

# Edward Burne-Jones on Nature



# Edward Burne-Jones on Nature:

## *Physical and Metaphysical Realms*

By

Liana De Girolami Cheney

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Edward Burne-Jones on Nature: Physical and Metaphysical Realms

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Photo credit: ©British Library Board, London, England.

**Figure 56.** Edward Burne-Jones, *Studies of Hearts*, 1870s, drawings from Edward Burne-Jones's *Secret Book of Designs* 1885, p. 537.

British Museum Library, London, England.

Photo credit: ©British Library Board, London, England.

**Figure 57.** Edward Burne-Jones, *Sketch for The Council Chamber*, 1888, black chalk on buff paper.

Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

Photo credit: ©Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

F. V. du Pont Acquisition Fund and Gift of Paul R. Miles, 199, 75.5.

**Figure 58.** Edward Burne-Jones, *Study of The Garden Court* for The Large Briar Rose, 1870–75, drawing.

Tate Britain, London, England.

Photo credit: ©Tate Britain, London, England.

**Figure 59.** Phidias, *Reclining Deity*, 447 BCE, marble sculpture from the East Pediment, Parthenon.

British Museum, London, England (flipped for comparison).

Photo credit: ©Liana De Girolami Cheney.

**Figure 60.** *Sleeping Ariadne or Cleopatra*, 2nd century BCE, marble.

Roman copy. Vatican Museum, Vatican City, Italy.

Photo credit: ©en.wikipedia.org.

**Figure 61.** Francesco Colonna, *Poliphilo Dreaming*, woodcut from the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Venice 1499).

Photo credit: ©en.wikipedia.org.

**Figure 62.** Etruscan sarcophagus, *Larthia Sietani*, 150 BCE, terracotta.

British Museum, London, England.

Photo credit: ©commons.wikimedia.org.

**Figure 63.** Edward Burne-Jones, *Burne-Jones at His Easel (Rural Idyll)*, 1885, drawing, pen and ink on paper.

British Museum, London, England.

Photo credit: ©Bridgemanimages.com.

## FOREWORD

Dr. Liana de Girolami Cheney has had a long and illustrious career as an art historian, author, and organizer of seminars and sessions at national and international conferences and symposia. As a long-time Professor of Art History at University of Massachusetts Lowell, she taught many undergraduate and graduate students the meaning of art and its history. As president of the Association for Textual Scholarship in Art History (ATSAH), she organized and spoke on many occasions at College Art Association meetings and many other national and international venues. Her generosity to younger art historians is legendary, and her encouragement of colleagues has been exemplary. Her deep knowledge of Giorgio Vasari and Edward Burne-Jones have made her an authority in the field.

Here, in her second book on Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98) following her *Edward Burne-Jones' Mythical Paintings*, she explores his ties to picturing the natural world and the world of fantasy. She uncovers Burne-Jones's sources, from classical to contemporary, in art and literature, from the Elgin Marbles to contemporaneous artists and poets such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Algernon Swinburne.

It is a fascinating journey, tracing preliminary drawings as well as finished painting series at a number of locations. Her treatment of such themes as *The Planets*, *The Hours*, and the *Briar Rose* legend, among others, is a work of brilliant and informed scholarship. Her deep knowledge of classical, medieval, renaissance, mannerist, and baroque periods, as well as the nineteenth century, creates a rich tapestry of preliminary drawings, paintings, and realized series on themes ranging from fairy tales, literature, and history.

Cheney's detailed treatment of Burne-Jones's working methods adds another focus to the study, from his drawings from nature following Ruskin's dictates, to his use of nature to embellish the meaning of his paintings. She shows how the artist combined natural sources with fantastic concepts to present poetic and richly embellished examples of the beautiful, a key concept in his work.

We look forward to the publication of this book that adds so much to our understanding of Burne-Jones and Dr. Cheney's continuing career as teacher, mentor and author.

Alicia Craig Faxon, PhD  
Professor of Art History, Simmons College, emerita  
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Liana De Girolami Cheney  
Ocala, Florida 2020

## INTRODUCTION

I need nothing but my hands and my brain to fashion myself a world to live in that nothing can disturb. In my own land I am king of it.<sup>1</sup>

—Edward Burne-Jones

The topic for this volume developed over the past ten years of research focusing on Edward Burne-Jones's (1833–98) interests in art and science. This investigation was assisted through international and national academic presentations in Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States at universities, museums, and art galleries—University of Bologna, Manchester College of Oxford University, The Sophia Center of the University of Wales at Trinity Saint David in Bath, the University of Reading, the Manchester Art Gallery, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, the College Art Association of America in New York City, Los Angeles, and Toronto, Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena, American Museum of National History in New York City, Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts, and South-East College Art Association in Atlanta, Chattanooga, and Sarasota. Further studies led to publication of several articles on the subject.

The fascination with Burne-Jones's emblematic, mythological, and planetary art evolved from my studies on Italian Mannerist art and theory and Renaissance Neoplatonism. My early studies of Botticelli's mythological and Neoplatonic images led me to seek an understanding of some of the stylistic and iconographic origins of Mannerist paintings. Focusing on Giorgio Vasari's emblematic and iconological program in his houses—Arezzo and Florence—guided me toward assimilating Mannerist conceits and artistic quests about beauty, nature, and spirituality. Botticelli, Vasari, and Burne-Jones shared a similar desire in their artistic careers: to create beauty in art.

In his wife's *Memorials* and the *Germ*, a contemporary journal of the time, Burne-Jones postulates many of his aesthetic ideals, his theory of art, and in particular his concepts on “beauty,” astronomy, and nature. In part, Burne-Jones's theory of art reveals the artistic aims of Mannerism and Pre-Raphaelitism. As noted in my previous book, *Edward Burne-Jones' Mythical Paintings*, his aesthetic theory emerged from his educational and

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<sup>1</sup> Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1904), 2:337. Hereafter GBJ, *Memorials*.

visual training at Exeter College of Oxford University in the classics, artistic studies with Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82), literary pursuits with his mentor William Morris (1834–96), and European traveling experiences, particularly his several visits to Italy. In these latter sojourns, he visited many cities, including Genoa, Padua, Verona, Venice, Perugia, Ravenna, Rome, Siena, Pisa, and Florence. Here he became familiar at close hand with the art of Giotto, Mantegna, Crivelli, Giorgione, Titian, Tintoretto, Raphael, Michelangelo, and especially Botticelli. His constant visits in London to the British Museum and National Gallery made him always aware of these Italian masters.

Burne-Jones's earlier fascination with ancient astronomical manuscripts and Renaissance books of illuminations, consulted in British and Italian libraries, made him cognizant of the celestial patterns projected in the past and of contemporary British discoveries with regard to the mysteries of the universe. The courtly illuminated manuscripts provided him with not only an interest in medieval and Renaissance courtly love but also visual knowledge of herbal decorations and myths about flowers and plants. These pursuits inspired him to further consult emblematic and mythographic books such as Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (*The Dream of Poliphilo*, 1499; he owned a copy that was gifted to him by Morris<sup>2</sup>), Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *Le roman de la rose* (*The Romance of the Rose*, c. 1230–c. 1270/80); Cristoforo de Predis's *De Sphaera* (*On The Sphere*, 1470); Otto van Veen or Otto Vaenius's *Amorum emblemata* (*Emblems of Love*, 1615–20); and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Romaunt of the Rose* (1387). British writings about art and art criticism by Walter Pater and John Ruskin (1819–1900) further sharpened Burne-Jones's knowledge about artistic creativity and his observation of the natural world. The poetry of his fellow Pre-Raphaelite artists (William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti) as well as his British friends and poets (Christina Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson) augmented this cultural vision about the beauty of natural and celestial forms.

In this book, my quest is limited: to elucidate only some aspects about Burne-Jones's concepts on Nature and to promote more thought about his personal view of physical and metaphysical phenomena. I restrict myself here to interpreting Burne-Jones's visualizations of Nature in only some selected drawings, watercolors, and paintings, not the plethora of his

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<sup>2</sup> See Mark Samuel-Lasner, "Note on Burne-Jones's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*," *Pre-Raphaelite Review* 1 (1978): 110; and Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1973), 81–83.

paintings, drawings, and studies that captured the many aspects of nature.<sup>3</sup> For this volume, I mean by *Nature* (uppercase) the cosmos encompassing terrestrial and celestial components, but consider *nature* (lowercase) as a physical phenomenon of only certain terrestrial aspects of Earth, including landscapes, flora, fauna, forests, plains, and woodlands. By *artificial nature*, I mean a magical phenomenon of nature, as conceits of a marvelous, spiritual, painted, or imagined world of nature. The metaphysical phenomenon of *Nature*, here, is associated with two aspects: celestial and planetary realms, and abstract notions of goodness, beauty, love; as well as time and space.

The volume consists of four chapters, dealing in turn with Natural and Artificial Landscapes; Celestial and Planetary Realms; Stellar and Terrestrial Time; and Fantasy Cycles or Magical Nature.<sup>4</sup> The contents relate to different types of conceptions of nature: a traditional observation in *plein air* of a landscape replicated in a drawing or a watercolor. This design, then, is later transferred or copied with accuracy into the background of painting. Or this accurate landscape design may be given an interpretative twist: transformed into an imaginary conception of nature for the creation of a forest in a fairy tale cycle.

Chapter One, “Artificial and Natural Phenomena: Scenery, Flora, and Fauna” comments on how Burne-Jones, like his fellow Pre-Raphaelite painters, was fascinated with nature, natural history, and landscape gardening—that is, the aesthetic appreciation for natural flora arranged to appear unstructured or wild. Burne-Jones, as a member and promoter of the British Aesthetic and Arts and Crafts Movements, considered the garden style a rejection of industrial England and promoted the attempt to preserve and restore the landscape to its pre-industrial state, including Persian types of gardens and the formality of Italian, French, and Dutch landscapes. The English Landscape Movement developed out of studies of natural history by Sir Francis Bacon and Robert Cecil, who advocated inclusion of botanical discoveries from the New World in garden designs. In addition, in the nineteenth century, the movement grew to include shrubs and blooming perennials sweeping in a painterly fashion with winding gravel pathways to rolling hills and water, ideally planned against a backdrop of forest with groupings of trees in the background.

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<sup>3</sup> See John Holmes, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), for a comprehensive study on the study of nature and science in British art.

<sup>4</sup> The chapters may be read non-sequentially, thus full citations of works cited are provided at first mention in each chapter.

Burne-Jones's quest for botanical accuracy is visualized, for example, in *Green Summer*. There are two versions, both now in private collections in England: one of 1864 in watercolors; the second an oil painting of 1868. Another painting showing Burne-Jones's love of nature is *Love Among the Ruins*, and again Burne-Jones made one version in watercolor in 1870 and another in oil in 1894. In 1870, this watercolor was employed for the illustration of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, an illuminated manuscript done in watercolor, bodycolor, and gold leaf. The calligraphy and ornamentation were designed by William Morris, and the image was composed by Edward Burne-Jones. In the paintings *Love and the Pilgrim* (1896–97) and *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1874), Burne-Jones combined the natural or physical representation of recent scientific discoveries with metaphysical associations of philosophical and poetical conceits about love. For example, the female protagonist in *L'Amant* (1865) and *Love Among the Ruins* (1873) was the beautiful Greek sculptress (also Burne-Jones's kindred spirit, model, and lover) Maria Terpsithea Cassavetti Zambaco (1843–1914).

For Burne-Jones, briar roses became a complex symbol with idiosyncratic meanings. The rose is a symbol of balance and love. The beautiful color of the flower contrasts with the foliage's unique scent, a poetical allusion to Spring as well as love. But the thorny branches of a rose are an ancient symbol for pain and pleasure. Burne-Jones played with this motif in his paintings in order to capture the perplexity of love experienced in his life for his muse Maria. However, he was also asserting the artistic superiority of painting over photography, at that time a new growing technique in his artistic cycle.

Chapter Two, "Celestial and Planetary Realms," deals with Burne-Jones's scientific interest in astronomy, as noted in his memorials and accounts. He executed cartoon drawings for a cycle on nine planets in 1879 for the artisans of the Morris Firm to transform into stained-glass panels. The commission was for the decoration of *Woodlands*, the Victorian mansion of Baron Angus Holden (1833–1912), a mayor of Bradford. Presently, seven of the cartoons—The Moon (*Luna*), Earth (*Terra*), Sol (Apollo), Venus, Jupiter, Saturn, and Evening Star—are in the Torre Abbey Museum in Torquay, UK, while the cartoon for Mars is part of the collection of drawings at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, UK, and the cartoon for Morning Star (*Stella Matutina*) is located at Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford, UK.<sup>5</sup> Special focus is given to the Moon (*Luna*), as a planetary

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<sup>5</sup> I express my gratitude to Dr. Joseph Harvey, Custodian, Torre Abbey Historic House and Galleries, for his email communications and generous assistance on