

The Pre-Raphaelites: A Legacy of Beauty

by Gail Leggio

Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.

—William Morris, *The Beauty of Life* (1880)¹

The last two decades have witnessed a resurgence of scholarly enthusiasm for second-wave Pre-Raphaelitism, geared not so much to the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (roughly 1848–53) and more to the international cultural phenomenon of the later nineteenth century. A number of ambitious exhibitions have explored how Dante Gabriel Rossetti's highly imaginative strain of Pre-Raphaelitism, adopted and developed by the prodigiously talented Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris, gave rise to and merged with Aestheticism, Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau and Symbolism.² The Metropolitan Museum of Art contributed to the critical reassessment, co-organizing the important retrospective "Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer" (1998). The Met's recent exhibition "The Pre-Raphaelite Legacy: British Art and Design" was a more intimate affair, yet was both stimulating and beautiful. The Met has modest holdings in this area (in marked contrast to its ample collection of Impressionists), but selected twenty-six objects (supplemented by four loans from local private collections) that testify to the benefits of a savvy in-house exhibition. The range of objects—paintings, drawings, furniture, ceramics, stained glass, book designs—reminds us how multitalented these artists were and how passionately they believed in a deeply thought-out beauty, both as the highest priority in art-making and as a necessity in every aspect of daily life.

A couple of gorgeous works anchored the exhibition. *Lady Lilith* (1867) exemplifies Rossetti's woman-as-icon, an idea incarnate in a specific model. The model in this watercolor version of the subject (by Rossetti and his studio assistant Henry Treffry Dunn) is Fanny Cornforth. The sumptuous oil version—in the Delaware Art Museum, which has the largest concentration of Pre-Raphaelite works in the United States—has a different model, Alexa Wilding, but this smaller version has an appealing intimacy. In Rossetti's most powerful paintings, the models are women he knew well. These paintings are not portraits per se, but the individual personality gives reality to the archetype: his sister Christina as the Virgin Mary in *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (1849–53), Elizabeth Siddal in *Beata Beatrix* (1864), Jane Morris in *Proserpine* (1872). Cornforth, Rossetti's mistress and housekeeper, appears in a number of his neo-Venetian celebrations of physical beauty. The poem he wrote to accompany *Lady Lilith*—a prime example of exploring a theme through what

he called the “double work of art”—was retitled “Body’s Beauty” in his sonnet sequence, *The House of Life*.

The subject of the picture and the poem is Lilith, Adam’s first wife, but Rossetti avoids the moralizing of the Biblical narrative. (Interestingly, some feminists and counter-culture exegetes have adopted Lilith as a positive figure.) Rossetti’s Lilith “draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,” but she cannot be reduced to a simple femme fatale. Like Walter Pater’s Mona Lisa, clearly influenced by Rossetti, Lilith is a self-renewing ideal, a deity and an artist—“young while the world is old, . . . subtly of herself contemplative.” In the painting, she sits in a bower of flowers, calmly combing her hair and gazing at herself in a mirror. She reflects the artist’s soul, a concept Rossetti had articulated in his prose tale *Hand and Soul*, first printed in 1850 in the Pre-Raphaelite journal *The Germ*. The protagonist is a painter of the pre-Giotto era, Chiaro, who has used his art to win fame, please the wealthy and serve the Church. Yet



Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Henry Treffry Dunn, *Lady Lilith*, 1867
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK CITY

Lord Frederic Leighton,
Lachrymae, c. 1894–95
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF
ART, NEW YORK CITY

he remains unsatisfied until he has a vision of a woman: “It seemed that the first thoughts he had ever known were given him as at first from her eyes, and he knew her hair to be the golden veil through which he beheld his dreams.” She tells him she is “an image, Chiaro, of thine own soul within thee.”³ Jerome McGann has called *Hand and Soul* Rossetti’s “aesthetic manifesto.”⁴ This line of thought—that beauty must be deeply rooted in the psyche of the artist—would resonate through the best of late nineteenth-century art.

We can see that sort of beauty in another highlight of the Met exhibition, Lord Frederic Leighton’s *Lachrymae* (c. 1894–95). Leighton never identified himself as one of the Pre-Raphaelites, who were largely self-taught artists. Leighton followed a more conventional career path, training in Germany, Italy and France. His first great success, *Cimabue’s Celebrated Madonna Is Carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence*, which dominated the 1855 Royal Academy exhibition and was purchased by Queen Victoria, could be considered a medieval (or at least cusp-of-the-Renaissance) picture. But Leighton is best known for his classical subjects. Still, there is ample justification for including *Lachrymae* in “The Pre-Raphaelite Legacy.” As a young man in Frankfurt, Leighton studied with Edward von Steinle, one of the Nazarenes, a group that also influenced the original Pre-Raphaelites. More significantly, Leighton assimilated the aesthetic ambiance and rich Venetian color that Rossetti and his circle promulgated.



While Leighton often chose subjects from Greco-Roman myth, it would be wrong to characterize his style as neoclassical. As Allen Staley has astutely observed, the term is “inappropriate, both because it suggests connections with earlier Neoclassical art and because it implies a more thoroughgoing allegiance to classical antiquity than was possible for any later nineteenth-century artist.”⁵ The neoclassicist Jacques-Louis David favored linear austerity in the service of moralizing history lessons. Leighton, in contrast, uses classical elements to construct a coloristic meditation on a theme. The voluptuously somber blues, greens and blacks of *Lachrymae* are as much a “harmony” as a painting by James McNeill Whistler. Leighton painted *Lachrymae* (“tears”) near the end of his life, and the vertical painting, with its gilt, pilastered frame, is like a doorway into another realm. A Greek maiden has come to make libations at the tomb of her lover, but the artist seems to have no specific story in mind. She leans against a Doric column, pale against her dark robes. A funerary urn rests on the pedestal, and a red-figured cup lies on the marble floor; both look convincingly antique but are not rendered with archaeological precision. A synchronicity of vertical shapes—the column, the figure, the background trees—provides the stately scaffolding for the composition. But what illuminates the picture is the flushed pallor of the girl’s skin and a shimmer of gold—perhaps the setting sun—through the scrim of dark green foliage. Leighton participated in the fin-de-siècle cult of beauty in many ways: he commissioned drawings from Aubrey Beardsley, contributed to *The Yellow Book* and built a lavish palace of art, now the Leighton House Museum.⁶

As compact as this show was, it set off ideas like a string of firecrackers. That gives us a sense of the creative cross-currents of the period. Rossetti’s *The Maids of Elfin-Mere* (1855) is a compelling image; it fascinates, in the occult sense of the word. Three tall maidens—a triple portrait of Rossetti’s muse Elizabeth Siddal—loom over a young man seated on the floor. The maidens hold spindles, suggestive of the fates, but are comely and serene, rather than threatening. They are singing, and the beauty of their music is conveyed visually by the rhythmic grace of their gestures, their flowing hair and simple white robes. The young man has a troubled air. *The Maids of Elfin-Mere*, Rossetti’s first published illustration, accompanied a poem by his friend William Allingham.

A fairy ballad with a Keatsian quality, the poem tells the story of three mysterious maidens who sing their elfin songs every night, spied on by a parson’s lovesick son, who tries to hold them against their will. The third stanza describes his betrayal:

Hands that shook with love and fear
Dared put back the village clock—
Flew the spindle, turn’d the rock,
Flow’d the song with subtle rounding,
Til the false “eleven” was sounding.

Then these Maids of Elfin-Mere
Swiftly, softly, left the room,
Like three doves on snowy plume.
Years ago and years ago,
And the tall reeds sigh as the wind doth blow.

The maidens vanish, their music is lost, the parson's son pines and dies. The refrain sets the encounter in a legendary past, resonating with other tales of humans, romantically involved with magical beings, who break taboos—Cupid and Psyche, the medieval Melusine, Beauty and the Beast, and Keats's *Lamia*. Rossetti's design captures the feeling of the poem, but is an autonomous work of art. As a poet-painter, Rossetti preferred "allegorizing on one's own hook," as he put it, in translating an idea from one artform to another. Narrative pictures make up a good deal of Victorian art, yet Rossetti avoids literalism and anecdotal illustration, even when drawing on a rich storytelling tradition, notably on Dante and Arthurian sources.

Burne-Jones thought Rossetti's *The Maids of Elfin-Mere* "the most beautiful drawing for an illustration I have ever seen," and quickly became an acolyte. He wrote that Rossetti "taught me practically all I ever learned.... He gave me courage to commit myself to imagination without shame."⁷ You can see Rossetti's influence—a personal and highly conceptual version of medievalism, along with a remarkably strong design sense—in Burne-Jones's *Le Chant d'Amour* (1868–77). Three figures form a frieze in front of an exquisite landscape in glowing dusky light: a beautiful woman plays a slim antique organ, while Amor works the bellows and a knight listens enraptured. The scene evokes themes of love, music and the art of the past as an ideal dream world. Amor is no classical cupid but an angelic youth, like Dante's mysterious companion in *La Vita Nuova*, memorably translated by Rossetti. The landscape is Venetian, in the style of Giorgione, a favorite of John Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites and Pater, whose famous remark that art should "constantly aspire to the condition of music" came from his essay "The School of Giorgione." The knight's pose echoes that of the parson's son in Rossetti's *Maids of Elfin-Mere*, and the differences between the figures are instructive. The parson's son turns away from the singers, and his troubled expression emphasizes the dramatic tension of the situation and the uncanniness of the apparition. Burne-Jones's knight faces the musicians: he has become part of their slightly melancholy yet aesthetically perfected world.

Burne-Jones worked diligently to achieve his aesthetic ideal. The knight's supple black armor—which recurs, to terrific effect, in *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* (1880–84) and the Perseus Series (1880s)—demonstrates Burne-Jones's familiarity with the work of Hans Memling and Vittore Carpaccio, to name just two of his circle's favorite old masters. But the goal was never archaeological accuracy. Burne-Jones designed most of his studio props: armor,

costumes and instruments were then fabricated by talented friends. According to his wife, Georgie, he did this “expressly in order to lift them out of association with any historical time.”⁸ He translates elements from disparate sources into the harmonious fiction of the picture. The viewer is spared the shocks of incongruity that bedevil Alma-Tadema’s fantasies of ancient Rome, where Victorian young ladies look out-of-place amid the superbly realized marble palaces and villas.

Le Chant de l’Amour’s backstory reveals the evolution of Burne-Jones’s artistry and underlines why it is a particularly apt work for an exhibition emphasizing the pervasive Pre-Raphaelite influence on art and design. Originally conceived as decoration for a piano, *Le Chant d’Amour* went through a series of revisions. In the first composition, only the lady and Amor appeared. In an 1865 watercolor, the knight has joined them, and the landscape has been established. The watercolor Amor is noticeably different.⁹ Blindfolded, his features obscured, crowned with a rather fussy chaplet of flowers and swathed in heavy drapery, he looks awkward compared with the bare-limbed youth in the final painting, a graceful, Botticellian creature with eyes closed as if in a trance. The knight and the lady are less changed, but the artist has refined their gestures, and the level of painterly assurance has risen dramatically. Burne-Jones had no formal training; Rossetti was a genius at what he called “fundamental brainwork” but had no method to pass on. The younger artist honed his skills by fervently studying the old masters.

He also nurtured his talents as a decorative artist, a vocation he considered in no way inferior to painting. The Pre-Raphaelite legacy grew out of a remarkable confluence of talents. With the inspiration of Ruskin and the intimate friendship of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and his life-long friend William Morris abandoned their religious studies at Oxford to devote themselves to art and beauty. Morris, in an 1880 lecture, summed up the all-embracing nature of their enterprise: “Beauty, which is what is meant by art, using the word in its widest sense, is, I contend, no mere accident to human life, which people may take or leave as they choose, but a positive necessity of life.”¹⁰ The Pre-Raphaelites, long unhappy with mid-Victorian commercial wares, often designed household objects. Morris had the entrepreneurial skills and encyclopedic knowledge of historic ornament to organize a design revolution. The Met show presented a nice selection of the dazzlingly diverse array of works created under the auspices of what was familiarly known as the Firm (formally, at first, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. and, later, Morris & Co.). A cabinet (1861), designed by Philip Webb and adorned with Burne-Jones’s painted scene *The Backgammon Players*, is a fairly simple example. Burne-Jones and Morris collaborated, more significantly, in the revival of stained glass and tapestry.

The stained-glass panel *King David the Poet* (1863) was one of a set of four (along with representations of Homer, Dante and Chaucer) designed for the

breakfast room of a private house, Silsden. Burne-Jones was responsible for the rather quaint figure of the crowned David with his harp. Morris created the yellow botanical background checkerboard of daisies and forget-me-nots. Burne-Jones's charcoal drawing *Noah* (1874) was executed for a four-light window at Jesus College Chapel, Cambridge (the other patriarchs are Adam, Enoch and Abraham). *Noah* demonstrates the mature artist's sophistication in dealing with the formal demands of the stained-glass aesthetic: the dove with the olive branch and the miniature ark, held like a saint's attribute, economically identify the character; the elongated figure elegantly fills the tall narrow space, and the angular lines of the drapery echo the architecture of the Norman-style chapel.

Tapestry offered other opportunities, playing to the strengths of Morris, who understood textiles and the aesthetics of overall pattern, and Burne-Jones, who found the medium "beautifully half way between painting and ornament."¹¹ *Angeli Laudantes* (woven 1898) tends toward the decorative, unsurprisingly, since the figures were conceived for a stained-glass window at Salisbury Cathedral. Made at Morris's Merton Abbey Tapestry Works, the piece combines Burne-Jones's appealing angels—their variegated red wings and silvery blue drapery achieve a balance between flatness and three-dimensionality—with the millefleur background, by designer John Henry Dearle, who also created the border of oranges and orange blossoms. The angels are inhabitants of a timeless Eden, who play golden harps while—in a delicious detail—enjoying the feel of grass and flowers on their bare feet.

Tapestries with a horizontal orientation lend themselves to storytelling or, more exactly, Burne-Jones's brand of stately narrative pageant. *The Passing of Venus: Design for Tapestry* (1898) builds on the medieval *Romaunt de la Rose* and Petrarch's *Trionfi*, depicting Venus in her triumphal car drawn by doves and preceded by Amor, who is readying his bow. The deities are advancing on a group of anxious women, most clustered around the figure of the Greek poet Sappho. Burne-Jones was working on this gouache the day he died, but had been contemplating the idea for decades. Another version appears as a tapestry in the background of his spectacular painting *Laus Veneris* (1873–78), although in that work, the goddess's son is a cupid, rather than the elegant youth in *The Passing of Venus*. The later work has more drama.

Book design was another principal area of collaboration for Morris and Burne-Jones, a subject worthy of its own major exhibition, culminating in the Kelmscott Chaucer, which Burne-Jones compared to "a pocket cathedral."¹² In the Met show, a copy of Morris's *The Well at the World's End* (1896) represented the Kelmscott Press. Showing the range of late Victorian book design, Beardsley's border designs for Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1893) demonstrate the evolution toward Art Nouveau. The phrase "arts and crafts" has been somewhat tarnished by association with casual hobbyists, but the Victorians who embraced the concept took the revival of old techniques seriously. They were

historically knowledgeable, rigorous in craft and passionate about aesthetics.

Morris created the woolen wall hanging *Bird* (c. 1878) for the drawing room walls of his family home, Kelmscott House. Combining charm with sophisticated pattern design, *Bird* reflects his careful study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century woven silks, as well as his experiments with natural dyes.¹³ Morris studied Eastern textiles at the South Kensington Museum. He taught himself tapestry-weaving using an eighteenth-century French manual. By mastering the techniques, Morris and his associates found a fresh medium for creative expression. The Met exhibition also featured a glazed earthenware plate (c. 1890–97) and a luster charger (c. 1882–88) by another of Morris's artists, William De Morgan, in Hispano-Moresque style. De Morgan's gorgeous ceramics owe a good deal to the Persian Iznik style, and one of his first commissions was to install the tiles Leighton had picked up in his travels, for the painter's spectacular Arab Hall. The loose consortium around the Pre-Raphaelites, as defined by this show and reaching from Ruskin to the Aesthetic Movement, quarried the past, particularly the medieval past—a visual, literary, craft-oriented and geographically wide-ranging Middle Ages—the way Renaissance artists quarried antiquity.

This smart, small-scale exhibition brings us closer to these artists. The closeness to their ideas and practice was reflected in the preponderance of works on paper on display. Some of them widen the circle: *The Convalescent* (1872), a tender pastel by Ford Madox Brown, a fine painter, friend of Rossetti



Sir Edward Burne-Jones, *Le Chant d'Amour*, 1868–77
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Sir Edward Burne-Jones
Angeli Laudantes, 1898
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and designer for Morris; *The Evening Star* (1871), a watercolor of an exotic woman by Simeon Solomon. But most of the drawings underline the skill and rich imaginings of Rossetti and Burne-Jones.

Rossetti's *Rosa Triplex* (c. 1867), in red and black chalk, turns multiple studies of a blonde into a triple-goddess manifestation, while his *Head of a Lady* (1874), in colored chalk, beautifully balances highly finished drawing—masses of hair and a face of Keatsian, high-elfin mystery—with blank space. *Jane Morris: Study for "Mariana"* (1868) is more elaborate. The finished oil (1870) alludes to Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem about a woman waiting in vain for her lover (based on a subplot in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*). John Everett Millais painted a version of the subject, *Mariana* (1850–51), which relates more obviously to the poem's quasi-medieval trappings. Rossetti's marvelous drawing—in red, brown, off-white and black chalk—is essentially a portrait of Jane Morris, with her unusual beauty and melancholy air. Because Rossetti loved her but could not marry her, the idea of Mariana hovers around her like an atmosphere, but it does not define her. Rossetti uses the dusky red of the overall sheet to great effect, highlighting the crimped black mass of her hair and her pale face, throat and expressive hands.

Burne-Jones's drawings show great range. *The Entombment* (1879), a preparatory sketch for a bronze plaque, demonstrates the artist's strikingly expressive use of drapery. Within the narrow confines of the horizontal composition,

two figures crouch over the body of Christ, the lines of their robes telling the story—a feeling of being brought low by grief—with radical economy. Drapery becomes “the perfect vehicle for those linear rhythms that lay at the heart of his tendency to abstraction.”¹⁴ Burne-Jones’s *Study of a Female Head* (1890), in yellow, red and green pastel, with black crayon on red paper, favors color over line. The face that looms out of the sanguineous fog has the slightly sinister, trance-like aura of a full-blown *symboliste* heroine. In contrast, *Study for the Head of Gawain* (1893) has the timeless quality of an old master drawing. The straightforward study, in black crayon, was part of the groundwork for an elaborate tapestry, *The Knights of the Round Table Summoned to the Quest by a Strange Damsel* (woven 1898–99), but the drawing is an autonomous work of art. Burne-Jones finds drama in the pale, alert eyes, as well as aesthetic pleasure in the bristling hair under the barely outlined cap and the way the crayon picks up the tooth of the paper in the shadows. This rewarding show gave us an intimate glimpse into the lives of these marvelous artists. “The Pre-Raphaelite Legacy: British Art and Design” was on view May 20–October 26, 2014, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10028. metmuseum.org

NOTES

1. Cited, Diane Waggoner, ed., *“The Beauty of Life”: William Morris and the Art of Design* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), p. 9.
2. Exhibitions include “The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts: Symbolism in Britain” (Tate Britain, 1998); “The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement, 1860–1900” (Victoria and Albert Museum and the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, 2012) and “Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde” (Tate Britain, 2013).
3. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed., Jerome McGann (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 314.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 409.
5. Introduction, *Victorian High Renaissance* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1978), p. 16.
6. Beginning this fall, the Leighton House Museum, the artist’s magnificent London home, is presenting “A Victorian Obsession: The Pérez Simón Collection” (November 14, 2014–March 29, 2015).
7. Cited, Frances Spalding, *Magnificent Dreams: Burne-Jones and the Late Victorians* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), p. 177.
8. Cited, Stephen Wildman and John Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), p. 313.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 98–99 and 138–40, for reproductions of alternate versions.
10. Cited, Waggoner, p. 9.
11. Cited, Wildman and Christian, p. 271.
12. Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1973), p. 164.
13. See Waggoner, pp. 51–53.
14. Wildman and Christian, p. 313.