Albert Museum, London
- Fig. 49. Edward Burne-Jones, *Vices*, 1870s 171
Victoria and Albert Museum. Photo credit: Victoria and Albert Museum, London
- Fig. 50. Edward Burne-Jones, *Love Leading the Pilgrim*, 1876–77, drawing..... 172
Private Collection. Photo credit: Stephen Wildman and John Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art Exhibition, 1998), Fig. 75

- Fig. 51. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Pilgrim at the Gate of Idleness*, 1884 173
Dallas Museum of Art, Texas. Photo credit: The Bridgeman Art Gallery (BAL 15217)
- Fig. 52. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Pilgrim at the Gate of Idleness*, 1877–1897..... 173
Private Collection. Photo credit: Art Resource, NY
- Fig. 53. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Pilgrim in the Garden or Heart of the Rose*,
1877–1897 174
Roy Miles Fine Paintings. Photo credit: The Bridgeman Art Gallery (BAL 11994)
- Fig. 54. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Pilgrim in the Garden*, 1880s, drawing..... 174
William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow. Photo credit: William Morris Gallery (D187)
- Fig. 55. Edward Burne-Jones, *Pilgrim's Dream*, 1877–1897, drawing 175
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Photo credit: Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (inv.
1050.30)
- Fig. 56. Edward Burne-Jones, *Vices I*, 1877–1897, drawing 175
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Photo credit: Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (inv.
1050.32)
- Fig. 57. Edward Burne-Jones, *Vices II*, 1877–1897, drawing..... 176
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Photo credit: Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (inv.
1050.38)
- Fig. 58. Edward Burne-Jones, *Dancers*, 1877–1897, drawing..... 176
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Photo credit: Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (inv.
1050.45)
- Fig. 59. Edward Burne-Jones, *L'Amant*, 1877–1897, drawing 177
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Photo credit: Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (inv.
1050.30)
- Fig. 60. Edward Burne-Jones, *L'Amant*, 1881, drawing 177
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston MA. Gift in Memory of Charles Eliot Norton from his
children (27.646) Photo credit: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston MA
- Fig. 61. Edward Burne-Jones, *L'Amant*, 1901, tapestry 178
Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe, Germany. Photo credit: Badisches
Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe (72/147)
- Fig. 62. Otto Vaenius, “No pleasure without pain.” *Amorum emblemata*,
Antwerp 1608 178
Photo credit: author

- Fig. 63. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Rock of the Doom*, 1875–88, bodycolor..... 179
Southampton City Art Gallery. Photo credit: Southampton City Art Gallery/The Bridgeman Art Gallery
- Fig. 64. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Doom Fulfilled*, 1875–88, bodycolor 180
Southampton City Art Gallery. Photo credit: Southampton City Art Gallery/The Bridgeman Art Gallery
- Fig. 65A. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Baleful Head*, 1875–88, bodycolor 181
Southampton City Art Gallery. Photo credit: Southampton City Art Gallery/The Bridgeman Art Gallery
- Fig. 65B. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Baleful Head*, 1875–88
(det., flipped image) 181
Southampton City Art Gallery. Photo credit: Southampton City Art Gallery/The Bridgeman Art Gallery
- Fig. 66. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Rock of the Doom*, 1875–88 182
Staatgalerie, Stuttgart. Photo credit: Staatgalerie, Stuttgart/The Bridgeman Art Gallery
- Fig. 67. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Doom Fulfilled*, 1875–88..... 182
Staatgalerie, Stuttgart. Photo credit: Staatgalerie, Stuttgart/The Bridgeman Art Gallery
- Fig. 68. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Baleful Head*, 1875–88..... 183
Staatgalerie, Stuttgart. Photo credit: Staatgalerie, Stuttgart/The Bridgeman Art Gallery
- Fig. 69. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Rock of the Doom* and *The Doom Fulfilled*,
1875–88 184
Art Gallery of South Adelaide, Australia Elder Bequest Fund 1902. Photo credit: The Bridgeman Art Gallery (ADL 362181)
- Fig. 70. Edward Burne-Jones, *Study of Persens, The Doom Fulfilled*,
1875–88 184
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK. Photo credit: Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge, UK
- Fig. 71. Edward Burne-Jones, *Study of the Medusa, The Baleful Head*,
1875–88, drawing 185
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK. Photo credit: Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge, UK
- Fig. 72. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Painter and His Model*, 1870, drawing 185
Sotheby's London. Photo credit: The Bridgeman Art Gallery

- Fig. 73. *Perseus Freeing Andromeda*, after Nicias, before 79, Roman fresco 186
National Archeological Museum, Naples (House of Dioscuri). Photo credit: Sergey Sosnovskiy, ©2008
- Fig. 74. *Perseus Freeing Andromeda*, before 79, Roman fresco 187
National Archeological Museum, Naples (inv. no. 8995). Photo credit: Sergey Sosnovskiy, ©2008
- Fig. 75. Giorgio Vasari, *Perseus Freeing Andromeda*, 1570 188
Tesoretto, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Photo credit: Art Resource, NY
- Fig. 76. Bernard Solomon, *Perseus and Andromeda, Ovid Metamorphoses*, Venice 1508 189
Photo credit: author
- Fig. 77. Titian, *Perseus and Andromeda*, 1554–56 189
Wallace Collection, London. Photo credit: By kind permission of the Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London/Art Resource, NY
- Fig. 78. Edward Burne-Jones, *Story of Troy*, 1870–1890 190
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, UK (accession number 1992P178). Photo credit: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, UK
- Fig. 79. Edward Burne-Jones, Study for *Story of Troy*, 1870–1890 191
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery (accession number 1922P179). Photo credit: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, UK
- Fig. 80. Edward Burne-Jones, *Wheel of Fortune, Fame Overthrowing Fortune, Oblivion Conquering Fame and Love Subduing Oblivion*, 1870 192
Watts Gallery, Compton, UK
- Fig. 81. Edward Burne-Jones, *Feast of Peleus and Thetis*, 1872–81 193
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England. Photo credit: Victoria and Albert Museum, London (P.108-1920)
- Fig. 82. Edward Burne-Jones, *Feast of Peleus and Thetis*, 1872–81 194
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, UK, Photo credit: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery (accession number: 1956P8)
- Fig. 83. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Wheel of Fortune*, 1875 195
Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo credit: Art Resource, NY

- Fig. 84. Edward Burne-Jones, *Venus Concordia*, 1871 196
Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery. Photo credit: Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery/ PLYMG.1926.16. The Bridgeman Art Gallery
- Fig. 85. Edward Burne-Jones, *Study of Venus Discordia*, 1872–73 196
National Museum and Gallery of Cardiff, Wales. Photo credit: The Bridgeman Art Gallery (NGW 184264)
- Fig. 86. Edward Burne-Jones, *Fame*, 1870s, drawing 197
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Photo credit: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery
- Fig. 87. Edward Burne-Jones, *Oblivion* 1870s, drawing 198
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Photo credit: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery
- Fig. 88. Edward Burne-Jones, *Love (Amor)*, 1870s, drawing 199
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Photo credit: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery
- Fig. 89. Edward Burne-Jones, *Cassandra*, 1868–70, drawing 200
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England. Photo credit Victoria and Albert Museum, London, CAI 12. Bequeathed by Constantine Alexander Ionides
- Fig. 90. Edward Burne-Jones, *Chant d'Amour*, 1865–1868 201
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA. Photo credit: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
- Fig. 91. Edward Burne-Jones, *Le Chant d'Amour*, 1864, drawing 202
Sotheby's, July 15, 2008, LO8131; Lot 14. Photo credit: Sotheby's, July 15, 2008, LO8131; Lot 14
- Fig. 92. Edward Burne-Jones, Study for *Le Chant d'Amour: Seraph*, 1868, drawing 202
School of Art Gallery and Museum, Aberystwyth University, Wales. Sotheby's London, July 15, 2008, LO8121; Lot 14. Photo Credit; Sotheby's London, England
- Fig. 93. Edward Burne-Jones, *Maria Zambaco*, 1868, drawing 203
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Photo Credit: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery
- Fig. 94. Edward Burne-Jones, *Female Musician*, 1866 204
Whitworth Art Gallery (inv 4654), Manchester, UK Photo credit: Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK

- Fig. 95. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1849 205
Tate Britain Gallery, London. Photo credit: Tate Britain Gallery, London
- Fig. 96. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ecce Ancilla Domini* or *Annunciation*, 1850 206
Tate Britain Gallery, London. Photo credit: Tate Britain Gallery, London
- Fig. 97. Edward Burne-Jones, *Annunciation*, 1879 206
Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight. Photo credit: Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight/The Bridgeman Art Gallery (WGL 191516)
- Fig. 98. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Found*, 1853–1861 207
Delaware Art Museum. Photo credit: Delaware Art Museum
- Fig. 99. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Found*, 1853, drawing..... 208
British Museum, London. Photo credit: British Museum, London
- Fig. 100. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Found*, 1855, drawing..... 208
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Photo credit: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery
- Fig. 101. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Sirens*, 1870–89..... 209
Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida. Photo credit: Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida
- Fig. 102. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Sirens*, 1875, watercolor 209
National Gallery of South Africa, Cape Town, South Africa. Photo credit: National Gallery of South Africa, Cape Town/The Bridgeman Art Gallery (MH 11908)
- Fig 103. Edward Burne-Jones, *Nightmare of the Sirens*, 1870s, drawing 210
Birmingham Museum and Art Galleries, UK. Photo credit: Birmingham Museum and Art Galleries, UK
- Fig. 104. Edward Burne-Jones, *Musical Angel, After Botticelli*, 1868, drawing..... 210
Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo credit: Victoria and Albert Museum, London
- Fig. 105. Geoffrey Whitney, *Sirenes*, after Andrea Alciato's emblem 211
A Choice of Emblemes, Leiden 1586. Photo credit: author
- Fig. 106. Siren Painter, *Odysseus and the Sirens*, 480 BCE from Vulci 211
British Museum, London. Photo credit: British Museum, London/Art Resource, NY

- Fig. 107. *Ulysses resists the song of the Sirens*, 50–75, Pompeii fresco.....212
British Museum, London. Photo credit: British Museum, London/Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY
- Fig. 108. John Williams Waterhouse, *Ulysses and the Sirens*, 1891213
Private Collection, UK. Photo credit: Art Resource/NY
- Fig. 109. Gustave Moreau, *The Sirens*, 1868.....213
Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris. Photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY
- Fig. 110. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Siren (Sirene Ligeia)*, 1873.....214
Private Collection. Photo credit: Monddori Porfolio/Sergio Anelli/Art Resource, NY
- Fig. 111. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Depths of the Sea*, 1886.....214
Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Photo credit: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA/Art Resource

Foreword

Dr. Liana De Girolami Cheney is an Investigadora de Historia de Arte at SIELAE, Universidad de Coruña, Spain, and President of the Association for Textual Scholarship in Art History (ATSAH), received her BS/BA in Psychology and Philosophy from the University of Miami, Florida, the MA in History of Art and Aesthetics from the University of Miami, Florida, and PhD in Italian Renaissance and Baroque from Boston University, MA. A Pre-Raphaelite, Renaissance and Mannerism scholar, she has published widely and has given numerous papers on Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98) and Pre-Raphaelite art. In this book she traces the role of mythology in his oeuvre in his retelling of classical and Arthurian myths in his paintings, drawings, and illustrations. We are presented with a fascinating cast of sirens, mermaids, harpies, and lovers such as Cupid and Psyche and Perseus and Andromeda and others. Her knowledge of Renaissance imagery also informs her connection of Burne-Jones to artists such as Botticelli, who inspired some of his mythic images.

As Prof. Cheney points out, Burne-Jones' use of mythology not only retold classic stories but also related these myths to his own life, loves, and era. His use of mythology becomes a saga of love, loss, and triumph in this book. Well documented and scholarly in its approach, *Burne-Jones' Mythical Paintings* is a book to be cherished and read not only by devotees of Pre-Raphaelite art but also by anyone interested in nineteenth-century art and culture, the Pre-Raphaelites, or mythology and its transformations.

Alicia Craig Faxon

Dr. Faxon is Professor of Art History, emerita, Simmons College, and author of *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* and *Pre-Raphaelite Art in its European Context*.

Acknowledgments

I want to express my sincere gratitude to the following journals and book publishers for allowing the reproduction in part or in its entirety of my following essays:

Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Edward Burne-Jones' *Love Among the Ruins*," in *The Review of the Pre-Raphaelite Society Journal*, 20 (Summer 2012), pp. 2–13

Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Burne-Jones' *Andromeda*: A Mythological Legend," *Artibus et Historiae* (2003), pp. 35–55.

Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Edward Burne-Jones' *Cupid and Psyche*: The Enchantment of an Ancient Tale," in *Wege zum Mythos*, ed. Gerlinde Huber-Rebenich and Luba Fredman (Berlin: University of Mannheim, 2000), pp. 57–71.

Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Burne-Jones: Mannerist in an Age of Modernism," in *Pre-Raphaelite Art in its European Context*, eds. Susan Casteras and Alicia Faxon (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, Associated University Press, 1994), pp. 103–16.

Liana De Girolami Cheney, "The Fair Lady and the Virgin in Pre-Raphaelite Iconography," in *Pre-Raphaelitism and Medievalism in the Arts*, ed. Liana De Girolami Cheney (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1992), pp. 242–81.

My appreciation is also extended to all the galleries, museums, private collectors, photographers, and photographic companies who permitted the reproductions of the included images in this book.

Introduction

This book focuses on Edward Burne-Jones' mythical paintings depicted between 1868 and 1898. His artistic training, cultural milieu, and traveling experiences; his love for the beautiful Greek sculptress, model, and muse Maria Cassavetti Zambaco (1843–1914), and his aesthetic sensibility provide the classical, emblematic, and mythological background for these narrative and historical paintings.

There are two main aspects examined: Burne-Jones' fusion of the classical and emblematic traditions in his mythical imagery, and his visualization of the Neoplatonic ideal beauty in these emblematic, narrative, and historical paintings. In his seeking to create a beautiful image, Burne-Jones formulates his aesthetic or art theory by combining the classical notions of *furor poeticus* ("the frenzy of the poet or of an artist"), *ut pictura poesis* ("as is painting, so is poetry"), and *ut pictura musica* ("as is painting, so is music").¹ These notions are embedded in his artistic quest for beauty in art. For Burne-Jones, beauty is the *summum bonum* of life and the sole inspiration of his creativity. He expresses his artistic pursuit with these words: "Only this is true, that beauty is very beautiful, and softens, and comforts, and inspires, and rouses, and lifts up, and never fails."²

Burne-Jones, as a romantic idealist, pursues harmony, beauty, and perfection in his art. The sensuous and ethereal beauty of his figures and magic interpretation of ancient sagas reflect his moral quest between good and evil, courtly and spiritual love, and real and aesthetic realms. As he proclaims: "I mean by a picture a beautiful, romantic dream of something that never was, never will be—in a light better than any light that ever shone—in a land no one can define or remember, only desire—and the forms divinely beautiful—and then I wake up."³

Thus, in his mythical paintings, Burne-Jones fuses a natural realm or visual realm for the formal depiction of the imagery with a metaphysical or aesthetic realm for the embodiment of beauty. Art, music, and love are then a poetical guide for Burne-Jones' manifestation of beauty.

The chapters in this book consider two types of mythical representations for unveiling Burne-Jones' quest for beauty: decorative cycles paintings or mythological paintings, and solo narrative paintings. Decorative cycles paintings

encompass those paintings executed or developed in a sequence where a mythological story begins within a painting and continues evolving throughout a series of paintings, thus creating a visual text. Then, the mythological story is united and interconnected within the cycle, forming a beautiful, visual woven tapestry. The mythological story is a sequential visual narrative or history painting united and interconnected within the cycle, such as seen in *The Story of Troy* of 1870–72 (Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery); *The Story of Cupid and Psyche* of 1872–81 (Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, and Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery); *The Story of Perseus and Andromeda* of 1875–78 (Tate Britain in London, Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge, and Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery); *The Story of Pygmalion* of 1868–78 (Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery); and *The Romaunt of the Rose (Love and the Pilgrim)* of 1877–97 (Tate Britain, London, and Dallas Museum of Art, TX).

The other type of mythical or narrative representations is the solo painting, which not only unveils a story but also reflects cultural attitudes of the fin-de-siècle, in particular, the image of the female as *ingénue* or *femme fatale*, e.g., *Love Among the Ruins* of 1870–94 (Wightwich Manor, Wolvehampton); *Lament* of 1865–66 (William Morris Gallery, London); *Chant d'Amour* of 1868–77 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, and Boston Museum of Fine Arts, MA); *The Sirens* of 1875–80 (Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, FL); and the *Annunciation* of 1879 (Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, Liverpool).

In addition to these paintings there exists a plethora of drawings, sketches, and studies of the ancient works of art, which Burne-Jones designs for his original conceptions of the mythological paintings. Some of these visual documentations are located in sketchbooks and notebooks on the Pygmalion Series at the Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery and the Ashmolean Museum and Library at Oxford. Others are found in sketchbooks and notebooks on the Cupid Series at the Fitzwilliam Museum and Library in Cambridge and The Drawing Collection and Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum, while three sketchbooks on the Cupid, Troy and Pygmalion cycles are in the drawings and paintings collection of the Manchester Art Museum and Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

In the decorative cycles paintings, Burne-Jones interprets the classical episodes and visually narrates them, providing for the viewer aesthetic and psychological moments in space and time, from past to present, and from real and imaginary realms. However, in the solo narrative paintings, he selects an aesthetic *pregnant moment* of the event, and by doing so, the significance of the imagery remains suspended and, at the same time, apprehended by the mind.⁴ In both representations, Burne-Jones aims for the soul to contemplate beauty.

This ideal which sustains Burne-Jones throughout his difficult life is clearly reflected in his mythical paintings. In *A Sketchbook by Sir Edward Burne-Jones*, Kathleen Elizabeth Alexander writes on the affinity between the idea of beauty in Burne-Jones' drawings, which show the impact of Walter Pater's aesthetic description of Leonardo da Vinci's drawings.⁵

Burne-Jones' cultural milieu provides him with an understanding of the classical revival in the arts of the Renaissance drifting into Mannerism, the Baroque, and the Rococo, gaining greater momentum in the nineteenth century as a result of the excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii. In England, love for the antique is expanded to collecting classical works of art. Since the seventeenth century, English collectors such as the Earl of Arundel and later Lords Burlington and Leicester commission other Englishmen already based in Rome to excavate on site and to send back whatever antiquities they could find. This taste for ancient archeological excavation expanded to sites in Greece and Asia Minor.

By the end of the eighteenth century, London is the center of trade in ancient art and antiquities. This enthusiasm for antiquity is clearly illustrated in Johann Zofanny's *Charles Towneley's and Friends in his London Library at 7 Park Street, Westminster* of 1782 (Fig. 1, Towneley Hall Art Gallery and Museum, Burnley, UK) where Towneley (1733–1810), along with his fellow antiquarians Charles Greville (1794–1865) and Sir Thomas Astle (1735–1803), are surrounded by his collection of antiquities. The already established Society of Dilettanti in England and the British Art Colony in Rome, to further the knowledge of the antique world, commission and finance exploratory expeditions in order to understand the Greek taste and Roman culture and to encourage artists and collectors alike to visit, explore, and excavate the ancient sites. Both societies function to further the knowledge of antiquity in England.⁶

Before the German historian and archeologist (1717–68) Johann Joachim Winckelmann classified Greek Art, nineteenth-century artists made no distinction between Greek and Roman art.⁷ The ancient Romans, who were lovers of Greek art, preserved, copied, and collected the works. European artists from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century were confronted with a mixture of "ancient" styles. In England, the apperception of ancient art by Pre-Raphaelite painters such as Burne-Jones is galvanized by the arrival of the Elgin Marbles (the Athenian reliefs from the Parthenon) and other classical treasures in London.⁸ Burne-Jones' affinity for ancient Roman art is further enhanced by his numerous Italian sojourns.

The impact of the classical revival in England relates not only to the assimilation of the classical style (Ernest H. Gombrich's concept of *all'antica*) and aesthetic appreciation but also to the moral connection between the image

and its content.⁹ The work of art, then, represents an *exemplum virtutis*, as in the tradition of Roman historians in their writings (Plutarch's *Lives*), which stressed the importance of art as a positive device toward the support of morality. Historical or mythological subjects, because of their inherent narrative content, could assert moral standards. Pre-Raphaelite painters, and Burne-Jones as well, abide by this new artistic quest, in particular, in mythological paintings, where these ideals are embodied and visualized. Burne-Jones' art reveals his familiarity and interests in the classical tradition experience through his cultural milieu and era.

An integral aspect of this book deals with the influence of classical art and literature on Burne-Jones' mythical paintings. His visual familiarity with classical imagery is achieved through his early schooling in the classics at Oxford; his constant visits to the British Museum collection, in particular, the display of the Elgin Marbles;¹⁰ as well as his many travels to Italy, in particular, to Rome, where he studies the antique first hand. His patronage by wealthy Greek families residing in London, such as the Ionides,¹¹ and his amorous involvement with a well-known beautiful Greek woman, Zambaco, further contribute to Burne-Jones' fascination with the antique.

Intertwined with the imagery and its signification of the mythical paintings are Burne-Jones' affinities for classical and Renaissance artistic and literary sources.¹² These sources reveal the relationship among three aspects: 1) the ancient theory *ut pictura poesis* in Plato's writings, in particular, the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Horace's *Ars poetica*, Pliny's *Natural History*, and Philostratus' *Imagines*; 2) the classical mythology of Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *Fasti* and *De amore*; and 3) the Renaissance *ars amatoria* (the art of love) and emblematic symbolism in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (*The Dream of Poliphilo: The Soul on Love*), Andrea Alciato's *Emblemata*, Vincenzo Cartari's *Imagini delli Dei de Gl'Antichi*, Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, and Otto van Veen's *Amorum Emblemata*.

Burne-Jones' writing and imagery, his theory of art, and, in particular, his concepts on ideal beauty are included in his *Memorials* and articles for *The GERM*, a contemporary journal of the time.¹³ Here, he postulates many of his aesthetic ideas. Since antiquity, ancient writers such as Pliny, Ovid, and Philostratus employ ekphrasis, a literary description or commentary on a work of art, real or imaginary, to stimulate the attention of the reader. For example, the story of Pygmalion reveals the art of deception. At first he falls in love with his creation, a female statue. Through the blessings of Venus, his work is transformed into a real woman. Pygmalion is not certain if he is awake or dreaming when this transformation occurs. The mythical paintings, too, combine two aspects of the sister arts—painting and poetry (image and word).

Philostratus explains, and Franciscus Junius (1545–1602), librarian to Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel (1585–1646), later notes that the fundamental likeness between the two arts is that they both imitate nature and create an aesthetic contemplation.

A few biographical facts on the multifaceted life of Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98) assist in understanding his artistic impetus and productive artistic life.¹⁴ He is a romantic Pre-Raphaelite artist whose imagery and iconography influence the Aesthetic Movement, the Art Nouveau Movement, and Symbolist painters of the nineteenth century.

Burne-Jones is born in Bennetts Hill of Birmingham on August 28, 1833, and baptized with the name of Edward Coley Burne Jones. His father, Edward Richard Jones, was a Welsh frame maker and gilder. His mother, Elizabeth Cole Jones, dies from complications of childbirth when he is only six days old. His father holds him responsible for her death and withdraws from loving his son. During Burne-Jones' childhood, Anna Sampson, a family nanny, raises him, but he lives isolated from parental love. In 1844, his father places him in King Edward VI grammar school for commerce. From 1848–52, Burne-Jones attends the Birmingham School of Art. But in 1852 he switches his educational interests to the study of theology and the classics, entering Exeter College in Oxford. This institution is at this time regaining its academic intellectual, philosophical, and theological reputation which had been lost during the Renaissance. At Oxford, Burne-Jones befriends another young man, William Morris (1834–96), who is also interested in theology and the classics. Morris becomes Burne-Jones' lifelong closest friend, artistic advisor and associate. They nickname each other: Burne-Jones is Ned, and Morris is Topsy (Fig. 2).¹⁵

At Oxford, inspired by the provocative sermons of Rev. John Henry Newman (1801–90), founder of the High Church Anglican religious movement called the Oxford Movement (Tractarian Movement),¹⁶ both start to pursue a clergyman's career. But they switch from theological studies to the humanities when their spiritual mentor, Newman, withdraws from the university for theological and political reasons. Burne-Jones and Morris then begin to focus on medieval and Renaissance history and literature, in particular, courtly sagas such as Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *La Roman de la Rose* of 1230–75, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* of the fourteenth century, Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* of 1470, and Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* of 1499. Books on ancient and nineteenth-century classical mythology are also included in their classical studies, e.g., Ovid's *Metamorphoses* of first century, Thomas Bulfinch's *The Age of Fable Stories of Gods and Heroes* of 1855, and early known versions of James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, later published in 1890.

In 1857, Burne-Jones and Morris meet John Ruskin (1819–1900), Alfred Tennyson (1809–92), and Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), all supporters of the same cultural interests on antiquity and the Middle Ages. But for Burne-Jones, the greatest artistic impact occurs at a meeting with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who invites Burne-Jones and Morris to collaborate with him on a mural painting at Oxford Union. The fresco mural endeavor fails as a result of their lack of knowledge about the technique. Nonetheless, Rossetti becomes Burne-Jones' artistic teacher and mentor, introducing him to the world of art, including the prints of the northern Renaissance German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528).¹⁷

Meanwhile, Ruskin's passion for Italian Renaissance art and culture opens Burne-Jones' eyes to a new aesthetic world of beauty, love, and art. From his travels to Italy (1859–73), he studies the art of Botticelli, Crivelli, Leonardo, Mantegna, Michelangelo, Titian, Tintoretto, and the Mannerist painters. With Ruskin's artistic impetus, Burne-Jones begins to formulate his own aesthetic theory of beauty, fusing artistic forms with literature, music, and decorative arts to create an exquisite image. He visualizes and partakes of the Aesthetic Movement initiated in Aesthetic literature by Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of Renaissance* of 1873.

In 1861, with Morris, Burne-Jones becomes a partner of the designer firm, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company, and cofounder of the Arts and Crafts Movement. In 1877 he assists in the formation of the Grosvenor Gallery to provide schooling and exhibitions for young artists.¹⁸ He receives several recognitions, including in 1885 associate membership in the Royal Academy and a position as honorary president of the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists. In 1889 he is honored with the Légion d'Honneur from Paris, and in 1894 he is granted the title of baronet by the English crown. It is after this prestigious knighthood that Burne-Jones begins to hyphenate his name, likely for family recognition.

Burne-Jones dies on June 17, 1898. Seven days later, a memorial service is held in his honor at Westminster Abbey in London—a remarkable tribute to an artist, since this is the first funerary memorial performed for a painter in this historic priory. His ashes are transported to rest in the churchyard of Rottingdean, in the county of Sussex, where he had resided in the summer.

In his personal life, Burne-Jones experiences constant vicissitudes of love. He marries Georgiana MacDonald (1840–1920), a trained painter. They have three children: Philip in 1861, Margaret in 1866, and another female child who dies at birth in 1863. His children become successful painters and poets.¹⁹ Burne-Jones' artistic involvement with wealthy patrons from London families such as the Cassavetti, Ionides, Carlisle, and Graham advance his career but