

A Critical Somersault

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It was rather sad—a little crowd of forlorn old survivals paying their last homage to the beauty and poetry now utterly scorned and rejected.”¹ Thus Graham Robertson, artist, author, master of stagecraft, and collector of the work of William Blake, described the private view of the exhibition that marked the centenary of Burne-Jones’s birth, held at the Tate Gallery, London, from June 14 to August 31, 1933. A few days later he went again “and found about two people there.” Even these, he noted, were not allowed to enjoy the show; the director, J. B. Manson, soon “marshalled them out of the room,” directing their attention to a recent painting by Walter Sickert with the words “Now here *is* something fine.”²

Robertson, of course, was prejudiced. A close friend of Burne-Jones for many years, he had watched with dismay as his reputation declined, eclipsed first by Impressionism (a development the artist himself had lived to see) and soon by more modern movements. It was going too far to say that the “beauty and poetry” of Burne-Jones were now “utterly scorned and rejected.” The Pre-Raphaelites and their followers have always had their admirers, and the fact that the exhibition was mounted at the Tate—indeed, that it took place at all—is significant. It included eighty-eight exhibits, well chosen by William Rothenstein, a survivor from the nineties who was by no means unsympathetic. He and the aged T. M. Rooke (1842–1942), Burne-Jones’s faithful studio assistant who was to live into his hundredth year, contributed to the catalogue, and a moving opening address was given by Stanley Baldwin, the artist’s nephew by marriage, who was currently between spells as Prime Minister. Contrary to Robertson’s belief, the show was well attended. It even inspired an editorial in the *Times*.

But if Robertson was being a little paranoid, his views were widely shared. In his foreword to the catalogue, Rothenstein admitted that there was “little sympathy to-day for the splendid achievement of the Pre-Raphaelite period.” Ernest Thomas, an assistant curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford and a moving spirit in the exhibition, had written that he thought “the public would go if only to scoff,” while Sydney Cockerell, the director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in

Cambridge, who had known Burne-Jones in the 1890s, when he was secretary to the Kelmscott Press, was “dubious” about holding the exhibition at all since “the tide of feeling against B-J is high.”³ Nor is it hard to understand these views when we read the patronizing reviews that the exhibition received. For the editorial writer in the *Times* it was essentially an exercise in nostalgia. “We can smile at the too prevalent weariness of all the eyelids, the droop of all the mouths . . . [but] we continue to love him . . . for what he meant to our youth.”⁴ Trying to place him in a wider context, the paper’s art critic saw him inhabiting a kind of escapist ghetto. Burne-Jones, he wrote, “is best . . . enjoyed if he be taken . . . as an artistic dreamer, and neither regarded as in the central tradition of painting, when he is bound to suffer, nor used as a stick to beat the moderns—in which case the stick is likely to break in his hand.” Like a rather dim child in a world of sophisticated adults, he could approach “the central tradition” only with assistance. “Though he was not by any means a great draughtsman, he could profit by the great Italians in formal qualities when he kept them in mind.”⁵

Time and again Burne-Jones was criticized for not being more of a realist, with either an ignorance of, or a willful disregard for, the number of questions this begged. The young Anthony Blunt, writing in the *Spectator* on “The Pre-Raphaelites and Life,” saw the exhibition as “an example [“a lamentable example” was surely the phrase on the tip of his pen] of what one Pre-Raphaelite could do in sheer escape from reality.”⁶ “Burne-Jones,” declared *Apollo* sententiously, “will not live . . . because he accepted an interpretation of ‘poetry’ that glorifies life at second hand. He dealt in the shadows not the substance of art—unlike Blake, or unlike, for that matter, St. John, Dante, or even Chaucer.” Deep water indeed, but mercifully relief is at hand; for of course it is all a matter of health. “Who knows but what a different diet would have made a different man of him?”⁷

The *Burlington Magazine* failed to note the exhibition at all, although Roger Fry, one of its most regular contributors, expressed a wish “to write on him. We can look at him now quite dispassionately, and I’ve always maintained he had some qualities.”⁸ I myself remember catching echoes of this conde-

scending attitude when I visited Jim Ede, a former assistant keeper at the Tate and a thoroughgoing modernist, in the 1960s. He was then living in Cambridge, where he was something of a guru to my generation of undergraduates, introducing us to Ben Nicholson, Christopher Wood, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, and other heroes. Filled with early enthusiasm for Burne-Jones, I ventured to mention the 1933 exhibition, with which I knew Jim had been involved. "Ah, yes," he said with a smile, "Burne-Jones. A third-rate artist, of course, but by hanging the pictures well we managed to make him look quite presentable."⁹

At least contact with the exhibition tended to induce an amused tolerance; if we move into a wider ambient, the tone becomes more shrill. Six years earlier, in 1927, Clive Bell, Fry's fellow articulator of Bloomsbury taste but far less intelligent, published his *Landmarks in Nineteenth-Century Painting*, in which he dismissed the Pre-Raphaelites as having "utter insignificance in the history of European culture."¹⁰ One wonders why, if they were so "insignificant," he accorded them full-chapter (i.e., landmark) treatment. Could it have been partly animosity, the temptation to denigrate an old *bête noire*? Certainly we are back with anxiety about the "central tradition," with a vision of Western art so obsessed with "formal qualities" that the whole Romantic-Symbolist dimension is not so much brushed aside as simply unseen. Bell does not, it is true, mention Burne-Jones by name, but by choosing *The Golden Stairs* (cat. no. 109) as his single chapter illustration, he implies that it epitomizes the sins of the entire movement.

Still, at least Bell had a thesis of sorts; others simply resorted to abuse. For C. H. Collins Baker, a former keeper of the National Gallery and currently Surveyor of the King's Pictures, Burne-Jones was "a weakling aesthete" who indulged "girlish dreams," and of whom "the best that will be said . . . eventually will be mild praise of his colour";¹¹ the observations occur in his book *British Painting*, published in 1933, the same year as the exhibition. But the prize for this type of myopia, intellectual laziness, or whatever one chooses to call it must go to R. H. Wilenski, who, in his *English Painting*, also of 1933, came up with the gem that *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* (cat. no. 112) was "the silliest possible still-life record of two models posing in fancy dress on a heap of Wardour Street bric-à-brac."¹² It is tempting to retort that this is the silliest possible comment ever made on a Burne-Jones.

Sixty-five years—Burne-Jones's lifetime a century on—have elapsed since the Tate exhibition, and we now commemorate his death in a comparable form. But the critical climate could hardly be more different. For another three decades Burne-Jones's reputation languished; some individual enthusiasm was occasionally kindled, but the public remained

largely apathetic. In 1940 Robin Ironside, like Ede an assistant keeper at the Tate but a generation younger, published a remarkable article entitled "Burne-Jones and Gustave Moreau" in Cyril Connolly's wartime magazine *Horizon*. In many ways the sophistication of this early reappraisal is still unsurpassed. Burne-Jones is firmly placed in an international context, and in direct opposition to earlier critics who had seen him as hopelessly outside the "central tradition" of European painting, the writer argues that "nothing could be more mistaken than to regard [his] art . . . as an exotic backwater." Ironside points out that all the agonizing about "formal qualities" is essentially irrelevant when assessing a picture by Burne-Jones; and he counters the regrets about his "poetic" inspiration and "escape from reality" by celebrating the artist's central role in a late-nineteenth-century culture, in which "painting and poetry drew together." Most perceptive and provocative of all, Ironside sees New English Art Club impressionism as the real agent of parochialism and reaction, suggesting that if it had not gained such a "fatal" ascendancy, "the art of Burne-Jones might well have brought forth a progressive symbolism which would have rendered the compelling influences of modern French painting less disconcerting."¹³ In other words, Burne-Jones, so long dismissed as an insignificant provincial, was in fact the true forerunner of mainstream modernism as it developed in France from Post-Impressionism onward, and might, other things being equal, have prepared British audiences for a phenomenon which, in the event, they were painfully slow, or even pathologically unable, to accept. No wonder Graham Robertson and other "forlorn old survivals" were delighted with this brilliant essay. But it was to have a sobering sequel. Two years later the Tate Gallery acquired Burne-Jones's late masterpiece *Love Leading the Pilgrim* (cat. no. 74). Ironside, who was still on the staff, must have been involved, but the price paid for the picture, a mere 90 guineas, is a graphic indication that his excitement was not widely shared.¹⁴

Meanwhile, in 1942 William Gaunt had published *The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy*, a highly entertaining account of the movement which was widely read and which inspired many to look again at the artists' work. But the real opportunity for reassessment came in 1948, when the centenary of the formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood brought a flurry of exhibitions and led the Phaidon Press to publish *Pre-Raphaelite Painters*, a picture book with another illuminating essay by Ironside and informative catalogue entries by the young John Gere. Burne-Jones, understandably, was not the focus of attention, but he did receive one remarkable tribute from what at first might seem an unexpected quarter. Wyndham Lewis, reviewing the exhibition at Whitechapel in the *Listener*, went out of his way to praise the gouache car-

toons for the Perseus series in the Southampton Art Gallery (cat. nos. 88–97). Confessing himself “entranced,” he urged his readers “to make the journey to Aldgate East if only to see the . . . series. I am sure that Burne-Jones ultimately will be valued more than any of these painters.” Lewis saw his hero in terms that had now become fashionable when discussing the Pre-Raphaelites, as a “dazzlingly successful pioneer of surrealism”;¹⁵ but that the leading exponent of Vorticism should have fallen for these austere images of rock and steel suggests another, and perhaps more telling, perspective.

Lewis’s enthusiasm may be fascinating to the art historian but it had no recorded impact. When Margaret Mackail, Burne-Jones’s daughter, died in 1953, bundles of her father’s drawings, of the kind that dealers and auction houses now fight over, flooded the market and could be bought for a song. Four years later The Grange, Fulham, Burne-Jones’s London home for thirty-one years, was demolished to make way for blocks of council flats, and in 1963 his great swan song, *The Sleep of Arthur in Avalon* (fig. 107), was sold abroad with scarcely a murmur of protest. To risk another undergraduate reminiscence, I well remember how, at about this time, my request to see some of the Fitzwilliam Museum’s magnificent collection of Burne-Jones drawings was greeted with amused surprise. It was soon clear why. Gathered by Sydney Cockerell during his directorship (1908–37), the drawings had hardly been touched since the time they were given, in all likelihood by Charles Fairfax Murray (1849–1919), Burne-Jones’s studio assistant who had become a well-known dealer, or those two great connoisseurs Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, who had bought extensively at the second Burne-Jones studio sale in 1919. Many emerged from dusty portfolios; others, equally dusty, were still in the heavy frames and handsome but acid-retentive mounts which the master himself had favored.

But times were changing. By the mid-1960s the Victorian revival, one of the most dramatic developments in postwar art history and taste, was well under way. Those indeed were heady days, when many were seeing the light, savoring the joys of initiation, and burning with the crusading zeal of converts. The Victorian Society had been launched in 1958, inspired by old campaigners like Nikolaus Pevsner and John Betjeman, buzzing with Young Turks eager to denounce such acts of vandalism as the demolition of the great Scott-Skidmore choir screen in Salisbury Cathedral, which took place in the name of “simplification,” less “distracting fussiness,” the following year.¹⁶ That there was an element of *épaté les bourgeois* in all this, a mischievous pleasure in shocking old fogies who believed that good taste had ended in 1837, is not to be denied. The Victoria and Albert Museum, which had mounted the important exhibition “Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Arts” as early as 1952 to mark its own

centenary, remained a center of enthusiastic expertise, of which the finest flower was the exhibition “Victorian Church Art,” held in 1971. Meanwhile dealers were beginning to specialize in Pre-Raphaelite drawings, Gothic Revival furniture, and Martin Brothers and William De Morgan pots, while Charles and Lavinia Handley-Read were establishing standards as scholars and collectors which have yet to be superseded.

It was against this background that all the leading Pre-Raphaelite painters were reassessed in major exhibitions: Ford Madox Brown (1821–1893) in 1964, John Everett Millais (1829–1896) in 1967, William Holman Hunt (1827–1910) in 1969, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) in 1973, and Burne-Jones in 1975. The Arts Council was responsible for grasping this final nettle, and the show, which later traveled to Birmingham and Southampton, opened in London at the Hayward Gallery, its exhibition space on the South Bank. Fears were expressed that the civilized and fastidious work of Burne-Jones would be killed by this exercise in sixties concrete brutality, but in the event it proved more than a match for its surroundings. It was symptomatic of his still equivocal standing that almost any picture the organizers wished to borrow was available, a luxury which no one assembling a Burne-Jones exhibition today can hope to enjoy. Size alone was a limiting factor, albeit a serious one since Burne-Jones is often at his best on a grand scale.

It was a further sign of the times that there were those on the Council’s Art Panel who still doubted the validity of the exercise, but their scruples were brusquely swept aside by their formidable chairman, Sir John Pope-Hennessy, who until recently had been director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, was currently director of the British Museum, and was in 1977 to accept the position of consultative chairman of the Department of European Paintings at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Recalling the Arts Council exhibition which took place during his chairmanship, Sir John wrote in his autobiography:

One of the most popular . . . was devoted to Burne-Jones. I, almost alone, had predicted its success. I had long believed Burne-Jones to be a much greater painter than Rossetti or Millais or Ford Madox Brown. . . . A cartoon for a stained-glass window by Burne-Jones of the Good Shepherd had been acquired not long before by the Victoria and Albert, and the figure, with its silky, over-shampooed hair, its sensual lips, and its glassy, introspective eyes, corresponded very closely with the models for male fashions shown in the window of Harrods in the Brompton Road. If this was what the young wanted to look like, they would, it seemed to me, be ripe for Burne-Jones. This proved to be the case.¹⁷

This account is not immune to criticism. The writer claims too exclusive a credit for recognizing Burne-Jones's virtues and predicting the success of the show. As for his talk of "over-shampooed hair" and "male fashions in Harrods," this is not quite so irrelevant as it might appear. Burne-Jones types *were* as familiar in the streets and magazines in the mid-1970s as they had been when Gilbert and Sullivan and George du Maurier satirized their prototypes a hundred years earlier. Nonetheless, to attribute a major artistic reassessment to the most superficial vagaries of fashion does seem a little inadequate. If one wanted to be pedantic, one could even point out that the Good Shepherd cartoon, which Sir John saw as so significant, is an extremely early work, by no means characteristic, and was unlikely, at that date at least, to have been known to more than a few specialists (cat. no. 4).

For all this, it is interesting that an art historian of Sir John's eminence rated Burne-Jones so highly. In fact, when I met him not long after the exhibition, he warmed to this very theme, telling me that he thought him not only the best of the Pre-Raphaelites but "the third greatest artist" that England had ever produced. Perhaps I should have known better than to ask him who were the first and second. He dismissed the question with an airy impatience, as if to say, "Don't be so silly," and to this day I can only assume that he meant Turner and Constable—or could it have been Turner and Gainsborough, or even Turner and Hogarth? However, despite its somewhat inconclusive character, I have never forgotten that conversation.

Sir John was also right when he said that the exhibition was a great success, and in hinting that it answered to the spirit of the time. It did not, however, represent a passing craze. Moods and aspirations may have changed dramatically during the last twenty-three years, but Burne-Jones's star has remained resolutely in the ascendant. Indeed few would deny that, far from being the "scorned and rejected" figure that Graham Robertson evoked in 1933, he is now one of the most

popular British artists, the subject of enormous interest not only in his native country but in Europe, America, Canada, and, by no means least, Japan. Since the 1970s we have witnessed every manifestation of esteem: monographs, biographies, learned articles, further exhibitions, pictures plucked from the obscurity of museum storerooms to be given pride of place on the walls, the popular culture to which Sir John Pope-Hennessy so quaintly refers, and of course those headline-grabbing salesroom prices that, rightly or wrongly, are regarded as a significant index of an artist's stature. It is to this ongoing process that the present exhibition gives, so to speak, a confirmatory blessing. For an artist to be accorded a centennial show not only in his birthplace but in two of the greatest museums of Europe and America must represent the ultimate apotheosis.

1. Robertson, *Letters*, p. 290.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 292. The Sickert was the full-length portrait of Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies as Isabella of France, painted and acquired by the Tate Gallery the previous year.
3. Lago 1975, p. 359.
4. *Times* (London), June 16, 1933, p. 15.
5. *Ibid.*, June 17, 1933, p. 10.
6. *Spectator*, July 28, 1933, p. 125.
7. *Apollo*, August 1933, pp. 120–21.
8. Denys Sutton, ed., *Letters of Roger Fry* (London, 1972), vol. 2, p. 679.
9. Ede gave a similar account of the matter in a letter to Mary Lago in 1973, observing that while he was "not particularly keen on Burne-Jones," he had been eager to make the exhibition "live as best I could" by his "arrangement" (Lago 1975, p. 361).
10. Clive Bell, *Landmarks in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (London, 1927), p. III.
11. C. H. Collins Baker, *British Painting* (London, 1933), p. 206.
12. R. H. Wilenski, *English Painting* (London, 1933), p. 225.
13. Ironside 1940, pp. 407, 419, 424.
14. The picture had been in the collection of Sir Jeremiah Colman, and appeared in his posthumous sale at Christie's, September 18, 1942, lot 61. It had fetched 5,500 guineas at Burne-Jones's studio sale at Christie's, July 16, 1898, lot 89.
15. *Listener*, April 22, 1948, p. 672.
16. See Victoria and Albert Museum 1971–72, p. 59, under no. F7.
17. John Pope-Hennessy, *Learning to Look* (London, 1991; paperback ed., 1992), p. 195.