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

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Printed in Germany

For Brendan Cole

Natura potentior Ars
Horace, *Ars Poetica*

Contents

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

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

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

Illustrations

British Museum, London. Photo credit: British Museum, London/Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

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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

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Acknowledgments

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 intepretation 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'Hónneur 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 the Cassavetti, Ionides, Carlisle, and Graham advance his career but