

‘Opaque with a vengeance’: Burne-Jones’s later watercolours, 1880–98

Between 1880 and his death in 1898, Edward Burne-Jones produced some of his largest and most innovative watercolours. Study of these works alongside the unpublished ledgers of his colourman, Charles Roberson, and other contemporary sources, reveals the artist’s radical combination of traditional practices with new developments in materials.

by FIONA MANN

THE WATERCOLOURS EDWARD BURNE-JONES painted during the last twenty years of his life are among his most technically challenging, yet the highly experimental methods and materials he employed in their creation have been little studied. These large and imposing decorative pieces, strongly coloured, highly textured and sparkling with gold, even seemed ‘strange to the time in which he first appeared’ and were a world away from the modest traditions of English watercolour drawing.¹ Study of these works in combination with contemporary records and the ledgers of Burne-Jones’s colourman, Charles Roberson, of Long Acre, London, from whom he bought large quantities of artists’ materials over a forty-year period, reveal much about the way he combined traditional techniques with the latest inventions of industrial Britain. The Roberson ledgers contain the personal accounts of over 9,000 individual customers between 1820 and 1944.²

Although Burne-Jones became an associate of the Society of Painters in Watercolours in 1864, he never felt welcome there. His unconventional watercolours, such as *The merciful knight* (1863; Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery), immediately ‘struck a discordant note’, with their ‘poetic archaism allied to decorative art’.³ *The Spectator* considered them ‘pieces of decoration’, stating that ‘it is at least doubtful whether they belong to the domain of fine art proper’.⁴ It was precisely these rigid and restrictive boundaries between media that Burne-Jones sought to challenge. Resigning from the society in 1870, his overriding desire was now for what he called ‘big things and vast spaces’.⁵

1. Detail of Fig.7.

Burne-Jones’s growing financial security, assured by wealthy industrial patrons such as Frederick Leyland and William Graham,⁶ and a steady stream of commissions for stained-glass designs from Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., the burgeoning decorative arts firm founded by his friend William Morris in 1861, enabled Burne-Jones, with his wife, Georgiana, and their two children to move to a large house, The Grange, in Fulham in 1867. There he had a studio and began to engage a succession of studio assistants. Between 1872 and 1891 he also had access to spacious studios in nearby Campden Hill Road and in 1882 he constructed a large garden studio in the grounds of the Grange, initially for storage, but it was soon transformed into a working space by enlarging the skylight.⁷ Fellow artist W. Graham Robertson considered it a ‘huge barrack of a place, like a schoolroom or a gymnasium, containing none of the usual properties and elegancies of a “show” studio’.⁸ It was equipped with a ‘tall narrow slit in the outer wall through which finished pictures were passed’, as the studio doorways were not high enough.⁹ In 1880 Burne-Jones bought a small house in Rottingdean, to where he escaped at regular intervals from the pressures of London life, working in an east-facing studio using pencil, charcoal or watercolour, since the light was not good enough for oil.¹⁰ Roberson was called on to transport paintings and equipment between the different studios and to prime, mount, line, strain, re-strain, reduce or enlarge works. As commissions for large paintings accumulated, however, Burne-Jones often felt overwhelmed, with many taking years to complete. Stretchers and canvases in varying

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nineteenth-century artists.

1 J. Comyns Carr: ‘Edward Burne-Jones’, in exh. cat. *Exhibition of the Works of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Bart.*, London (The New Gallery) 1898, p.23.

2 Roberson Archive, Hamilton Kerr Institute, Cambridge (hereafter RA, HKI).

3 J.L. Roget: *History of the ‘Old Water-Colour Society*, London 1891, II, p.116.

4 ‘Art: The Water-Colour Society’: *The Spectator* (29th April 1865), p.468.

5 G. Burne-Jones: *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, London 1904, II, 1868–98, p.13.

6 Frederick Leyland (1831–92) was a British shipowner with residences in Liverpool and London. William Graham (1817–85) was a wine merchant, cotton manufacturer, port shipper and Member of Parliament.

7 ‘At first no painting was done in it, the light not being arranged for that: in course of time, however, the skylight

was enlarged and Edward was glad to make use of it’, see Burne-Jones, *op. cit.* (note 5), II, p.124.

8 W.G. Robertson: *Time Was: The Reminiscences of W. Graham Robertson*, London 1933, p.76.

9 A. Thirkell: *Three Houses*, London 1931, p.22. A similar window for large canvases was built into G.F. Watts’s studio at his new home in Compton, Surrey, in 1891, where it can still be seen.

10 *Ibid.*, p.121.





2. Preliminary design for the Graham Piano, by Edward Burne-Jones. 1878–79. Metalpoint (probably silverpoint), 10.2 by 17.8 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

stages of completion were stacked against the walls, and oils, stained-glass designs and watercolours were worked on simultaneously, using similar techniques. This system did, however, allow him to perfect a technique or motif in one painting or medium before transferring it to another. As he said in 1896, while completing a replica of his oil *Aurora* (1896; Queensland Art Gallery), 'that's the good of having two pictures, one to wash the other [to wear], as Mr Morris says of having two shirts'.¹¹

Although he loved the immediacy and spontaneity of watercolour painting compared with the lengthy preparation required for oils, towards the end of his life Burne-Jones would comment that he had never liked the texture of paper and preferred painting on canvas.¹² This may explain his attempts to disguise the surface of his watercolours with different textures and his experiments with painting in watercolour on canvas during the 1870s.¹³ Burne-Jones had an extensive knowledge of the many different papers available, both traditional and new, from the coarse packaging paper that David Cox had favoured¹⁴ to the pure and 'practically imperishable' handmade paper developed

at Hayle Mill, Maidstone, in 1895 by the artist John William North, using one hundred per cent linen rag and without the use of damaging bleaching agents.¹⁵

From around 1879 Burne-Jones experimented with silverpoint, executing designs for the decoration of a piano for William Graham, completed in 1879–80, in a 'metallic book' manufactured (with its 'accompanying pencil') by T.J. & J. Smith (Fig.2).¹⁶ He also exhibited a number of studies in silverpoint at the Winter Exhibition of the Society of Painters in Water Colours in 1891,¹⁷ and in June 1892 he ordered a book of metalpoint papers and two silverpoints from Roberson.¹⁸ With such artists as William Dyce, Frederic Leighton and William Holman Hunt, Burne-Jones was thus part of a British revival of metalpoint, which was inspired by Renaissance examples in the British Museum, London, and by the publication of an English translation of Cennino Cennini's *Libro dell'Arte* in 1844.¹⁹

11 M. Lago, ed.: *Burne-Jones Talking: His Conversations 1895–1898 Preserved by his Studio Assistant Thomas Rooke*, London 1982, p.98, entry for 20th April 1896.

12 See T.M. Rooke, diaries, typescript, National Art Library, London: II, 9th January 1896, p.161; and III, 10th March 1897, p.355.

13 See F. Mann: 'A "born rebel": Edward Burne-Jones and watercolour painting 1857–80', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 156 (2014), pp.657–64.

14 Lago, *op. cit.* (note 11), p.131, entry for 20th January 1897.

15 Rooke, *op. cit.* (note 12), II, p.161,

notes a discussion in January 1896 between Rooke and Burne-Jones on John William North's new paper. For North's papermaking venture, see H. Alexander: 'John William North, A.R.A., R.W.S.', *The Old Water-Colour Society's Club 1927–1928* 5 (1928), p.44. For bleaching, see T. Fairbanks Harris and S. Wilcox: exh. cat. *Papermaking and the Art of Watercolor in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Paul Sandby and the Whatman Paper Mill*, New Haven (Yale Center for British Art) 2006, pp.67–68.

16 Victoria and Albert Museum, London (hereafter VAM), inv. no.E.7-1955. T.J. & J. Smith, of 26

Charterhouse Square, London, EC1, established in 1839, were specialist manufacturers of fine diaries, almanacs, quill pens and metallic papers, see 'T.J. and J. Smith', *Grace's Guide*, https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/T._J._and_J._Smith, accessed 24th January 2018.

17 The study in the VAM sketchbook was not included in the 1891 winter exhibition. The review of the exhibition in the *Athenaeum* 3345 (5th December 1891), p.767, describes: 'eighteen studies in colours, silver-point and chalk [...] mostly made by Mr. E. Burne Jones for the famous picture of "The Star of Bethlehem", which is now in the public

gallery at Birmingham [...] These studies indicate the [...] rare technical skill of the author [...] Especially noticeable are a *Study of King Gaspar* (no.124) [...] and, above all, *Study of a Head in Silver-Point* (380)'.

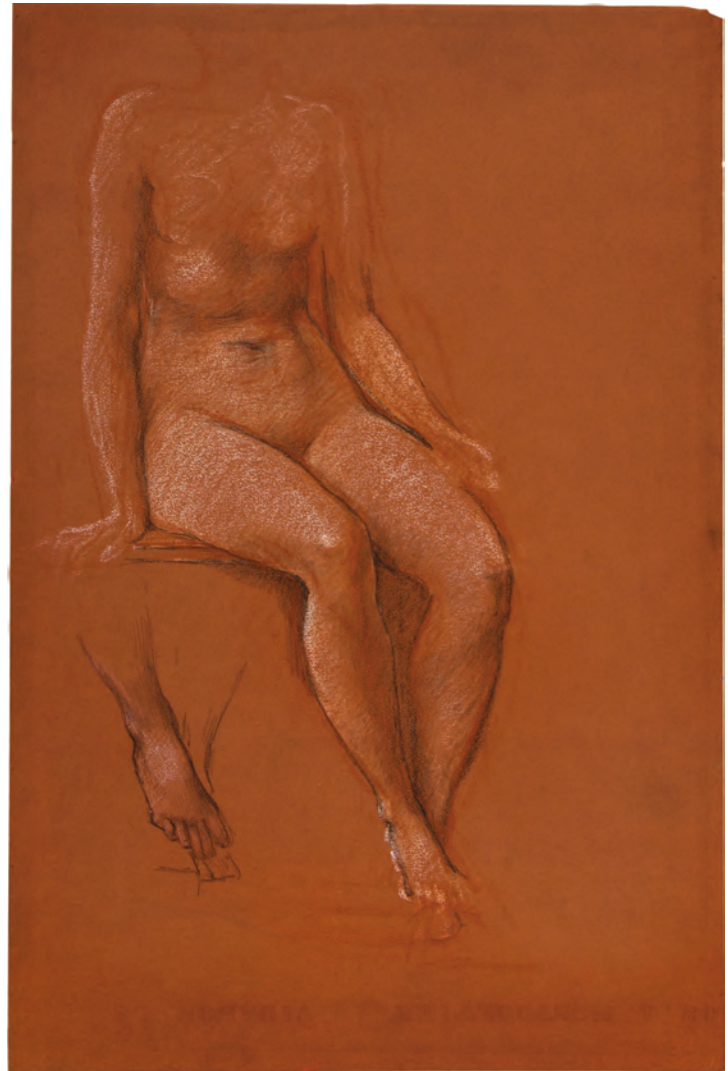
18 RA, HKI MS 250-1993, p.281. A Roberson & Co. Ltd. catalogue, *Artists Colours Materials*, London, c.1901, lists silverpoint materials for sale, including 'Linen Bound Sketch Books, 32 leaves of Silver Point Paper, 7 x 5 in' priced at 2s. 6d, p.122.

19 S. Sell and H. Chapman, *et al.*: exh. cat. *Drawing in Silver and Gold: Leonardo to Jasper Johns*, Washington

Imported papers commonly used for etching and printmaking were also of great interest to Burne-Jones and he began to purchase them in increasing volumes during the 1880s and 1890s. There were a small number of orders for sheets of India paper and of Dutch Van Gelder, but it was 'Japan papers' which he seemed to favour particularly, purchasing 240 sheets in December 1887 and five 'quires' (sets of twenty-four sheets) of 'thick Japan paper' in December 1890.²⁰ Contemporaries with whose work he would have been familiar, including James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Lawrence Alma-Tadema and William Holman Hunt, generally seem to have used Japan paper in a conventional way, following Rembrandt's example, as a support for etchings or drypoint, although Whistler also painted in watercolour on it. Burne-Jones preferred to use this distinctive surface for sketches in charcoal or chalk. Three such studies in the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, date from c.1889 to c.1891 and the Roberson ledgers for 1897 list '5 Drawings on Japanese vellum paper mounted on panel boards over cartoon'.²¹ Unlike Whistler, who consciously sought out eighteenth-century and earlier papers, it seems likely that the Japan paper Burne-Jones purchased from Roberson was one of the so-called 'imitation Japan' or '*simili Japon*' papers created by European manufacturers such as the Dutch Van Gelder company in the early nineteenth century.²² Burne-Jones also bought small sheets of French papers for sketching, particularly those with a distinctive pink or terracotta tint, from manufacturers such as Canson and Montgolfier, which were clearly watermarked; there is an example in the Fogg Museum, Harvard (Fig.3).²³ This paper was described as being 'hard-sized' and 'suitable for bodycolour or chalk drawing'.²⁴

Burne-Jones's finished watercolour paintings from this period were commonly over five feet in height, requiring complex and expensive supports to be prepared by Roberson, consisting of either brown cartoon paper or several sheets of Whatman's high-quality wove Antiquarian (31 by 53 inches) or Double Elephant paper (26 ½ by 40 inches) joined together, laid over canvas and attached to a large wooden stretcher, similar to supports for oil paintings. Roberson later named a 'Brown Burne-Jones tint' in their list of cartoon papers, after the fifty-four-inch wide support that the artist regularly bought from them.

In preparing his detailed designs for paintings, decorative projects and book illustrations, Burne-Jones created a vast number of sketches and drawings in a range of media from silverpoint to charcoal, pen and ink, chalk and pencil. During the 1880s Roberson received orders from him for large numbers of mechanical pencils and boxes of leads in different grades of hardness, ranging from intensely black BBB to the very hard 6H, which was advertised as being suitable for architectural drawing only (Fig.4). Burne-Jones specified pencils and leads made by the German manufacturer A.W. Faber, which were introduced in 1873,²⁵ insisting that for him pencils were used not as a sketching tool but 'as a finishing instrument', allowing himself no india-rubbing.²⁶ Where



3. *Study for King Cophetua and the beggar maid*, by Edward Burne-Jones. 1883. Black, red and white chalk on pink wove paper, 45.9 by 30.3 cm. (Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum; © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Cambridge MA).

some colour was required, from the 1880s onwards he often turned to another recently developed product, Creta Laevis ('smooth chalk' in Latin), a type of coloured crayon or pencil made from pigment mixed with clay, extruded, dried and then impregnated with wax (Fig.5). Developed in the United Kingdom by Wolff & Sons in 1837 and available in a wide range of colours, these pencils were said to be both blendable

(National Gallery of Art) and London (British Museum) 2015, pp.190–95.

20 RA, HKI MS 250-1993, pp.260 and 281.

21 RA, HKI MS 313-1993, p.259, listed on 8th March 1897 alongside an order for '250 labels on Yellow Gum^d Paper [...] for Paris Exhibition', so probably destined for there.

22 For Whistler's use of early papers, see M. Smith: 'Hunting for old paper with James McNeill Whistler', *The Book and Paper Group ANNUAL* 16 (1997), available at <http://cool.conservation-us.org/coolaic/sg/bpg/annual/v16/bp16-13.html>, accessed 5th April 2018.

23 Examples of sketches on watermarked pink Canson and Montgolfier paper include *Drawing of Margaret for King Cophetua* (Sale, Sotheby's, London, 14th December 2017, lot 2); *Drawing of Angela Thirkell for Arthur in Avalon* (1890s; private collection); *Study for King Cophetua* (1883; Harvard Art Museums, Fogg Museum) is described as having 'watermark at bottom of paper: [...] Montgolfier Vidalon', see M. Wadsworth, H. Willard, E. Evans, A. Mongan and M. Gilman: exh. cat. *Paintings and Drawings of the Pre-Raphaelites and their Circle*, Cambridge MA (Fogg

Museum of Art, Harvard University), 1946, p.41. Typically the full watermark read 'Vidalon-les-Annonay Anc^{no} Manuf^e CANSON & MONTGOLFIER'. Burne-Jones did not purchase Canson paper from Roberson at this time, it may have come from Lechertier Barbe, a colourman used by Ford Madox Brown, or from Cornelissen & Son of 22 Great Queen Street, in London, who by January 1895, were also advertising their speciality in 'French Canvases and Brushes', see advertisements, *Art Journal* (January 1895). Burne-Jones also ordered the new high-quality laid Ingres paper

developed by Canson et Montgolfier/Arches by 1864 for the artist Ingres.

24 Roberson, *op. cit.* (note 18), p.63.

25 H. Petroski: *The Pencil: A History of Design and Circumstance*, London 1990, p.229.

26 On 18th January 1896 Burne-Jones complained to his assistant Thomas Rooke that, 'Sometimes knots will come into it, and I never can get them out, I mean little black specks', see Lago, *op. cit.* (note 11), p.84. At a time when Cumberland graphite was becoming scarce, European pencils were produced from inferior grades of graphite that had been pulverised and baked with clay.

and permanent, and appear to have been used to great effect in Burne-Jones's large-scale cartoons for the *Last Judgment* (1874–76; Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery), which he coloured in 1880. He also created rapid textural effects through the unconventional combination of chalk or pastel with watercolour in large works such as *King Cophetua and the beggar maid* (Figs.1 and 7). Rouget's Fixative, a new French device for spraying fixative onto pencil, chalk and crayon drawings, was ordered by Burne-Jones almost as soon as it was advertised in Britain in 1870 and he continued to buy huge quantities of it from Roberson throughout his working life.

Burne-Jones's ability to depict the beautiful and varying surfaces of the materials he painted, from foliage, fabrics, embroideries, carvings and jewels to metals and reflected water, was aided by the arrival during the second half of the nineteenth century of new types of metal-ferruled artists' brushes, which were designed to produce more textured brushstrokes in watercolour and were ideal for working on large areas. During the 1880s and 1890s, Burne-Jones regularly bought flat and round watercolour sables, mostly red sable, and extra fine hog brushes, a few with handles up to 3½ feet long for his large-scale works. Thomas Matthews Rooke, Burne-Jones's studio assistant from 1869 to 1898, confirmed his master's application of watercolour with 'hog-hair bristles made for oils'.²⁷ Burne-Jones's preference for red sables reflects his textured painting technique, as red sable bristles were stiffer and firmer at the point than those of the more elastic brown sable and were thus more suitable for painting in bodycolour. They were also considered by one contemporary watercolour manual to be 'more useful in dragging or making separated touches than in laying on washes',²⁸ for which the softer brown sables were recommended. Other new brushes he ordered during these later years include 'foliage brushes', which had short flat tips with a square edge, riggers with a long, pointed tip for painting fine lines and lettering, fitch

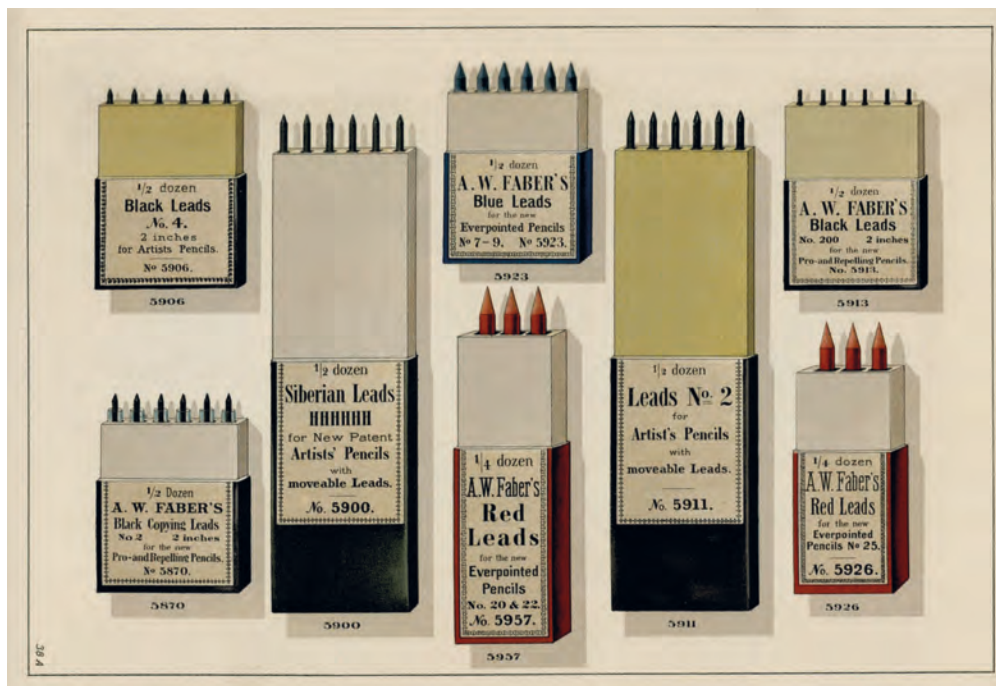
brushes and hog brushes with domed ends, as well as, more unusually, traditional Japanese calligraphy brushes with bamboo handles (Fig.6).

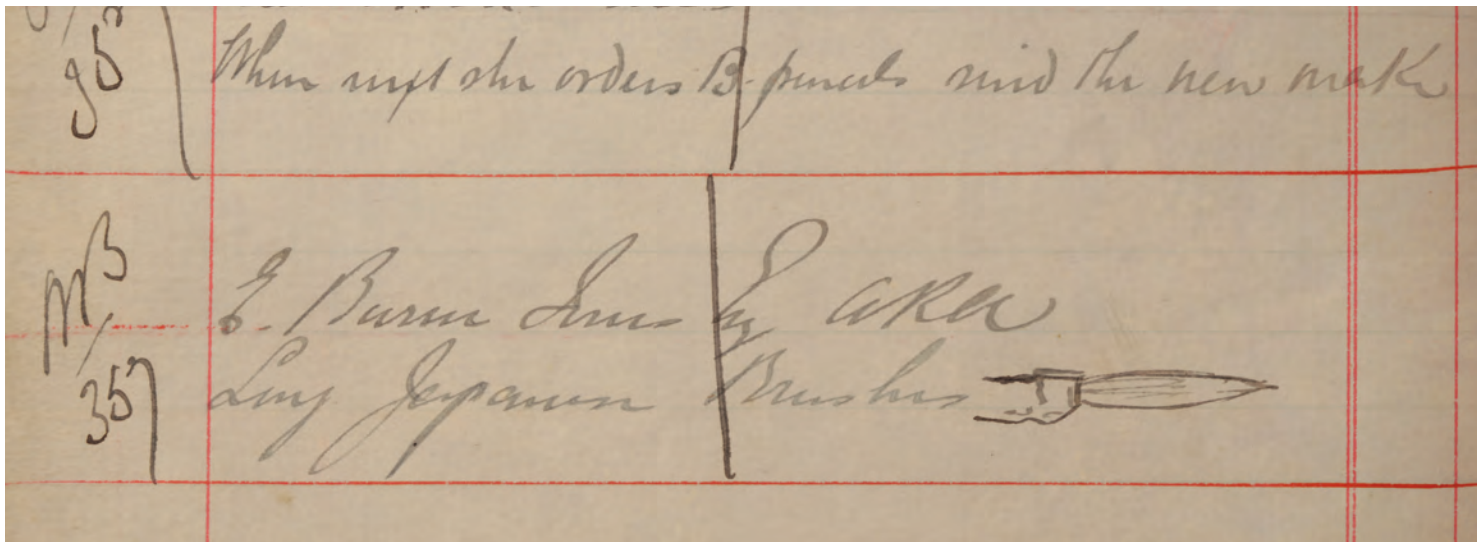
Burne-Jones equipped his studios with a range of modern devices. A papier-mâché human lay figure was kept in a small room adjoining his studio at the Grange, to aid with the drawing and painting of drapery.²⁹ Full-size papier-mâché figures were only introduced by Roberson by the 1880s, to complement the earlier stuffed and wooden versions.³⁰ In 1883 he paid more than £8 for a walnut horse and rider lay figure, which came back to Roberson six years later to be repaired.³¹ Horses feature in many of Burne-Jones's later designs, especially in those for his tapestries of the Holy Grail. In 1890 Burne-Jones asked Charles Fairfax Murray to find him the latest French invention for his garden studio: 'Where could I find a very cheap cheval glass – moveable on castors? I want one for the garden studio – should like a good glass – Should like it to cost 1/9d'.³² It would be useful, he said, for 'reversing the aspect of my pictures and seeing where they are most amiss'.³³ In 1896 a Claude glass – a black convex glass device popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that was used to simplify the tone and to reflect landscape in miniature – was acquired from Roberson. It may have been used to help Burne-Jones with the composition of the enormous oil painting *Arthur in Avalon* (1881–98; Museo de Arte de Ponce, Puerto Rico) from within the confines of the studio. As his paintings increased in size, he acquired some of the latest designs of large winding easels, standing and rack easels, which had been introduced to accommodate works up to six feet high, and tall ladders to reach the higher parts of his monumental compositions. Rather poignantly, six months before his death, he ordered from Roberson a new 'Telescopic Tower Ladder stained Walnut specially made to order'.³⁴

Pigments were bought in a range of forms during this period, with pans and tubes preferred for most, although expensive metallic pigments such as gold, silver and bronze were generally bought as hard cakes or powders. These were incorporated into many watercolours completed during the 1880s, including *Cupid's hunting fields* (Fig.8) and *King Cophetua and the beggar maid*. In 1895 and 1896 orders for 'pure gold' were accompanied by requests for several cakes of 'red gold', 'green gold' and 'red copper', all expensively priced at five shillings each.³⁵ These were also undoubtedly

4. Pencil leads, from A.W. Faber Price-List, London 1897. (William Jenkins Architecture and Art Library, University of Houston).

5. Wax crayons or Faber's Creta Laevis coloured pencil collection in box, from A.W. Faber Price-List, London 1897. (William Jenkins Architecture and Art Library, University of Houston).





6. Record of Burne-Jones's order for long Japanese brushes, 30th November 1889, ledger of Charles Roberson. (Roberson Archive, Order Book, Long Acre Branch, Hamilton Kerr Institute, MS 422-1993, p.343, by permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge; © Hamilton Kerr Institute; photograph Chris Titmus).

used for some of the studies in metallic pigments on coloured grounds that he produced in quantity at this time. Two very new metallic products, aluminium and platinum,³⁶ were increasingly used by Burne-Jones in later years, with the platinum, which was as expensive as gold, being supplied from a source other than Roberson. He bought dozens of tubes of the revolutionary new pigment Chinese white, first introduced by Winsor & Newton in 1834. This was an opaque, stable and permanent white, which would not blacken over time, like lead white, and did not change in tone as it dried, like permanent white. While its use was advocated by Ruskin, Chinese white was the subject of intense critical debate during this period, especially among traditionalists, who insisted on transparent washes and highlights formed by leaving areas of the paper surface untouched. The *Art Journal* branded Burne-Jones's watercolours 'opaque with a vengeance [...] in substance and surface [they] might almost be mistaken for oil'.³⁷ Burne-Jones secretly enjoyed the public confusion over his medium,³⁸ but the fact that his watercolours were indeed frequently mistaken for oils could cause problems, for example, his watercolour *Love among the ruins* (1870–73; private collection), described by the *Art Journal* as illustrating 'the beginning, progress and end of much that is, and has been, done in

recent water-colour art',³⁹ was almost destroyed when painted over in egg white by a French dealer who believed it to be an oil.

In 1875 Burne-Jones was commissioned by the rising young politician Arthur Balfour to produce a series of pictures to decorate the music room of Balfour's house in Carlton Gardens, London. Burne-Jones produced an ambitious and technically challenging schema of ten subjects from the Perseus legend, inspired by Morris's epic poem *The Earthly Paradise*, six to be in oil and four to be executed in 'gilt and silvered gesso',⁴⁰ carved in relief and painted, the whole to be surrounded by a border of 'ornamental raised plaster' of Morris's acanthus design.⁴¹ Burne-Jones's vision was inspired by Mantegna's series of nine large tempera panels, the *Triumph of Caesar* (1484–92?), which had been installed by Charles I in Hampton Court Palace in 1629 as a continuous frieze. A copy of the *Triumph* is known to have decorated Burne-Jones's drawing-room at the Grange, and in the 1870s he requested images of Mantegna's works from Ruskin's friend Charles Eliot Norton.⁴² In order to create a suitable setting for the Perseus paintings, Burne-Jones advised Balfour to redecorate his music room with stained-glass windows, light oak panelling, and soft candle lighting.⁴³ He proposed an estimate of £4,000 for the planned six Perseus oil paintings,⁴⁴ for which he would prepare six full-sized watercolour cartoons, all of them around four by five feet. In the end he produced a total of twelve watercolour panels and seven oils but only one low gesso relief on an oak panel, *Perseus and the Graiae* (1877; National Museum of Wales, Cardiff). After being poorly received at the Grosvenor Gallery exhibition in London in 1878, where the *Magazine of Art* described the

27 T.M. Rooke: 'Notes on Burne-Jones's medium', in W.S. Taylor, ed.: exh. cat. *Burne-Jones*, Sheffield (Mappin Art Gallery) 1971, p.8.

28 G. Barnard: *The Theory and Practice of Landscape Painting in Water-Colours*, 2nd ed., London 1858, p.70.

29 Thirkell, *op. cit.* (note 9), p.20.

30 S. Woodcock: 'The life of a London lay figure: Charles Roberson, a case study', in J. Munro: exh. cat. *Silent Partners: Artist and Mannequin from Function to Fetish*, Cambridge (Fitzwilliam Museum) and Paris (Musée Bourdelle) 2014, p.63. Burne-Jones had hired a lay figure from Roberson in 1864.

31 RA, HKI MS 250-1993, pp.258 (1883); and 278 (1889).

32 Letter from Edward Burne-Jones

to Charles Fairfax Murray, 27th June 1890 [in pencil], Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Burne-Jones papers, XXVI.26.

33 Letter from Edward Burne-Jones to May Gaskell, after 1892, quoted in J. Dimbleby: *A Profound Secret: May Gaskell, Her Daughter Amy, and Edward Burne-Jones*, London 2005, p.124.

34 RA, HKI MS 313-1993, p.259. It cost £18 10s.

35 *Ibid.*, p.258.

36 R.J. Gettens and G.L. Stout: *Painting Materials: A Short Encyclopaedia*, New York 1966, p.92: 'Although aluminium powder was probably available as early as the middle XIX century, it was not until a decade or so after 1886 [...] that the

powder became readily available'. Platinum was produced commercially in the United Kingdom only from c.1800, see D. McDonald and L. Hunt: *A History of Platinum and its Allied Metals*, London 1982, p.159.

37 'Society of painters in water-colours: sixty-sixth exhibition', *Art Journal* 32 (1st June 1870), p.173.

38 See, for example, Robertson, *op. cit.* (note 8), p.79; and Burne-Jones, *op. cit.* (note 5), pp.61–62.

39 'Exhibition of water-colour drawings at the Dudley Gallery', *Art Journal* 35 (1st March 1873), p.87.

40 P. Burne-Jones: 'Notes on some unfinished works of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Bt., by his son' *Magazine of Art* 23 (1900), pp.159–67, esp. p.162.

41 Burne-Jones, *op. cit.* (note 5), II, p.60.

42 Robertson *op. cit.* (note 8), p.74; for his requests to Norton, see, for example, letter from Edward Burne-Jones to Charles Eliot Norton, dated '1870', Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge MA, MS Am 1088 (754), [https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:431432063\\$1i](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:431432063$1i), accessed 7th January 2019.

43 P. Fitzgerald: *Edward Burne-Jones*, Stroud 2003, pp.158–59. See also letter from Edward Burne-Jones to Arthur Balfour, 27th March 1875, Balfour Papers, BM Add MSS 498 38; and C. Conrad and A. Zettel: exh. cat. *Edward Burne-Jones: Das Irdische Paradies*, Stuttgart (Staatsgalerie) and Bern (Kunstmuseum) 2009–10, pp.103–04.

44 Fitzgerald, *op. cit.* (note 43), p.159.



7. Full-scale cartoon of *King Cophetua and the beggar maid*, by Edward Burne-Jones. c.1883. Bodycolour, watercolour, coloured chalks and pastel with gold medium on paper, 290 by 132 cm. (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; photograph © Birmingham Museums Trust; Bridgeman Images).

8. *Cupid's hunting fields*, by Edward Burne-Jones. 1885. Gouache with watercolour and gold and silver paints on ivory wove paper, laid down on linen canvas, 99.5 by 76.9 cm. (Art Institute of Chicago).

combination of metal with 'linear art' as 'a barbarism which shocks the eyes',⁴⁵ plans to use this unconventional decorative process for further panels were abandoned. Only half of the watercolour cartoons were fully completed and ten remained unsold at the artist's death.

This mammoth project would occupy Burne-Jones and his studio assistants on and off for over twenty years, the cost of the complex paper supports alone (panelled boards covered with linen, cartoon and Antiquarian, double elephant or brown paper) amounting to over £18.⁴⁶ While Burne-Jones's orders for the supports for eight of the twelve watercolour cartoons can be found in the Roberson ledgers between 1876 and 1884, records for the remaining four are missing, although recently a Roberson label and stamp has been discovered on the back of one of them, *Death of Medusa II* (c.1882; Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart).

Fastidious attention to detail was paid in the preparation for the series. Burne-Jones's design for Perseus's helmet was translated into a three-dimensional model in metal by W.A.S. Benson,⁴⁷ who was just starting out in business as a designer of furniture and metalwork.⁴⁸ Benson also helped Burne-Jones to create his own distinctive types of armour, 'imaginary, fantastic forms, based on the leafage of plants or the scales of reptiles', combining 'chain mail and plate mail in such a manner as might drive the connoisseur to distraction'.⁴⁹ Numerous compositional, figure and costume studies were made, followed by an elaborate full-sized cartoon on brown paper, using what Burne-Jones's son, Philip, described as 'pastel or water-colour, often in a mixture of the two, a medium which he found convenient for rapidly giving a general idea of the effect which he wished to produce'.⁵⁰ The cartoon was then traced by an assistant and transferred to an identically-sized canvas ready for the oil painting.

Burne-Jones's working methods are particularly evident in the Perseus watercolour cartoons: the squaring up of the paper in readiness for transferring the design to canvas, visible in two unfinished panels;⁵¹ the initial composition using nude figures, which appear clothed in the final version; the unconventional combination of pastel or chalk with watercolour; and the use of aluminium or platinum for armour and of gold for details such as the sky shimmering through the trees in the final cartoon, *The baleful head* (Fig.9). The mesmerising effect of the precious metals flickering in the candlelight of Balfour's music room can be imagined. Burne-Jones's fascination with reflective surfaces is evident too in his careful portrayal of the mirroring of his figures' feet in pools of silvery water – see, for example, *Perseus and the sea-nymphs* (1877; Southampton City Art Gallery) – a motif Burne-Jones also incorporated into the *Days of Creation* watercolours (1870–76; Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum) painted during the same period. It is possible that, like other artists, Burne-Jones found inspiration in the extraordinary depiction of mirrored surfaces in Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait, acquired by the National Gallery, London, in 1843.⁵²

45 'The Grosvenor Gallery – concluding notice', *Magazine of Art* 1 (1878), p.111.

46 RA, HKI MS.248-1993 (15th Jan 1876 and 10th May 1877), p.178; HKI MS.250-1993 (19th May 1884), p.259.

47 Possibly made after 1877, as Benson first met Burne-Jones in

1877 and did not set up his first small workshop, near Burne-Jones's home in North End Road, Fulham, until 1880. See A. Denton, 'W.A.S. Benson: a biography', in I. Hamerton, ed.: *W.A.S. Benson: Arts and Crafts Luminary and Pioneer of Modern Design*, Woodbridge 2005, pp.48–51.

48 *Ibid.*, pp.51–53. In 1878 Benson helped Burne-Jones design a piano.

49 A. Vallance: 'The decorative art of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Bart.', *Art Annual* (special issue of *Art Journal*), London 1900, p.28.

50 Burne-Jones, *op. cit.* (note 40), pp.159–60.

51 *Death of Medusa II* (c.1882; Southampton City Art Gallery) and *Atlas turned to stone* (c.1878; Southampton City Art Gallery).

52 A. Smith *et al.*: exh. cat. *Reflections: Van Eyck and the Pre-Raphaelites*, London (National Gallery) 2017.



Other commissions from this period included a large painting *King Cophetua and the beggar maid* (1884; Tate Britain, London) for Lord Wharmcliffe, initially agreed at £1,000, although another devoted patron, William Graham, managed later to negotiate on the artist's behalf a much higher price, including copyright.⁵³ Graham himself purchased the full-scale watercolour cartoon for £600. An order in the Roberson ledgers dated September 1880 for a strainer covered in linen and brown paper that matches the dimensions of the cartoon and a comment in Burne-Jones's work record for 1880 noting 'designed Cophetua' suggest an earlier date for commencing the painting than the c.1883 ascribed to it.⁵⁴ Before commencing the large cartoon, numerous careful studies in pencil and chalk were made and models were made in wax or other material 'from which he studied the lights and shades on the throne'.⁵⁵ Burne-Jones also designed a crown and shield and had full-scale models made in copper by Benson, which he adapted to produce what he called 'a reflection of a reflection of something purely imaginary'.⁵⁶ Around this time Burne-Jones had become friendly with Lawrence Alma-Tadema, whose skill at painting light on metal he greatly admired and sought to emulate.⁵⁷ The design for the beggar-maid's dress, which was not meant to be historically accurate, underwent various transformations.⁵⁸ In 1883 and 1884 Burne-Jones made several purchases: of aluminium and bronze powder and gold of different colours; of Genuine ultramarine, Chinese white, wax Creta Laevis pencils and sets of Rouget's fixing apparatus.⁵⁹ The final nine-foot high cartoon combined a number of different media: watercolour, bodycolour, coloured chalks, pastel and gold pigment, to create a highly textured surface, which recalls the decorative goldwork used in early altarpieces or medieval manuscripts. The maid gazes out from a vast golden throne, which dominates the composition in a manner reminiscent of Byzantine mosaics or of Mantegna's *Madonna della Vittoria* (1496; Musée du Louvre, Paris).⁶⁰ The finished oil (Tate) was exhibited to great acclaim at the 1884 Grosvenor Gallery exhibition, where it was compared to 'the work of the great masters of a bye-gone age'.⁶¹

In 1887 the Corporation of Birmingham, the city of Burne-Jones's birth, approached him to paint a major work for their new municipal Museum and Art Gallery for a proposed fee of £2,000.⁶² The subject he chose was a religious one – the Star of Bethlehem – and the medium, perhaps surprisingly, was watercolour (Fig.10). He based the composition on his recent design for a tapestry for Exeter College, Oxford, the *Adoration of the Magi*, for which his small watercolour modello was photographically enlarged to create full-size cartoons. Ambitiously, Burne-Jones planned his Birmingham watercolour to be of similar dimensions to the tapestry, over twelve feet wide by eight feet high. This was a revolutionary idea and technically challenging. Even today it is considered the largest watercolour in existence. A complex support was prepared for the artist, consisting of ten sheets of Whatman's

9. *The baleful head*, by Edward Burne-Jones. 1885. Watercolour and bodycolour on paper laid on linen canvas, 153.7 by 129 cm. (Southampton City Art Gallery; Bridgeman Images).

Antiquarian – the largest size high-quality wove handmade paper available – seamlessly joined together and mounted on a very large stretcher.⁶³ During 1890 and the beginning of 1891 Burne-Jones ordered cakes of gold paint and genuine ultramarine from Roberson, as well as moist watercolours, including a tube of a new green pigment, emerald oxide, and tubes of Chinese white, flat red watercolour sables and foliage brushes and Rouget's fixative.⁶⁴ Burne-Jones's widespread use of green had often been criticised. It was a pigment commonly held in disdain, despite the introduction of a range of stable green pigments during the first half of the nineteenth century.⁶⁵

Traditionally, watercolour painters have worked at easels that are gently tilted back to prevent the thin washes of colour from running off the page. A photograph of Burne-Jones in front of *Star of Bethlehem* (Fig.11) shows him working on a vertical surface, suspended from a railing; in order to reach the higher sections he is forced to balance on a specially constructed ladder. Such a working method would have been unthinkable prior to the arrival of watercolour paint in tubes in 1842. Their excellent covering qualities and thicker consistency made them less likely to run, thanks to the increased content of another new product, glycerol.⁶⁶ Rooke later described his master's preference for a 'stiff pigment of the texture of soft cheese which he could liquefy with diluents when it was wanted to run easily'.⁶⁷ Burne-Jones's purchase in November 1890 of 'watercolour medium', probably watercolour megilp, may have been used to help prevent his paint from running during the execution of this picture. First available in 1849, megilp – said to be made from gum tragacanth – allowed colours to be 'applied pulpily, after the manner of Oil Painting'.⁶⁸ Painting the picture made severe physical demands on the artist, obliging him to clamber relentlessly up and down the ladder to check the perspective and tonality of the picture.

Roberson's men were summoned to the Garden studio on 16th April 1891 to prepare the watercolour for exhibition. Four men carefully lowered the picture off the wall using rings and cord. Four days later they attached slips to the painting, wrapping it in protective sheeting and transporting it to the New Gallery, London.⁶⁹ There it was fixed in its frame and hung in the centre of the wall of the West Room, in the 'place of honour'.⁷⁰ Burne-Jones's ten-foot high watercolour *Sponsa de Libano* (1891; Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool), which was derived from a design for embroidery and painted rapidly in the first few months of 1891, hung on the adjacent wall.⁷¹ Initially purchased from the artist by Agnew's in June 1891 for £1,200,⁷² it was acquired by the Walker Art Gallery – another new regional gallery – after being exhibited there in 1896.

53 O. Garnett: 'The letters and collection of William Graham – Pre-Raphaelite patron and Pre-Raphael collector', *Walpole Society* 62 (2000), pp.145–343, esp. pp.169–70.

54 RA, HKI MS 248-1993, p.321; and E. Burne-Jones, autograph work record (List of works), Fitzwilliam Museum Archives, Cambridge, Edward Burne-Jones Papers.

55 Burne-Jones, *op. cit.* (note 40), p.160.

56 Burne-Jones, *op. cit.* (note 5), II, p.261.

57 See Burne-Jones's discussions with Alma-Tadema about the pigment 'mummy', in *ibid.*, II, p.114.

58 Rooke, *op. cit.* (note 12), IV, p.519 (1898).

59 RA, HKI MS 250-1993, pp.258–59.

60 See W.S. Taylor: 'King Cophetua and the beggar maid', *Apollo* 97 (February 1973), p.151.

61 'London Spring Exhibitions: The Grosvenor and Water-Colour Societies', *Art Journal* 46 (1st June 1884), p.189.

62 S. Wildman: *Visions of Love and Life: Pre-Raphaelite Art from the Birmingham Collection, England*, Alexandria VA, 1995, p.66.

63 See 'Watercolour – The Star of Bethlehem', BMAGIC, <http://www.bmagic.org.uk/objects/1891P75>, accessed 22nd May 2018.

64 RA, HKI MS 250-1993, pp.278 and 281.

65 M. Shelley: 'The craft of American drawing: early eighteenth to late nineteenth century', in K.J. Avery: *American Drawings and Watercolors in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Volume 1. A Catalogue of Works by Artists Born Before 1835*, New York and London 2002, p.67, note 106. See also G. Barnard: *The Theory and Practice of Landscape Painting in Water-Colours*, London 1861, p.20: 'It is very doubtful whether a picture, having a preponderance of green, is ever truly popular'.

66 Shelley, *op. cit.* (note 65), p.73.

67 Rooke, *op. cit.* (note 27), p.8.

68 A. Penley: *The English School of Painting in Water Colours*, London 1861, p.29.

69 RA, HKI MS 250-1993, p.281.

70 'The New Gallery', *Pall Mall Gazette* (29th April 1891), p.2.

71 E. Burne-Jones, autograph work record, (List of Works), Fitzwilliam Museum Archives, Cambridge, Edward Burne-Jones Papers, listed under 1891: 'finished the Star of Bethlehem & began and finished the Sponsa di "Libano"'.
72 National Gallery, London, Agnew's archive, drawings stock book no.6 (1874-1892), NGA 27/1/2/7, item 252, 16th June 1891.





10. *Star of Bethlehem*, by Edward Burne-Jones. 1887–91. Watercolour and bodycolour with scraping on ten sheets of J. Whatman Turkey Mill Kent paper dated 1882 or 1883 on stretcher, 256 by 386.8 cm. (Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery; photograph © Birmingham Museums Trust; Bridgeman Images)

11. Detail of *Sir Edward Burne-Jones*, by Barbara Sotheby, printed by Frederick Hollyer. 27th July 1890. Platinum print, 33.3 by 25.7 cm. (National Portrait Gallery, London; Bridgeman Images).

Across the room at the New Gallery were Aesthetic movement works by Alma-Tadema, Burne-Jones's brother-in-law Edward Poynter and the Belgian symbolist Fernand Khnopff, with whom Burne-Jones became friendly and exchanged sketches around this time.⁷³ The *Star of Bethlehem* reveals many exquisite details, in the fabrics and shot-silk effects of the robes (an effect favoured by Mantegna, using shell gold) and in the stitching of the shoes and the gleaming gold and jewels of the crown, which were copied from that of the Virgin enthroned in Van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece.⁷⁴

Painted towards the end of his life in 1894, the *Fall of Lucifer* (Fig.12) was of immense personal significance and satisfaction to Burne-Jones. A strangely modern work, it was originally intended as a design for part of the mosaic decoration of the American Episcopal Church in Rome, installed in 1885. It was a highly challenging composition. Burne-Jones wrote to Frances Horner that 'the crowd of fallen angels has been so worrying to me to bring into order in my Lucifer that I at one time thought of asking Asquith to help me – nothing but the police seemed to promise any success, but I have subdued the turbulent and exalted

12. *Fall of Lucifer*, by Edward Burne-Jones. 1894. Gouache and gold paint and gold leaf on joined sheets of wove paper, laid down on canvas and stretched over wooden panel, 245 by 118 cm. (Private collection).

the weak, and I think it will do'.⁷⁵ Exhibited at the New Gallery in 1895, it was described in the catalogue as follows:

a large host of descending figures, all animated by the same purpose. High up on the left is the colossal adamant Gate of Heaven, closed behind the last of the fallen angels. In steel armour, with spears and furled blue standards, they sink downwards into space in a long sweeping curve. A text of the Vulgate runs round three quarters of the canvas. The painter's favourite tones are in this instance rendered with a combination of pastel and water-colour.⁷⁶

Three years later, the picture was mistakenly described as an oil painting in the 1898–99 New Gallery exhibition held after the artist's death.⁷⁷ It was lent by Agnew's, who had bought it in July 1898 at Burne-Jones's studio sale for £1,000.⁷⁸ Eight feet in height, the primary support appears to have been made by joining four sheets of Antiquarian paper together one above the other, with raised gold lettering decorating three of the borders, almost like a giant illuminated manuscript. In 1893 Burne-Jones spent more than £4 on cakes of red, lemon and plain gold, and in February 1895, when he may have been putting the final touches to the raised lettering before sending the picture to the New Gallery, he spent a further 35 shillings on gold cakes.⁷⁹ The paper is laid on canvas and stretched over a wooden panel. To the artist's dismay, the painting was returned unsold from the 1895 New Gallery exhibition. Although the public's appetite for his earlier works was now keen, Burne-Jones was only too aware that interest in his new styles of expression was dwindling. 'People didn't know how to take it', he lamented, 'because they thought it was different to my usual things. They didn't know whether to praise it or deplore it because it was new'.⁸⁰

Innovation had brought Burne-Jones frequent criticism and condemnation over the years, yet the artist had always believed that 'to be a painter is not merely to apply pigments according to academical formulas and conventions'.⁸¹ With the eye of the designer, he wove elements from decorative arts into these later watercolours, which appeared to critics at times like fresco,⁸² tempera,⁸³ 'elaborate tapestry work' or 'an admirable colour conception for a carpet'.⁸⁴ His works shocked the cautious and enthralled the enlightened, but were never ignored.

By challenging the traditional art hierarchies that privileged oil over watercolour, and high art over decorative, Burne-Jones sought to create a fluidity between media, whereby techniques could become freely interchangeable, rather than being subject to dogmatic institutional rules. Indeed, by 1878 he was acknowledged to be one of the artists whose experiments in watercolour had enlarged and expanded the resources of oil-painting.⁸⁵ The technical freedom enjoyed by ensuing generations of watercolour painters owes much to Burne-Jones's pioneering vision and progressive techniques.



73 L. des Cars: 'Edward Burne-Jones and France', in S. Wildman and J. Christian: exh. cat. *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer*, Birmingham (Museum and Art Gallery) and New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art) 1998, p.35.

74 E. Burne-Jones: 'Sketch of crown from Jan Van Eyck, *The Virgin Enthroned (the Ghent Altarpiece)*', after 1859, VAM, E.4-1955.

75 Letter from Edward Burne-Jones

to Frances Horner, 1895, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Burne-Jones papers, XXVII.55.

76 H. Blackburn, ed.: *New Gallery Notes, An Illustrated Catalogue*, London 1895, VIII. p.13, no.135.

77 J. Comyns Carr: exh. cat. *Exhibition of the Works of Sir Edward Burne-Jones*, London (New Gallery) 1898, p.67, no.119.

78 The National Gallery, London, Agnew's archive, stockbook NGA 27/1/1/8 (1891–98), p.153, see <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/research/research-centre/agnews-stock-books/reference-nga27118-1891-98>, accessed 22nd March 2018.

79 RA, HKI MS 250-1993, p.282; and RA HKI MS 313-1993, p.258.

80 Lago, *op. cit.* (note 11), p.63, 3rd December 1895.

81 W. Sharp: 'Edward Burne-Jones', *Fortnightly Review* 70 (1898), p.302.

82 C. Phillips: 'The Summer exhibitions at home and abroad: II The Academy

and the New Gallery', *Art Journal* 53 (1891), p.184; and *The Spectator* (16th May 1891), p.692, both referring to the *Star of Bethlehem*.

83 *Ibid.*; and *Pall Mall Gazette*, *op. cit.* (note 69), both referring to the *Star of Bethlehem*.

84 'Philharmonicus': 'The Burne-Jones school of painting' (Correspondence), *Pall Mall Gazette* (28th May 1877), p.2.

85 'The water-colour exhibitions', *Pall Mall Gazette* (4th January 1878), p.10.