



Sir Joseph Noel Paton, *The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania*, 1849
National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

Fairy Painting

Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

—John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale”

There's a fairy grotto downstairs at the Frick, but those with preconceptions of whimsical greeting-card pixies should beware. Nineteenth-century British fairy painting, like the original folktales gathered by the Brothers Grimm, is highly charged, often erotic and sometimes violent. The Frick exhibition is a prime selection of thirty-four pictures from the larger show organized by the University of Iowa Museum and the Royal Academy of Arts, London. The genre attracted some first-rate artists, such as J.M.W. Turner, whose *Queen Mab's Cave* (1846) depicts a swarm of fairies in molten light beneath a fantastic acropolis. Shakespeare provided the most common literary pretexts. *Ferdinand Lured by Ariel* (1849–50) by Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais features a rumpled and understandably quizzical Elizabethan youth confronting a floating poison-green waif, buoyed up by bat-winged goblins. Like *The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* spawned a host of bizarre images. Edwin Landseer's *Titania and Bottom* (1848–51), much admired by Queen Victoria, is one of the most charming, with its winsome donkey caressed by a sultry fairy queen and tiny, cherubic fairies riding snowy pink-eyed hares. Joseph Noel Paton's *The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania* (1849) is more complex. Lewis Carroll praised it, claiming he had counted 165 fairies. While the central royal couple are decorous, if barely clothed, more lascivious fairies and goblins infest the underbrush. The variations in size make fairy-

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spotting a visual challenge: one miniscule elf perches on a snail, while a tiny nymph feeds a newt, an outsized fly perched on her shoulder. No wonder the author of *Alice in Wonderland* was mesmerized by the uncertain scale of this labyrinth. The strangest work in the exhibition (and this is a large claim in this company) is *The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke* (1855–64) by Richard Dadd, painted when the schizophrenic artist was confined in Bedlam. While many fairy painters favor miniaturized nymphs from Greek mythology, Dadd's fairies are sturdy country folk, wizards, hobgoblins, and winged Elizabethan amazons. The genre's tendency to *horror vacui* reaches its zenith here. Every inch of the canvas is worked like a tapestry: tiny figures lurk in the outsized weeds, in a landscape dotted with hazelnut-boulders and starred with embossed daisies. The elaborate criss-cross of whiplash weeds over the horizon-less *sous bois* has the energy of a Jackson Pollock painting. Other interesting artists are featured. The self-taught Irishman John Anster Fitzgerald depicted dreams and drug-induced hallucinations. The goblins who dance around the sleeping figures are reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch, whose grotesque hybrid figures Fitzgerald may have known from prints. Richard Doyle specialized in quirky, comical fairies: *The Fairy Tree* poises more than 200 creatures on the branches of a tree. His brother Charles, a talented but unstable man who committed himself to an asylum, was the father of Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes and champion of spiritualism. The scholarly, fully illustrated catalogue includes discussion of related phenomena such as the "transformation scenes" of contemporary theater (\$29.95 in softcover). The exhibition continues at The Frick Collection through January 17, 1999. 1 East 70th Street, New York, NY 10021.

—Gail Leggio