Burne-Jones and the Design of the Holy Grail Tapestries
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The commission to decorate Stanmore Hall, Middlesex, the home of a newly made millionaire, William Knox D’Arcy, was the greatest Morris & Co. had ever received. The recently extended property required new carpets, mosaic floors, furniture, wallpaper and decorative plasterwork. The culmination of the decorative scheme, however, was to be a tapestry cycle based upon Malory’s Morte d’Arthur. This would provide the sumptuous escapism not only for the client, but for the two men who for most of their lives had been enchanted by the Middle Ages and the search for their own individual essence of beauty, William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. The commission, coming towards the end of their careers (circa 1890) was to provide them with the opportunity to realise a great many of their ambitions, not least the greatest tapestry panels they had, or were, ever to produce.

Morris had clear views on the necessary qualifications he expected a tapestry designer, especially of figurative work, to have. In a letter of 1878 to Thomas Wardle, he outlined these qualities:

1. General feeling for art, especially for its decorative side.
2. He must be a good colourist.
3. He must be able to draw well; i.e., he must be able to draw the human figure, especially the hands and feet.
4. Of course he must know how to use the stitch of the work.1

Morris himself would seem to reach his own exacting standards. His only weakness, experience of the medium, was tackled the following year when he taught himself the skill of tapestry weaving from an eighteenth-century French manual. The successful result, his first design, the verdure2 panel Acanthus and Vine, revealed a natural understanding of the nature of the medium. Strong, clearly defined motifs suited tapestry designs and this Morris fully exploited. This contrasts, however, with Morris’s later designs in which his shift to figurative-based work resulted in compositions which were less successful, and on the whole problematic.3

The Orchard was Morris’s first attempt at figurative work and was woven in 1890 under the supervision of his assistant, Henry Dearle, though “parts of the figures have been woven by his own hand”.4 The design is an adaptation of the angels painted on the nave ceiling of Jesus College, Cambridge in 1866, set amongst a background of fruit trees designed by Dearle. The figures, though balanced, appear awkwardly posed and have an unnatural feeling of movement. The background is altogether more successful, introducing some element of
naturalism whilst preserving much of the two-dimensional emphasis so important to good tapestry design.

Morris's failings became more pronounced in the Minstrel Figure panel, also of about 1890. Here the figure is "feebly executed, the one appearing foot and hand being particularly poor, while the drapery gives no sense of a body underneath".\(^5\) Clearly then, Morris himself could not be relied upon to supply figurative designs, though his contributions to verdure panels continued with The Woodpecker (1885) and The Forest (1887), both of which are superb, particularly the former.

The obvious successor to Morris was his close friend Edward Burne-Jones. His enthusiasm for Burne-Jones held no bounds:

> Now there is only one man at present (as far as I know) who can give you pictures at once good enough and suitable for tapestry — to wit, Burne-Jones.\(^6\)

Friendship aside, the suitability of Burne-Jones for tapestry design was suggested by his achievements in other branches of decorative art, notably stained-glass. From the 1860s onwards Burne-Jones was the most important stained-glass artist at Morris and Co., combining an innate ability to handle large-scale compositions with power and clarity.\(^7\) The transition from stained-glass design to tapestry design is an obvious one, with the strength of both forms of decorative art dependent on the lack of perspective, with almost all the pictorial elements in one plane. The model of much of Morris's and Burne-Jones's work, the medieval tapestries of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, had rudimentary perspective and sense of scale; figures typically float in these compositions.\(^8\)

This transition from one medium to another was aptly demonstrated by the number of tapestry panels woven using existing stained-glass cartoons; St Cecilia, originally designed in 1875 as a stained-glass panel for Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, was woven as a tapestry in 1887, together with a companion St Agnes also from a previous stained-glass design.\(^9\) The designs originally for a twin lancet window at Salisbury Cathedral for Angeli Laudantes and Angeli Ministrantes were reworked into tapestry in 1894, which proved to be hugely popular, with many repeats.\(^10\)

The first designs specifically for tapestry however, came in 1882 when Burne-Jones produced Pomona and Flora. A letter to Morris's wife conveys his excitement: "Uncle Ned has done me two lovely figures for tapestry, but I have got to design a background for them."\(^11\) The panels are composed of single female figures set amongst Morris's recurrent motif of scrolling acanthus leaves. Again, the figures have not been properly integrated into the background design, rather like the figures in The Orchard. Moreover, the figures are over-powered by the forceful scrolling leaves; so much so that they seem to have drowned, lost in a sea of acanthus.
Morris, then, was not able successfully to produce figurative designs of his own nor adapt those of others. The intervention of Dearle, in reducing the size of the panels and adding a millefleur\textsuperscript{15} background, proved richly rewarding, resulting in seven repeats of Pomona and eleven of Flora.

Burne-Jones began to acquire a greater feeling for the medium which led him, in 1887, to undertake his most complex design to date, The Adoration of the Magi. This depiction of the nativity displayed Burne-Jones’s sensitive handling, combining the ability to convey an appropriate grandeur with a sense of drama. This was to prove another successful collaboration between Dearle, who supplied the background details, and Morris who provided the surrounding decorative border. The key to Morris & Co.’s prosperity in tapestry production seemed to lie in the pooled efforts of these three men.

The experience Burne-Jones gained from the design of The Adoration of the Magi must have stood him in good stead when the commission for the design of the Holy Grail tapestries arrived just a few years later. The scene enabled him to judge, in the finished medium of tapestry, the arrangement of several figures and issues relating to proportion which in some ways differ from those for stained-glass production.

The design process that Burne-Jones appears to have followed seems, from the surviving drawings and sketches, to have not been radically different from his approach to any other medium. This is not, however, to say that the examination of these preliminary works would not prove a fruitful exercise, revealing as they do something of how the finished tapestry panels arose and were shaped by the artist’s fertile imagination.

The earliest preliminary work on the tapestry cycle seems to date from a time when even the allocation of the wall space was not yet complete. An early sketch for what was eventually to become The Arming and Departure of the Knights envisages a scheme much more ambitious than was actually realised (Fig. 1). Here a great number of figures, particularly on horseback, are set within an expansive campsite, conveying a great sense of expectant drama. The idea would have been unsuccessfully translated into tapestry, particularly as the perspective and spatial delineation was complex.

Morris was adamant that successful tapestry design would emphasise “the force, purity and elegance of the silhouette of the objects represented . . . ”.\textsuperscript{15} Later schemes are less ambitious, closer to what was eventually executed (Fig. 2). The emphasis has shifted from the main body of action, achieving a more personal focus on the characters involved. The number of figures represented is reduced and at the same time they are brought closer to the picture plane inviting the viewer to empathise more closely with, for example, the unhappy farewell between Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere.

Guinevere is shown on the extreme left of the composition handing Lancelot his shield as he prepares for the quest. Burne-Jones only hints at their adulterous relationship with a subtle exchange of glances. The executed tapestry panel is close to this later scheme, and other drawings concentrate on this intimate scene more explicitly. This plays down the problematic nature of this relationship, which is at the root of Lancelot’s impurity, resulting in his failed attempt to obtain the Grail and, ultimately, the break-up of the Round Table itself. Through the placing of these figures at the extreme edge of the composition Burne-Jones clearly aims to underscore the alien quality of the relationship and the marginalisation of these figures in late nineteenth-century society.

Interestingly, though, in earlier compositions this exchange of glances was prominent, with Guinevere directing a deep lingering gaze towards Lancelot; a gaze that is unmistakable. Quite when and why this change in emphasis occurred is unclear, but a likely explanation is that it was considered less unsettling for Guinevere to be seen to take a more passive role in the relationship, receiving rather than offering glances.

Having worked out the basic arrangement of the allotted panels Burne-Jones would then produce numerous studies, some highly finished, of the individual figures.\textsuperscript{14} These studies were typically executed in chalk and capture the element of spontaneity, though they belie the sheer amount of time he must have spent on them to assure himself that every element of each pose and arrangement had been fully explored. The surviving drawings are a testament to his fine draughtsmanship.

These individual studies were then incorporated into a general layout for each panel, which was then still the subject of much revision on the part of Burne-Jones. A late sketch for The Attainment resembles on the whole the finished tapestry panel, though there exist a number of differences that have great bearing on the impact of the scene, the concluding panel in the series (Fig. 3).

First, the sea in this sketch, visible through the arcade formed by the trees, extends up to the chapel containing the Holy Grail. This is in contrast to the finished version, in which the sea is present only at the extreme left of the composition. The intimate and almost hallowed atmosphere is not present until the later change, without which the viewer’s attention is inclined to wander beyond the events unfolding in the foreground to the seascape behind. The tangible tension between the figures on the left, the monumental angels and the contemplative figure of Sir Galahad is finally achieved.

The failing of the scene to direct sufficiently the viewer’s gaze is redressed somewhat by Burne-Jones who concentrates some rich detailing on the chapel. An attempt is made to provide some interest in the table supporting the Grail, rather than the Grail itself. In doing so the detailing goes some way to counteract the expansiveness of the sea.\textsuperscript{15}

After all these exhaustive drawings and sketches had resolved the final arrangement for each of the tapestry panels, Burne-Jones would then have composed the original scale drawings from which the cartoons were made.\textsuperscript{16}
These cartoons were arrived at by photographically enlarging the original scale drawings to the size of the intended panels, and were used directly by the weavers to translate the design to tapestry. Despite talk of Morris resurrecting the art of high-warp tapestry "as anciently practised" he in fact used modern methods that kept costs low and allowed a more faithful reproduction of the cartoon, though tapestry would always remain the preserve of the extremely wealthy.

From the original scale drawings Dearle made reduced drawings with suggested colouring, since the drawings supplied by Burne-Jones were "only slightly tinted" and this mainly took the form of small patches of colour applied suggestively. These coloured drawings were submitted to Burne-Jones for approval and if necessary altered slightly. The photographic enlargements which would form the cartoons were also returned to Burne-Jones for final approval. The level of detail demanded by the weavers usually required retouching to areas where this was typically lost, usually the hands and feet. The cartoon was then returned to Dearle and the addition of a few flowers, the suggested patterning of the draperies and some accessories, via a tracing placed over the cartoon, was then made. The translation to tapestry began when an outline was made of both Burne-Jones's finished design and Dearle's additions using Indian ink applied to the warp threads. The outline was applied to the 'front' of the warp face with respect to the finished work to prevent the reversal of the image, though the markings had to be visible to the weavers working from the 'back'.

The cartoon, though, in no way approached the minute level of detail found in the finished tapestry panels. Morris was keen to allow some freedom on the part of the weavers in the selection of some colour and details, considering them "... both by nature and training, artists, not mere animated machines". It was, after all, the responsibility of the weavers to construct a decorative ensemble. This was relatively novel at a time when the competence of weavers was usually judged by the skill with which they were able to reproduce faithfully the cartoon. Yet, despite these freedoms, Morris's weavers were always going to interpret the designs of another hand.

The Holy Grail tapestries represent the culmination of the work of perhaps the greatest artistic partnership of the nineteenth century, that between Morris and Burne-Jones. The intensity of colour, the fluid compositions and sheer size mark them out as the greatest tapestry panels of that collaboration. Though sadly dispersed, the Holy Grail series retains its power to impress, delight and move the viewer. This is in no small part due to the extraordinary talents of Burne-Jones who, at the height of his creative powers, was able to bring to this series a consummate passion and sensitivity that still resonates today.
Notes

1. M. Harrison and B. Waters, *Burne-Jones* (London, 1973), p.137. Thomas Wardle had assisted Morris, from about 1875, in dyeing experiments, which Morris was to apply the results of in setting up the Merton Abbey workshops in 1881 with the aim of producing all the colours on site.
2. Derived from the French for greenery, *verdures* were simply panels of largely foliage into which other elements could be inserted.
12. This is a descriptive term, derived from the French for 'thousands of flowers', used to denote areas that are covered with innumerable tiny wildflowers.
14. A pair of studies, one nude the other clothed, for the figure of Sir Lancelot in *The Failure of Sir Lancelot* are in the collection of the Cartwright Hall, Bradford.