

DRAWING ON THE PAST: VICTORIAN INNOVATION AND TRADITION IN LIFE, LEGEND, LANDSCAPE

VICTORIAN DRAWINGS AND WATERCOLOURS

17 February – 15 May 2011

THE BACKWARD GLANCE

In April 1861, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. officially opened for business, offering clients bespoke decorative objects made using techniques, palettes, materials and designs – whether for stained glass, furniture or textiles – that simultaneously looked forward and backward in history. Edward Burne-Jones, whom Morris had met when they were undergraduates at Oxford in the 1850s, was the firm's chief designer of stained glass. As such, he created a series of sumptuous and serene panels for their first major secular commission: the Green Dining Room of the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) designed jointly by Burne-Jones, Philip Webb and William Morris. Burne-Jones produced a study of a girl in classical drapery twisted and folded across the back and waist (Fig. 1) to accentuate both the figure's pose and to allude to the fashion of the day for 'Aesthetic dress', wherein luxurious fabrics were draped



Fig. 1

and crossed more loosely over the body than the confining corsets and bustles dictated by mainstream taste. This drawing, which may have been created for sale in its own right, eventually informed one of the many stained glass panels decorating the beautiful South Kensington dining room. The Green Dining Room project combined Burne-Jones' languid glass designs with painted decoration in greens, reds and ruddy oranges to create a harmonious, pleasurable public space for refreshment, removed from the Museum's vast collections whilst referencing them with its finely worked details (Fig. 2). The site's design was essentially a distillation of medieval and Elizabethan rooms in grand houses and as such was one of many decorative spaces that was directly and yet imaginatively informed by Britain's distant past.



Fig. 2

The drawings and watercolours displayed in the Courtauld Gallery's Life, Legend, Landscape exhibition are a miscellany, as pointed out by Elizabeth Prettejohn in the exhibition catalogue. The sheer range of subjects, artists, and techniques speaks as a whole to the diversity and importance of drawing and watercolour painting for artists in Britain in the nineteenth century. Themes within the collection emerge in

the placement of these intricate, delicate images across the gallery walls; one of the strongest of these is the tension between historicism and invention. Tracing the means by which a cluster of the artists represented in the Gallery's present show engaged with the past gives us a more refined and deeper understanding of their Victorian present and its varied attempts to articulate a cohesive cultural identity. As modernity challenged convention, the concept of 'revival' gained a revolutionary quality in nineteenth-century Britain, and this is evident in numerous albeit apparently disparate pictures in Life, Legend, Landscape. Three broad themes – ideal beauty, medievalism, and ornament – can be used as lenses to carefully and insightfully focus on these drawings' different yet consistently provocative revisions of historic precedent.

GENDER AND IDEAL BEAUTY

William Etty's depictions of nude women attracted a great deal of attention – not always positive – throughout his career. In 1843 he exhibited *Musidora: The Bather* 'At the Doubtful Breeze Alarmed' at the Royal Academy (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3

He made at least four versions of the picture, clearly captivated by the challenge of depicting a nude young woman at the anxious point of anticipating inevitable discovery. The subject was inspired

by James Thomson's 1730 poem, *The Seasons: Summer* in which Musidora is discovered by Damon while bathing in a river alone:

*But desperate youth,
How durst thou risk the
soul distracting view:...
With fancy blushing,
at the doubtful breeze
Alarmed, and startling like
the fearful fawn.*

Etty's most controversial representations of young, nubile British women made critics uneasy because these figures were painted without allegorical or classical gloss. Even the cited inspiration of an eighteenth-century poet whose work had also inspired Gainsborough could not fully account for what was a nude, vulnerable woman surprised in the middle of a very English secluded stream. The voyeuristic opportunities afforded by this image are related to Etty's earlier drawing of a female



Fig. 4

nude posing with a cast of the Venus de Medici (Fig. 4).

The celebrated Venus in the Uffizi in Florence was replicated as a plaster cast for student inspiration at the drawing school of the Royal Academy, where Etty spent many years refining his technique. In this image he fuses together drawing from the antique and drawing from life, suggesting that the dynamism and fleshy sensuality of the live model outstrips even the renowned classical beauty of the Medici Venus. Moreover, what is hidden in Etty's rendition of the plaster cast is revealed in the contrived pose of the nude model, whose crossed legs and outstretched arm allow for playful embrace of the plaster statue and the simultaneous exposure of pubic hair, an aspect of mature womanhood so typically overlooked in traditional representations of ideal female beauty. Of representing women, Etty claimed that he 'never painted with a lascivious motive'. Rather, 'finding God's most glorious work

to be WOMAN, that all human beauty had been concentrated in her, I resolved to dedicate myself to painting – not the Draper's or the Milliner's work – but God's most glorious work, more finely than ever had been done.'

Unlike Etty's project's reliance on gender specificity and the particular qualities of feminine beauty for its avant-garde impetus, Frederic Leighton's treatment of the nude form was radical precisely because of the artist's consistent merging and translating of male and female bodies as artworks progressed from sketches to finished oil paintings. Leighton's interest in androgyny has striking parallels with Burne-Jones and Simeon Solomon in the 1870s and 1880s; this is particularly evident in *Elijah in the Wilderness*, the angel for which is a composite of male and female models. Angelic androgyny is also striking in the series of works Leighton produced for the Dalziel Brothers' 1881 biblical illustrations, such as *Abraham and the Angel* (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5

apocalyptic scene, 'And the Sea gave up the Dead which were in it' date from c.1877-84 (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6

The earlier of the drawings shows a woman with her white neck craned upward and back arched, her arms bent sharply at the elbows in two related positions on a single sheet. A later drawing depicts a draped male figure in a similar position

to the female studies, shielding his eyes or stretching. Leighton, who consistently worked from the nude towards clothed figures in his finished work, was also comfortable with the transferring of female and male anatomical characteristics between studies in order to create either ambiguously composite or clearly gendered figures. This strategy both privileged and eclipsed the central importance of working from life and incorporating the nude figure into each stage of his art production. While Leighton's work shows a preoccupation with idealized classical forms, his practice also discloses a surprising flexibility regarding biological sex and pictorial composition.

ORNAMENT AND THE DECORATIVE

Charles Conder's small mixed media picture on silk, *Les Incroyables* of 1892, offers the viewer a theatrical, dreamlike image of spaces and figures swathed in rich fabrics of varying hues and textures (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7

The male 'Incroyables' (*Incredibles*) and female 'Merveilleuses' (literally, the Marvelous ones) refer to fashionable youths who resisted the *Reign of Terror's* violent implications for France by dressing flamboyantly to mark themselves out as politically critical of the Jacobin regime. Conder's image is, however, also suggestive of a decadent fin-de-siecle lushness and Symbolist ambiguity; this is especially located in the gestures and dress of the figure on the right, whose deep blue cloak and hat contrast vibrantly against the coolness of the sparsely leafy background, which leads the eye towards the shadowy Incroyables in their grand black hats at the very rear of the stage-like space. Figures in this work take on decorative qualities in their patterned costumes; they are all artifice and intrigue as Conder displays their bodies not to suggest an intelligible narrative, but to confound clarity and foreground the decorative for its own sake. In this sense, Conder could be usefully connected to one of the Victorian period's most significant draughtsmen, Aubrey Beardsley.



Fig. 8

In both *Servant Carrying Slippers* (1893) (Fig. 8) and *Pierrot with Mandolin* (1894), the vibrant tension of Beardsley's deftly handled ink lines create zones of concentrated ornament, contrasting satisfyingly with expanses of negative space. Whether a mild smugness or a practiced deference, the character of each figure is described with a graceful economy that drew on Japanese graphic art and distilled it into an unprecedented yet attractive set of artistic parameters for an eager British public. His first major commission was for the publisher J. M. Dent's illustrated edition of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* in 1893, for which he produced detailed imagery organized into tense zones of ornament, such as 'The Lady of the Lake', conveying the crushing together of elements in a densely wooded and evocatively mysterious setting; and 'How King Arthur saw the Questing Beast and thereof had great marvel', where the artist has divided the picture surface with a series of jagged overlapping marks expressive of anxiety and a dreamlike, visionary state (Fig. 9).



Beardsley's interaction with medievalism shared commonalities with illustrated projects such as William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones' *Kelmscott Chaucer*, which was also produced in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

MEDIEVALISM AND THE GOTHIC REVIVAL

The Victorian taste for the intricate narratives and representational opportunities of medievalism had gripped the nation from the 1840s through Alfred Tennyson, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood,



Fig. 10

and a network of artists including Daniel Maclise. Maclise's careful rendering of minutiae in his interpretation of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* dates from c.1860 (Fig. 10). Its crisp lines, particularly in the strands of hair, musculature of the steed, and stiffly folded drapery of Enid's garb, allude to Northern Renaissance masters such as Albrecht Durer and Martin Schoengauer. The image takes up an event described by Tennyson, the Victorian poet laureate, as a suspicious and uncertain yet intimate encounter between the lovers Enid and Geraint:

...Geraint upon the horse
Mounted, and reached a hand,
and on his foot
She set her own and climbed;
he turn'd his face
And kissed her climbing...

Maclise's care in depicting the ringlets of chainmail, Enid's braided and knotted hair, and the forlorn slipper cast to the far left of the picture, invite the eye to linger upon details of Geraint and Enid's romance. Perhaps less noticeable but just as crucial in the production of atmosphere and setting is Maclise's attention to the carved Romanesque details surrounding the open doorway. Grotesques, interlaced patterns and hunting scenes decorate the portal in a manner corresponding to what John Ruskin referred to in *The Stones of Venice* as sacrificial, bringing to mind the painstaking time and energy freely given by the stone carver in elevating mere building to the status of architecture. Maclise's drawing was completed around the same time that Thomas Deane and Benjamin Woodward worked with Ruskin on final details of the opulently carved monument to the Gothic Revival and the triumph of Victorian scientific taxonomy in Oxford, the Natural History Museum. Effulgent natural elements featured on the capitals of this modern and controversial Victorian structure, many of which were inspired by Ruskin's studies of architectural details in Venice in the 1840s and 50s. The three-volume *Stones of Venice*, published between 1851 and 1853, include numerous plates of Ruskin's own drawings.



Fig. 11

The illustrations, such as *Leafage of the Venetian Capitals* (Fig. 11), show the art critic and theorist's obsessive interest

in detail and careful observation. This plate represented the development of acanthus ornament from Greek use through to Roman, Gothic, and finally the Renaissance. 'The Nature of Gothic', which was profoundly influential for numerous scholars and enthusiasts of the Middle Ages in the nineteenth century, was first published within *Stones* as a plea for modern art and architecture to return to what Ruskin believed was a utopian period of labour and dignity. Ruskin's point in images like the representations of acanthus ornamentation from the Doge's Palace in Venice was not only to show variety of artistic interpretation of this single plant, but also to use architectural examples to demonstrate his view on the primacy of Gothic ornament (marked as number 12 on the drawing) for its vitality, sculptural craft, and tense pairing of restraint and dynamism.

With the notion of craft, we must return finally to the careful folds of classical drapery surrounding the body of Burne-Jones' finely drawn figure for the Green Dining Room at South Kensington. William Morris and Burne-Jones both believed firmly in the interdependence of painting, drawing, architecture and the decorative arts. Indeed, Morris was one of the foremost champions of art as integral to the very concept of civilization at every level of human dignity, relationship and evolution. With this in mind alongside these brief analyses of Victorian images at once declaring their historic sources of inspiration and their aspiration for newness and freshness, it becomes increasingly clear that in the nineteenth century, drawing and watercolour painting – these small-scale instances of mark-making on paper – offered liberating outlets for interpreting the world. Each of these works compels the viewer to look closely and take pleasure in detail, execution, observation, and the touch of pencil, pen or brush upon a flat, yielding surface. In such a diverse exhibition of works, there are numerous paths that one can take through the display in order to discern particular themes, values or approaches common to a cluster of artists or a period within the nineteenth century's numerous and overlapping artistic sustained moments. The beauty of Life, Legend, Landscape is in its miscellany, and what it can teach us about the Victorian creative impulse and the desire to sketch, to study, and to express in nineteenth-century Britain.

IMAGE CREDITS

Fig. 1. Edward Burne-Jones *Study of a draped female figure for 'The Garland Weavers'* Probably 1866; Fig. 2. Philip Webb *Design for Wall and Cornice in Green Dining Room*, 1866, V&A; Fig. 3. William Etty *Musidora: The Bather 'At the Doubtful Breeze Alarmed'*, 1843, Tate; Fig. 4. William Etty *Female nude with a cast of the 'Venus de' Medici'*, c.1835-37; Fig. 5. Frederic Leighton *Abraham and the Angel*, 1881, Tate; Fig. 6. Frederic Leighton *Two studies of a female nude for 'And the Sea gave up the Dead which were in it'*, c.1877-84; Fig. 7. Charles Conder *Les Incroyables*, 1892; Fig. 8. Aubrey Beardsley *Servant carrying slippers*, 1893; Fig. 9. Aubrey Beardsley *How King Arthur saw the Questing Beast and thereof had great marvel'*, 1893, V&A; Fig. 10. Daniel Maclise *Geraint and Enid: Illustration to Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King'*, c.1860; Fig. 11. John Ruskin *Leafage of the Venetian Capitals*, c.1849-52.

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WITH THANKS:

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