



**HAL**  
open science

# William Burges's Great Bookcase and The Victorian Colour Revolution

Charlotte Ribeyrol

► **To cite this version:**

Charlotte Ribeyrol. William Burges's Great Bookcase and The Victorian Colour Revolution. Yale University Press, 2023, 0300267975. hal-04268465

**HAL Id: hal-04268465**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04268465v1>**

Submitted on 5 Jul 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Charlotte Ribeyrol

## Introduction

### The Colours of the 1862 London Exhibition

‘I really see no reason why we should not have buildings in smoky London glowing with imperishable colours.’  
William Burges, *Art Applied to Industry* (1865)

This is a (book)case study. It tells the story of a fascinating artefact, William Burges’s Great Bookcase (1859–62), which the Ashmolean Museum acquired in 1933 but displayed for the first time only in 2016. During the intervening period, it was occasionally shown at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and then on a more permanent basis at Knightshayes Court, Burges’s unfinished country house in Devon. Originally designed for his London office on Buckingham Street, this private piece of painted furniture was also exhibited in the Medieval Court of the 1862 London International Exhibition, which marked a turning point in the history of colour. This book explores the intertwined stories of this polychrome bookcase and of nineteenth-century colour, taking the 1862 Exhibition as its colourful starting point.

‘There was a great inarticulate cry of admiration and delight, as the fountain dancing in the sunshine, and the long rainbow-roof of the Nave, shone out upon us, as though a gate had opened in Paradise’ (FIG).<sup>1</sup> The overwhelmed reaction of the working-class crowds on the first shilling-entrance day of the 1862 London International Exhibition was recorded by *Chambers’s Journal* as one of the rare enthusiastic comments on the Exhibition building, which most visitors saw as a ‘monstrous architectural pile’.<sup>2</sup> Deprived of the luminous transparency of the Crystal Palace, which had hosted the Great Exhibition of 1851, the colour scheme chosen by Superintendent of Decoration John Gregory Crace proved a disappointment to many:

Compare the colouring of the 1851 building, or the Crystal Palace at Sydenham, with this, and we see that [. . .] [the] blues and yellows are not of that violent kind

---

<sup>1</sup> Anon., ‘The First Shilling-Day’, *Chambers’s Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts* 17, nos 418–443 (January–June 1862), p. 7. On the ‘forgotten’ exhibition of 1862, see John R. Davis et al. (eds), ‘Almost Forgotten’: *The International Exhibition of 1862; Decorative Arts Society Journal* 38 (2014). The research presented in this book has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 818563).

<sup>2</sup> Anon., ‘The International Exhibition’, *Fraser’s Magazine* 66 (November 1862), p. 631.

that Mr. Crace's artist, as he calls him, has been allowed to throw in 'quite promiscuously' as to tint.<sup>3</sup>

The description of Crace's colours as 'promiscuous' is revealing: the adjective may be understood in both spatial and moral terms as signifying something that is either 'discordant' or 'undiscriminating in sexual relations'. This language points back to a long chromophobic tradition in which colour was confined to a superficial, subservient role on account of its supposedly shameful associations with the feminine body. The primal desires triggered by such alluring colours were deemed to be of a sexual rather than an aesthetic nature, as can be seen in the similar attacks formulated against the 'meretricious' excess of John Gibson's *Tinted Venus*, which was very much the controversial star of the show (FIG).<sup>4</sup> If the 'inarticulate' working classes responded so positively to the building and to some of its gaudy exhibits, it was certainly, therefore, because their less refined senses were instinctively drawn to the vivid, enticing hues.

Crace, nonetheless, tried to vindicate his chromatic choices. In a paper entitled 'On the Decoration of the International Exhibition Building', which he delivered at the Society of Arts, he explained that he had adopted, on the one hand, the 'principle of counterchanging colours' reminiscent of 'the decorations of the early masters, which abound in Italy', for instance in the Chapel of the Santo Corporale in Orvieto Cathedral.<sup>5</sup> And yet, on the other hand, his scheme was also radically modern, in keeping with the laws of colour perception devised by the director of the Gobelins dyeworks, the French chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul. Just as Chevreul's *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs* (1839), translated into English in 1854, aimed at improving the perceptual impact of dyestuffs, so Crace offered advice to exhibitors of fabrics on how to make their colours more appealing to the public eye, in accordance with what he believed to be the chromatic harmony of the building he had decorated:

Many rich and valuable stuffs were seriously injured at the Exhibition of 1851, by injudicious arrangement of them. [. . .] It is necessary to bear in mind that all colours have their complementaries, which add or detract from the beauty of the adjoining colours, according to what they may be.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Anon., 'The International Exhibition', *The Critic* (12 April 1862), pp. 96–7.

<sup>4</sup> Martina Droth, Jason Edwards and Michael Hatt (eds), *Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901* (London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 186. On the colours of Gibson's *Tinted Venus*, see Chapter 4.

<sup>5</sup> John Gregory Crace, 'On the Decoration of the International Exhibition Building', *Journal of the Society of Arts* (11 April 1862), p. 341.

<sup>6</sup> Crace, 'On the Decoration', p. 342. On the key role played by Crace in reviving the colours of Victorian interiors, see Megan Aldrich, 'Architecture and Interiors', in *A Cultural History of Color in the Age of Industry*, ed. Alexandra Loske (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2021).

For Chevreul and Crace alike, the question of how best to display textiles was crucial. Crace's concern reflects his interest in chromatic innovation and in the new materials that had, by 1862, come to the fore. These ranged from the aniline dyes devised for Britain's expanding textile industry, to the new colour printing techniques like chromolithography which, alongside hand-tinted stereoscopic photographs, were used to reproduce the event itself. In the conclusion to his report on the medals awarded at the 1862 Exhibition, the president of the council of chairmen, Lord Taunton, clearly emphasized the shift, praising the transformation for industrial application of 'new raw materials hitherto considered as waste'.<sup>7</sup> He may have been thinking here of the 'mauve mania' brought about by William Perkin's accidental discovery of mauveine in 1856, for which the chemist was awarded a medal in 1862.<sup>8</sup> The substance that Perkin and his epigones had transformed into a beautiful rainbow of dyes was literally industrial refuse, that is to say, coal tar, possibly the most evil-smelling and unsightly of materials. Chemical synthesis had become the new alchemy.<sup>9</sup>

The 1860s marked a major turning point in the history of colour, which found itself suddenly promoted to the ambivalent status of signifier of the modern in a rapidly changing industrial world. Since the emergence of the field of colour studies in the 1990s, scholars have increasingly emphasized the historicity of colour by adopting diachronic approaches to dyes and/or pigments. However, they have done so without focusing specifically on what happened to colour in Victorian Britain. Michel Pastoureau, for instance, in his series *The History of a Color*, is surprisingly silent about the invention of anilines while John Gage in *Colour and Culture* mentions the new synthetic dyes only in passing.<sup>10</sup> The Impressionists' engagement with new colours has been analysed more extensively by Georges Roque and Laura Kalba, but their studies focus for the most part on nineteenth-century France.<sup>11</sup> The role played by colour in nineteenth-century German culture in the wake of Johann W. von Goethe's *Farbenlehre*

---

<sup>7</sup> Lord Taunton, quoted in Anon., 'State Ceremonial of the Declaration of Prizes to Exhibitors', *Journal of the Society of Arts* (18 July 1862), pp. 552–3.

<sup>8</sup> On this 'mauve mania', see Simon Garfield, *Mauve: How One Man Invented a Color That Changed the World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> On colour, alchemy and the aniline revolution, see Michael Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> See John Gage, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993), p. 222.

<sup>11</sup> See Georges Roque, *Art et science de la couleur: Chevreul et les peintres, de Delacroix à l'abstraction* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009) and Laura Kalba, *Color in the Age of Impressionism: Commerce, Technology, and Art* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2017).

(1810) has received more attention, as colour is still often considered a German ‘speciality’.<sup>12</sup> Britain’s industrial supremacy, by contrast, is more typically presented through a black-and-white filter, especially in popular culture, as if the period was no more than the ‘funereal’ age of coal pollution and the bleak, working-class slums denounced by Charles Baudelaire, Charles Dickens and John Ruskin alike.<sup>13</sup> And yet, the industrial revolution was also a ‘colour revolution’ which radically transformed colour production and colour perception.<sup>14</sup> While it is true that the new prominence given to colour was not accepted with open arms by all, as is evidenced by the outburst of chromophobia in response to the ‘gaudy’ colours of the 1862 Exhibition, this resistance is in itself a compelling ‘sign’ that a ‘chromatic turn’ was under way.<sup>15</sup>

### **William Burges: A Nostalgic Chromophile**

In this book, I analyse this ‘chromatic turn’ in the light of the work of a partly neglected Victorian chromophile who was another key actor in the 1862 Exhibition: the ‘art-architect’ William Burges (1827–81). Burges was the son of a wealthy marine engineer who encouraged the building aspirations of his children: William’s younger brother briefly trained as an architect and his sister, Mary, married the Gothic Revivalist Richard Popplewell Pullan. When Burges was 14, his father presented him with a copy of A.W.N. Pugin’s *Contrasts* (1836). This book was a revelation to the boy and spurred him towards the decision to embrace an artistic career. At King’s College School, London, Burges met Dante Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti, with whom he studied Latin, Greek, German and French, as well as following a course on General Literature and Science. In 1844, he became articled to Edward Blore, Surveyor of Westminster Abbey. That same year he joined the Ecclesiological Society, a crucial force in the Gothic Revival. Following Blore’s retirement in 1849, Burges joined the office of Matthew Digby Wyatt who, as Joseph Mordaunt Crook notes, was at this time both an expert in the decorative arts of the Middle Ages and a public figure in debates concerning the application of fine art to industry.<sup>16</sup> It was during this period that Burges made his first trip abroad to France,

---

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Le Rider, *Les Couleurs et les mots* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), p. 3. See also Esther Leslie, *Synthetic Worlds: Nature, Art and the Chemical Industry* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> For literary accounts of the nineteenth century as a ‘funereal’ age, see John Harvey, *Men in Black* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Regina Blaszczyk, *The Color Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Similarly, W.J.T. Mitchell analyses the ‘need to defend “our speech” against “the visual” [as a] sign a pictorial turn is taking place’: *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 12–13.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Mordaunt Crook, *William Burges and the High Victorian Dream* (London: John Murray, 1981), p. 41.

taking in Normandy and Paris, which was soon followed by journeys to Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Germany, Turkey and Greece. Burges supported Digby Wyatt as a research assistant for the 1851 Great Exhibition and in the production of *Metal Work and Its Artistic Design* (1852) and the two lavishly chromolithographed volumes of *The Industrial Arts of the Nineteenth Century* (1853–54). In 1851, Burges entered into a partnership with the architect Henry Clutton. One of their first joint projects was an entry for the international competition to design the cathedral of Notre Dame de la Treille in Lille, which they won with plans that Eugène Viollet-le-Duc himself supposedly believed to have been thirteenth-century originals.<sup>17</sup> However, the two men quarrelled and, in 1857, Burges moved into his own offices at 15 Buckingham Street, London. There, as a neighbour to the painter George Price Boyce, he was introduced to influential literary and artistic figures, including Simeon Solomon, William Morris and A.C. Swinburne. His interactions and exchanges with this circle encouraged him to experiment with more collaborative art forms.

At a time when Burges was principally involved in working on private commissions of painted furniture for James Nicholson and H.G. Yatman, he received an invitation from the Ecclesiological Society to design the Medieval Court of the 1862 Exhibition, marking a breakthrough in his more public career.<sup>18</sup> The newly created firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company also exhibited their work in this section which was conceived as a colourful tribute to the rich material culture of the Middle Ages. One of Burges's major 'innovations' in comparison to Pugin's own Medieval Court of 1851 was his introduction of painted furniture (FIG). Although a great chromophile himself, Pugin had limited the use of colour to the small decorative painted shields on his carved oak *armoire* (FIG). This cabinet, designed by Pugin and made by J.G. Crace, was the major piece in the group of furniture displayed at the Medieval Court in the Great Exhibition. It was immediately purchased by Henry Cole for his future South Kensington Museum. In 1862, Cole paid a much smaller sum (£40) for Burges's Wines and Beers sideboard, acting more cautiously in supporting the new craze which partly jarred with the public perception of Medievalism. Burges's painted cabinets had indeed ushered him into the 'avant-garde of furniture designers'.<sup>19</sup> His Court even appeared as a gallery of more advanced taste than Richard Redgrave's Fine Arts Section for the Exhibition, which included none of the 'rising' artists who contributed to Burges's polychrome bookcase.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, p. 71.

<sup>18</sup> Burges was at the time a regular contributor to *The Ecclesiologist*, the Society's monthly journal.

<sup>19</sup> Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, p. 295.

<sup>20</sup> The only exception being Henry Holiday's *The Burgesses of Calais, AD 1347* (1859), lent by the artist himself, as noted by Julius Bryant in "The Progress and Present Condition of Modern Art": Fine Art at the 1862

If Crace's decoration of the 1862 Exhibition building had been criticized as both gaudy and anachronistic, Burges's Medieval Court was equally perceived as an 'anomaly' in an industrial age: 'Six hundred years have passed since the style of yon cabinet was in vogue', as Charles Eastlake ironized in a review of the court's furnishings.<sup>21</sup> The ideological contrast between past and present was further exacerbated by the daring chromatic choices adopted by Burges, whose aim was precisely to dispel the gloom of modernity:

Since the great French Revolution all colour has been gradually dying out of the male costume, until we have got reduced to our present gamut of brown, black and neutral tint [. . .] this absence of colour is really a very serious consideration, for the eye of the designer is naturally affected by what he sees around him.<sup>22</sup>

This quotation is taken from Burges's 1865 lectures on *Art Applied to Industry*, which take the 1862 Exhibition as a starting point for a reflection on the future of English art manufactures. Burges delivered his lectures alongside the chemist Frederick Crace Calvert – former assistant to Chevreul and first cousin of J.G. Crace – whose main focus was the new coal-tar dyes. However, in contrast to Calvert's lectures, Burges drew on the arts and materials of ancient times to envisage a new path ahead for art and industry.

The well-documented historicizing impulse of the Victorians, which reached a peak with the mid-nineteenth century Gothic and Greek Revivals, has only rarely been analysed in terms of the coloured lens through which this past was received and actively reconstructed. If colour has a history, it was also used by the Victorians to create stories about history itself, which translated into ideologically charged visions of colourful bygone ages, whether antique or medieval.<sup>23</sup>

Like Morris and Burne-Jones, Burges was very much a nostalgic chromophile. While his 'lust for colour' has already been underlined in the scholarship – notably by Mordaunt Crook in one of the rare studies devoted to Burges's life and work – his chromophilia is generally mentioned only in passing.<sup>24</sup> And yet, as Ghenete Zelleke notes, colour was just as 'intensely

---

Exhibition', in Davis et al. (eds), *Almost Forgotten*, p. 67. I am very grateful to the anonymous reader of my manuscript for pointing this out to me.

<sup>21</sup> Jack Easel, 'The Great Exhibition', *London Society* 1 (August 1862), p. 16. Following Clive Wainwright, Nicolas Roquet attributes the review to Charles Eastlake, who was generally more sympathetic to the Gothic Revival: Roquet, *Life in Costume: The Architectural Fictions and Anachronisms of William Burges* (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 2011), p. 161. For further accounts of Burges's Medieval Court, see Max Donnelly, "'Rapture and Ridicule": The Furniture in the 1862 Medieval Court', in Davis et al. (eds), *Almost Forgotten*, pp. 107–32.

<sup>22</sup> William Burges, *Art Applied to Industry: A Series of Lectures* (Oxford and London: John Henry and James Parker, 1865), pp. 8–10.

<sup>23</sup> I wish to thank Nick Gaskill here for our discussions on colour and history.

<sup>24</sup> Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, pp. 55–6. Since Charles Handley-Read's 'Notes on William Burges's Painted Furniture', *Burlington Magazine* 105, no. 728 (November 1968), pp. 496–509, and Mordaunt Crook's seminal study of Burges's 'High Victorian Dream' (1981), a few other essays have emphasized the originality of Burges's

important to Burges' as it was to Ruskin, A.W.N. Pugin and Owen Jones.<sup>25</sup> His decorative work, combining gilding with vivid heraldic hues, seems to be closer to the intense polychromy of medieval manuscripts and stained-glass windows than are the works of any of his contemporaries, Morris and Pugin included. Burges in fact opened up a compelling *via media* between these different approaches to the colours of the past, which this book will explore. Like Ruskin, Burges believed in the sanctity of pure colour, a sanctity which he thought was epitomized in the furnishings of the Gothic cathedrals extolled by Pugin. However, Burges departed from Pugin in that his interest in the colours of the pre-Reformation past was more aesthetic than religious. His was not a quest for the abstract 'truth' of architecture but, rather, for dazzlingly polychrome 'fictions'.<sup>26</sup> Despite his extensive experimentations with the colours of historical ornamental patterns, Burges also differed from Jones, as well as from Chevreul, in his belief that a sense of chromatic harmony could not be accounted for in terms of scientific rules but was instead a culturally charged matter. In this, the architect came much closer to Ruskin's Romantic appreciation of the colours of nature and art: 'A man of no talent, a bad colourist, would be ready to give you mathematical reasons for every colour he employs.'<sup>27</sup> Such 'mathematical reasons' not only dematerialized colour by favouring the eye over the hand, the optical over the haptical, but ultimately threatened to unweave the rainbow of nature. However, where Ruskin uneasily eschewed the issue of chromatic bodies, Burges constantly experimented with coloured materials, drawing on antique and medieval recipes to recreate the very stuff of the colours of the past.<sup>28</sup>

Burges's chromophilia was indeed strikingly eclectic, ranging across cultures and periods, from the colourful artefacts of ancient Egypt to the Japanese prints that he may have been one of the first in Europe to collect (FIG).<sup>29</sup> Indeed, his fascination with the material culture of pre-industrial societies, such as India or Japan, was aesthetically pioneering. Over ten years before the craze for *Japonisme*, Burges praised the Japanese Court of the 1862

---

decorative work and architecture, in particular Matthew Williams's *William Burges* (Norwich: Jarrold Publishing, 2004), Ghenete Zelleke's 'Telling Stories in the Gothic Vein: William Burges and the Art of Painted Furniture', *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005), pp. 21–8 and, more recently, the excellent but as yet unpublished Ph.D. by Nicolas Roquet, *Life in Costume* (2011).

<sup>25</sup> Zelleke, 'Telling Stories in the Gothic Vein', p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> On Burges's departure from Pugin's (and to a certain extent Ruskin's) 'true' principles of architecture, see Roquet, *Life in Costume*, p. 240.

<sup>27</sup> John Ruskin, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, vol. 12 (London: George Allen, 1904), p. 500.

<sup>28</sup> On Ruskin's unease with the body of Venetian colour, see John Barrie Bullen, *Continental Crosscurrents: British Criticism and European Art, 1810–1910* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 130–31.

<sup>29</sup> Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, p. 53.



Exhibition as the true medieval court, exemplifying a passion that his close friend, the Aesthete E.W. Godwin, would soon emulate.<sup>30</sup>

Yet Burges's love of colour in all its forms should not be thought of as a mere escapist dream indulged in by an architect who was trapped in 'smoky London'.<sup>31</sup> Burges's chromatic expertise is extremely well documented. The catalogues of books compiled for the two auction sales of his library in 1882 and 1918 have proved to be an invaluable source of information for the present volume, testifying to Burges's intellectual curiosity about cultures different from his own and to his extensive erudition in matters of architecture, painting, sculpture, literature, archaeology and theology.<sup>32</sup> He was also a prolific writer who annotated dozens of sketchbooks and who regularly contributed essays – by no means confined to architectural subjects – to numerous specialist journals, such as *The Builder* and *The Ecclesiologist*.<sup>33</sup> In his *Burges and the High Victorian Dream*, Mordaunt Crook lists over 200 examples of such printed papers, which together reveal just how engaged Burges was in the intellectual debates of his own day and age.<sup>34</sup>

### **Burges's 'Embodied Poems'**

Despite his fascination with the medieval past, Burges did not live the life of a hermit in an ivory tower. Not only was he a highly respected and influential member of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), he also belonged to several 'clubs', including the Hogarth Club, the significance of which Allen Staley describes as 'considerable' for the emergence of the new art of the 1860s.<sup>35</sup> Thanks to such venues, Burges befriended a number of prominent artistic and literary figures, whose names, from Morris to Wilde, he carefully recorded in his 'Abstract of Diaries'.<sup>36</sup> These succinct diaries, which partly compensate for the loss of his correspondence, highlight the key moments in Burges's career and show how it was enriched by such artistic exchanges.

---

<sup>30</sup> William Burges, 'The International Exhibition', *Gentleman's Magazine* 213 (September 1862), p. 10. See also Burges, 'The Japanese Court in the International Exhibition', *ibid.*, pp. 241–54.

<sup>31</sup> Burges, *Art Applied to Industry*, p. 107.

<sup>32</sup> The library sales will henceforth be referred to as LS 1882 and LS 1918.

<sup>33</sup> These sketchbooks are kept in the RIBA Collections, housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum print room.

<sup>34</sup> Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, p. 54.

<sup>35</sup> Allen Staley, *The New Painting of the 1860s: Between the Pre-Raphaelites and the Aesthetic Movement* (London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2011), p. 6. As Mordaunt Crook records, Burges was a member of numerous clubs and societies: the FABS, the Hogarth Club, the Arts Club, the Verulam Club, the Athenaeum, the Arundel Club, the Architectural Photographic Association, the Architectural Museum Society, the Royal Archaeological Institute, the Medieval Society and, eventually, the Royal Academy. Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, pp. 72–80.

<sup>36</sup> A facsimile of the 'Abstract of Diaries' is kept at the National Art Library.

Moreover, Burges was an ‘art-architect’ who believed that architecture was the mother of all the arts, including literature, upon which latter he was probably the only Victorian architect to draw so heavily.<sup>37</sup> The desire to bring together the skills of artists of all types drove the collaborative dimension of most of his decorative work, which emulated that of the medieval guilds so admired by Ruskin and Morris:

It is possible that much might be effected by cooperation – such as the establishment of Guilds for the adornments of churches. By them we might hope to see the vacant niches of our cathedrals gradually re peopled with statues; the walls and windows of our City churches glow with colour.<sup>38</sup>

Heralded by Mordaunt Crook as the only Pre-Raphaelite architect, Burges embraced the same ‘pleasant bright colours’ that his painter and poet friends were extolling in the 1850s and 1860s, and continued to engage with progressive attitudes towards art and literature throughout the rest of his life.<sup>39</sup> His tea parties at 15 Buckingham Street, and later at Tower House in the artistic quarter of Melbury Road, where he moved in 1878, were described by Edmund Gosse as aesthetic meetings of art and life which would have appealed to Oscar Wilde and peacock fan James McNeill Whistler:<sup>40</sup>

He used to give the quaintest little tea parties in his bare bachelor chambers, all very dowdy, but the meal served in beaten gold, the cream poured out of a single onyx, and the tea strictured in its descent on account of real rubies in the pot. He was much blinder than any near-sighted man I ever knew, and once, when with me in the country, mistook a peacock seen *en face* for a man! His work was really more jewel-work than architecture, just because he was so blind, but he had real genius I am sure.<sup>41</sup>

Burges is often remembered through the anecdotes of his acquaintances in similar fashion, with the emphasis placed on his short-sightedness and childish sense of humour, as in the following poem by D.G. Rossetti:

There’s a babyish party named Burges  
Who from infancy hardly emerges:  
If you had not been told

---

<sup>37</sup> Burges coined the term ‘art-architect’ in 1864 but he alludes to the idea as early as 1860. This key concept was at the heart of the major exhibition devoted to ‘the strange genius of William Burges’ at the National Museum of Wales and at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1981.

<sup>38</sup> William Burges, ‘Art and Religion’, in *The Church and the World: Essays on Questions of the Day in 1868*, ed. Rev. Orby Shipley (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1868), p. 598.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 588.

<sup>40</sup> Many other artists (the Thornycrofts, Watts, Marcus Stone, Luke Fildes) lived on Melbury Road in the last quarter of the nineteenth century: see Charlotte Gere, *Artistic Circles: Design and Decoration in the Aesthetic Movement* (London: V&A Publishing, 2010), pp. 155–6.

<sup>41</sup> Evan Charteris, *The Life and Letters of Sir Edmund Gosse* (London: William Heinemann, 1931), p. 147. According to the ‘Abstract of Diaries’, Burges visited Whistler’s Peacock Room in 1877. Whistler and Wilde were also among the last literary and artistic figures to visit Burges at Tower House in 1881.

He's disgracefully old,  
You'd offer a bull's eye to Burges.<sup>42</sup>

This tendency has contributed to a downplaying of the seriousness of the research on which Burges based all of his writings and designs. His output was at the same time both erudite and creative: he was '*un architecte doublé d'un poète*' whose highly distinctive and complex decorative work, from decanter to cathedral, should be seen and read as 'embodied poems':<sup>43</sup>

He was the best iconographer of his day and so fond of imagery that his complete works are embodied poems, so to speak, which it requires more than a tolerable acquaintance with medieval literature to comprehend [. . .] The minor arts – such as sculpture, decorative painting, glass painting, jewellery, art-furniture – were at his finger ends. In fact, the designs which he made for such works absorbed almost too much of his time.<sup>44</sup>

Burges believed that furniture and buildings should 'tell wondrous stories' of bygone ages – whether Pagan or Christian, serious or playful – in keeping with the purpose of the object they were meant to ornament.<sup>45</sup> His decorative work drew on 'innumerable quotations [. . .] by turn popular and scholarly, literary and historical', as noted by the architectural writer and collector Charles Handley-Read, who 'discovered' Burges in the 1960s.<sup>46</sup> In this, the architect was following the model of medieval furnishings, both French and Italian, which he invited his audiences and readers to imaginatively recreate in their original settings: '[T]he great feature of our medieval chamber is the furniture; this, in a rich apartment, would be covered in paintings, both ornaments and subjects; it not only did duty as furniture, but spoke and told a story.'<sup>47</sup>

Burges's infinite imagination was thus fuelled by the Pagan and Christian tales that he freely merged into the decoration of several of his pieces of furniture, just as medieval artists

---

<sup>42</sup> No. 4 of Rossetti's Nonsense verses, quoted in Williams, *Burges*, p. 19.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Lucas, 'Deux architectes anglais: William Burges et R. Popplewell Pullan', *Bulletin de la Société centrale des architectes* (1885–6), p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Popplewell Pullan, 'The Works of the Late William Burges' (17 April 1882), quoted in David Lawrence and Ann Wilson, *The Cathedral of Saint Finn Barr at Cork: William Burges in Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), p. 55.

<sup>45</sup> Burges, *Art Applied to Industry*, p. 112.

<sup>46</sup> Handley-Read, 'Notes on William Burges's Painted Furniture', p. 496. On Handley-Read and Burges, see the 'Prelude' to Mordaunt Crook's *Burges*. See also Zelleke, 'Telling Stories in the Gothic Vein' and, more recently, Matthew Winterbottom, "'Not Acceptable to Present Taste": William Burges's Great Bookcase', *Decorative Arts Society Journal* 41 (2017), pp. 14–25, and Jevon Thistlewood, 'An Examination of William Burges's Great Bookcase', *Decorative Arts Society Journal* 41 (2017), pp. 27–33.

<sup>47</sup> In his lectures on *Art Applied to Industry* (pp. 71, 73), Burges quotes Vasari's *Life of Dello Delli* on Italian painted furniture ornamented with 'fables taken from Ovid or other poets; or narratives related by the Greek or Latin historians'.

‘seized and appropriated the literary spoils of antiquity’.<sup>48</sup> His fascination with the ‘Paganism of the Middle Ages’ was quite unusual at a time when Lord Acton could assert that ‘two great principles divide the world and contend for the mastery, antiquity and the Middle-Ages’.<sup>49</sup> This division was particularly prominent in the battle of the styles then raging in architectural circles, which opposed classicists to Gothicists. Burges’s literary approach to art and architecture nonetheless partly recalls the eclectic endeavours of Morris and his friends who, in their decoration of the Red House, medievalized Pagan epics like the *Iliad*, giving an early sign of what Walter Pater would later describe as Morris’s ‘charming anachronisms’.<sup>50</sup> Like Morris, Burne-Jones and Rossetti, Burges embraced the verse of earlier poets as much as he did that of the poets of his own day. In doing so, he drew on the expressive and artistic potentialities of intense ‘lyric colour’ to recreate the medieval dreamland that he spent his whole career translating in stone, jewel, glass and gold.<sup>51</sup> As a cultural construct, colour has the *poetic* power to generate such narratives about the past. It is precisely this power that the present book seeks to unveil, illuminating it in the context of the artistic, religious and political debates in which Burges and his friends were engaged.<sup>52</sup>

### **Colour Matters: A Bookcase Study**

While iconography and symbolism are central for understanding Burges’s colourful imagination, they do not tell the whole story, for Burges actively engaged with the material dimension of colour as well. In 1858, for example, he exhibited at the Royal Archaeological Institute a murex shell excavated in Athens the previous year, using it to explain to his audience the chromatic practices of the textile dyers of antiquity.<sup>53</sup> And like Morris, he also experimented with accounts drawn from ancient technical manuals, from Theophilus to Cennino Cennini, in seeking to achieve new – and at the same time *old* – chromatic effects.<sup>54</sup> The Pre-Raphaelites rediscovered Cennini’s fifteenth-century *Il libro dell’arte* thanks to Mary Philadelphia

---

<sup>48</sup> William Burges, ‘Paganism in the Middle Ages’, *The Ecclesiologist* 18 (1857), p. 206.

<sup>49</sup> Acton in 1859, quoted in Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Walter Pater, ‘Poems by William Morris’, *Westminster Review* 90 (October 1868), pp. 306–7. On Morris’s Red House, see Sheila Kirk, *Philip Webb: Pioneer of Arts and Crafts Architecture* (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2005), p. 25, and Jan Marsh, *William Morris and Red House* (London: National Trust, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> On Morris’s ‘lyric colour’, see Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris* (London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>52</sup> On the power of colour to generate narratives, see Diana Young (ed.), *Rematerializing Colour: From Concept to Substance* (Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2018), p. 16.

<sup>53</sup> Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, p. 77.

<sup>54</sup> Theophilus’ *De diversis artibus* and Cennini’s treatise *On Painting* both featured in Burges’s library (see also Chapter 1).

Merrifield's translation in 1844. Merrifield was a self-taught artist and writer who played a crucial role in Victorian colour debates, her expertise ranging from oil and fresco painting to dress and interior decoration. Although her research mainly focused on the colouring techniques of the Old Masters, she actively engaged with the newest theories on chromatic arrangement, as shown by her enthusiastic article on Owen Jones's decoration of the Crystal Palace in 1851 in which she referenced Chevreul's laws which had not yet been translated into English.<sup>55</sup> Burges may have also been familiar with her research and illustration into custom history, another subject close to his heart.<sup>56</sup> Coloured fabrics and materials were indeed crucial props in his fictions of the past.

Scholarly discussions of literary colour, which have become more numerous in recent years, rarely address this material dimension.<sup>57</sup> In literary studies, the 'material turn' has so far consisted primarily in a reappraisal of the role played by objects in fiction. The question of colour complicates such object-focused analyses because colour is not only one among the many properties of the object (that is, a merely secondary 'ornament') but a substance with a material history of its own. Colour – or rather *colours*, to distinguish between concept and material – therefore needs to be 're-materialized' in order to highlight why and how the artists and poets in Burges's circle embraced the creative potential of coloration and (dis)colouring – that is to say, the potential of colour *across time*.<sup>58</sup>

Whatever 'stories of history' objects might tell, Burges did not perceive fiction and history to be 'competing authoritative discourses'.<sup>59</sup> On the contrary, his extensive knowledge of ancient polychromy directly shaped his fantasized narratives about the past. Colour, whether old or new, always mattered to Burges, as this book will show. However, in order to shine a

---

<sup>55</sup> For an account of Merrifield's colour research, see Alexandra Loske, 'Mary Philadelphia Merrifield: Color History as Expertise', *Visual Resources* 33 (2016), pp. 1–16.

<sup>56</sup> In 1854, Merrifield published the first book on dress history by a woman, entitled *Dress as a Fine Art* (Boston, MA: J.P. Jewett, 1854), which she had illustrated herself. The volume comprised essays previously published in the *Art Journal* and *Sharpe's London Magazine*. It came with an introduction by the historian Frederick William Fairholt, whom Burges referenced, alongside Camille Bonnard (much used in Pre-Raphaelite circles), James R. Planché and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, as an authority on the topic in an article entitled 'Books on Mediaeval Costume', *Building News* 37 (1879), pp. 143–5.

<sup>57</sup> Recent publications on colour in nineteenth-century literature include Helsinger, *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts* (2008), Nicholas Gaskill, *Chromographia: American Literature and the Modernization of Color* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), Élodie Ripoll, *Penser la couleur en littérature: Explorations romanesques des Lumières au réalisme* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2018) and Rey Conquer, *Reading Colour: George, Rilke, Kandinsky, Lasker-Schüler* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019).

<sup>58</sup> Young, *Rematerializing Colour*, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Simon Goldhill, *The Buried Life of Things: How Objects Made History in Nineteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 2–3. On literature and the material turn, see Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and Katharina Boehm and Victoria Mills, 'Mediating the Materiality of the Past, 1700–1930', *Word & Image* 33, no. 3 (2017).

light on the origins of his life-long chromophilia, the focus will be on just one colourful object: Burges's own Great Bookcase, which was one of the key pieces displayed in the Medieval Court of 1862 (FIG). Although well-known to Burges specialists, the iconography of this private bookcase has never been discussed in detail.<sup>60</sup> As one of Burges's largest and most ambitious pieces of furniture, and certainly his most personal, this bookcase, a work that was 'several years' in the making, was the creation he seems to have cherished above all others. In keeping with his passion for the thirteenth century, Burges conceived this object as a *mise en abyme* of a Gothic edifice – 'a painted architectural arrangement of pillars and arches, the whole crowned with parapet and gables' – its visible hinges, typical of medieval furniture and architecture, highlighting the interconnectedness of the panels decorating its surface.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, in keeping with the architect's belief in the narrative function of decoration, the Bookcase, which was intended – rather impractically – to hold Burges's books on art and architecture, *reads* like a book, and more precisely like an anthology of stories in colour and of colour. This 3-metre-high cabinet, the overall design for which survives in the RIBA Collections (FIG), was created at the height of the short-lived craze for the painted furniture that Burges described as 'full of pictorial art, of colour and gold'. It certainly served as an inspiring example for contemporary designers lamenting the absence of 'colour [. . .] in [their] daily life', like, for example, Charles Forster Hayward, who followed the lead of Burges in designing three Gothic Revival bookcases with panels painted by Edward J. Poynter and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (FIG).<sup>62</sup>

Not only was this particular piece very important to Burges himself but it also launched the careers of most of the thirteen promising artists who contributed to its highly erudite decorative scheme. This broad collaboration, which clearly evokes that of medieval craftsmen, is in many ways unique, for Burges's other pieces of painted furniture involved no more than two or three painters. In this, the object anticipates his first architectural ventures, such as the restoration of Waltham Abbey in 1865, for which Burges commissioned almost the same team of painters. It also reflects how immersed Burges was in the aesthetic debates of the time. Throughout this book attention will be drawn to how closely connected this extraordinary

---

<sup>60</sup> Over the years a small number of scholars have given succinct descriptions of the contents of the panels, but only Winterbottom ("Not Acceptable to Present Taste") and Thistlewood ('An Examination') have paid these images more than glancing attention. Their work has provided the starting point for many of the analyses developed in this book (including in the conservation Annex).

<sup>61</sup> Henry Stacy Marks, *Pen and Pencil Sketches*, vol. 1 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1894), pp. 219–20.

<sup>62</sup> William Burges, 'The Late Exhibition', *The Ecclesiologist* 20 (1862), p. 337 and *Art Applied to Industry*, pp. 77–8. For a detailed description of two of these bookcases, see Max Donnelly's notes for the Victoria and Albert online catalogue. <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O58570/bookcase-hayward-charles-forster/>

artwork is to the works of other Victorian artists and writers who were equally engaged with the intertwined cultural and material histories of colour which emerged during this key period.

The iconographic scheme of the Bookcase was certainly intended to appear as far more ambitious and wide-ranging than Burges's previous work, as its eight painted panels tell the story of the origins of the fine arts, including the non-visual art of poetry. The piece is crowned by a gabled pediment, with *Art*, painted by Edward Burne-Jones, taking pride of place in the central arch (FIG). On either side of *Art* stand Nathaniel Westlake's allegories of *Religion* and *Love*, interspersed with and flanked by Edward J. Poynter's smaller *Muses*. The panels that cover the main body of the Bookcase are divided such that those on the right convey Pagan themes and those on the left their Christian counterparts. On the right (FIG), we see the Pagan origins of architecture (*Rhodopis* by Poynter), poetry (*Sappho and Phaon* by Henry Holiday), painting (by Frederick Smallfield, the subject identified by Pullan and Godwin as a representation of Apelles) and sculpture (*Pygmalion* by Simeon Solomon). On the left (FIG), we find the Christian companions to these Pagan panels, with *Dante's Vision* of Beatrice by Poynter (and perhaps also Rossetti, whose name is inscribed upon the side of the panel), *St John and the Angel Measuring the Heavenly Jerusalem* by Solomon, *Torrel Modelling Effigy of Queen Eleanor* by Albert Moore, and *Beato Angelico painting the Virgin* by Thomas Morten.<sup>63</sup>

The figures depicted on the sides of the Bookcase also function as allegories of the arts, albeit on a smaller scale. From bottom to top, there are roundels representing *Law* by Morten (the head of Novella de Andrea, 'daughter of a law professor at Bologna', according to the RIBA annotations) and George Adolphus Storey (Paris in a Phrygian cap). Above, *Music* is personified in the form of St Cecilia by Morten and Orpheus by William Frederick Yeames (FIG). Further up we see *Philosophy*, represented by Solomon's St Augustine and Charles Rossiter's Plato. The lower right and left sides of the Bookcase are painted with *Harpies* by Frederick Weekes and *Sirens* by J.A. Fitzgerald (FIG). The metamorphic figures across the front depict *Arachne*, the *Pierides* and *Syrinx* by Henry Stacy Marks. This last group was described by Burges as a representation of 'Metamorphoses Relating to Architecture', possibly serving to suggest the 'transitional' or transformative powers of his own art as well as the vitality of medieval grotesque.<sup>64</sup> These depictions are complemented by numerous animal figures on the friezes (painted by Poynter) and in the eight spandrels of the arches (by Burges),

---

<sup>63</sup> On the possible involvement of Rossetti in the painting of the Great Bookcase, see Handley-Read, 'Notes on William Burges's Painted Furniture', p. 503.

<sup>64</sup> Anon., 'Royal Institute of British Architects [discussion of Pagan/Christian art]', *The Builder* 19 (9 March 1861), p. 163.

which show the architect's fascination with natural history (FIG). While the panels cover a historically wide range of intertwined narratives, from the Pagan past to the late Middle Ages, the animals represented are highly diverse from a geographical perspective, with tropical birds featuring alongside species native to Western Europe, with tropical birds (such as pelican, spoonbill and hummingbird) featured alongside species native to Western Europe (eagle, crane, owl, hoopoe, etc.).<sup>65</sup> Some of these bird figures also evoke contemporary *zukushi* prints by the Japanese artist Utagawa Yoshikazu, representing an 'enumeration' of animals or insects (FIG).<sup>66</sup> Burges collected together several of these popular prints aimed at children in an album entitled 'Polychromy, 18 October 1858'. In this colourful scrapbook, he also compiled his own watercolours of polychrome details on French, English and Italian Gothic edifices and ecclesiastical vestments, alongside various press cuttings and copies from Pompeian frescoes and medieval manuscripts. Many of these colourful items seem to have inspired the iconographic and chromatic scheme of the Bookcase. For instance, on the inside of the cabinet doors, dragonflies, spiders, flying fish, seahorses and small birds' heads (by Stacy Marks) appear against rich green and red backgrounds, evocative of Pompeian wall paintings (FIG).<sup>67</sup> The birds were most certainly copied from live models as Stacy Marks watercolour versions of the exact same images can be found in Ruskin's Teaching Collection with the mention 'Zoo' alongside the white-crested laughing thrush, the cock of the rock, and the red and yellow macaw (FIG).<sup>68</sup> The colours of nature play a crucial role in the decoration of this piece of furniture, which is divided horizontally into decorative bands to evoke, from top to bottom: Air (the stars, the peacock-eyed suns, the clouds and birds), Earth (the flowers, beasts, insects and, as the ultimate geological 'strata', the minerals symbolized by Fitzgerald's *Metals*) and Sea (the shells and fish). These ornamental motifs are also recorded in rich golds, reds and blues in the RIBA archives (FIG).

The flower frieze, on the other hand, should be read chronologically: each of the four sections corresponds to a specific season, with the pansies, the auricula and the cyclamen, for instance, representing winter (FIG). However accurately depicted they might be, some of these creatures and other natural elements are presented through a literary prism, with the artists

---

<sup>65</sup> Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, p. 311.

<sup>66</sup> I am extremely grateful to Clare Pollard for this information.

<sup>67</sup> In the Middle Ages, colour was also applied to the inside of furniture, as suggested by Viollet-le-Duc's drawing of a fourteenth-century *armoire* from Noyon which served as the model for Burges's Bookcase (see below).

<sup>68</sup> Stacy Marks, *Pen and Pencil Sketches*, vol. 1, p. 221. The painter also notes that the bird heads on the inside panels were 'the only work' which he carried out 'without being "coached"' by Burges. These bird heads could have been added at a later date as Stacy Marks himself notes: 'In November 1877 I was painting some tiny panels of heads of birds for my old fellow-student William Burges.' The date 'Novr 5 1877' is also found on the watercolours in Ruskin's Teaching Collection.



drawing on sources that range from Homer's *Odyssey*, Aristophanes' *The Birds*, Aesop's *Fables* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to popular children's tales, including scenes from 'The Story of Cock Robin' (by Burges; FIG), Madame d'Aulnoy's 'The White Cat', and 'Puss in Boots' (both by Poynter). The Bookcase thus recalls the illuminated medieval bestiaries that depicted animals while also conveying a moral subtext (FIG). Aesop's *Fables* were highly popular in the Middle Ages and Burges was certainly familiar with William Caxton's 1484 illustrated edition of these tales (FIGS).<sup>69</sup> In addition, the architect may have been aware that the anthropomorphizing of animal figures (cats in particular) was another favourite motif of *zūkushi* artists such as Utagawa Yoshitora (FIG). The coloured fan in Poynter's 'White Cat', in particular, strongly suggests this Eastern influence (FIG). By mingling Pagan and Christian, high and low, East and West, natural science and popular literature, Burges, a 'master of fiction, pranks and puns', relieved the encyclopaedic erudition showcased by his bookcase with a touch of humour that was primarily intended for the enjoyment of his close circle of artist friends.<sup>70</sup>

The invoice that Burges carefully recorded in one of his sketchbooks, reproduced here for the first time, reveals just how expensive the Bookcase was to make: an expenditure of £240 in total is recorded, including £120 for the artists' work (FIG). This was, at the time, a very large sum, and can be contrasted with the mere £50 Kenneth Clark paid when he purchased the piece for the Ashmolean Museum some seventy years later. In 1933, Victorian art was no longer fashionable and Clark deemed the object to be 'not acceptable to present taste'. Nevertheless, given the importance of the artists who contributed to its decoration, Clark knew that this was a crucial acquisition which would 'always remain an important document in the history of the [Pre-Raphaelite] movement'.<sup>71</sup>

Burges's invoice mirrors to a considerable degree the vertical composition of the Bookcase, beginning as it does with Burne-Jones's *Art*, which is singled out as having cost £5. In one of his articles on the 1862 Exhibition, Burges praised the artist as a key figure among

---

<sup>69</sup> William Caxton is also represented on the Cadmus *escritoire* (see Chapter 2). The Fables illustrated on the Bookcase appear in the following order: The Tortoise and the Hare; The Dog and the Shadow; The Fox and the Mask; The Stag and the Lion; The Fox and the Hyena (?); The Fox and the Leopard (?); The Frog and the Ox; The Ass, the Cock and the Lion; The Bear and the Bees; The Wolf and the Lamb; The Fox without a Tail; The Dog in the Manger. The tale of The Fox and the Stork is also represented on both sides of the Bookcase.

<sup>70</sup> Roquet, *Life in Costume*, p. 11. Burges's erudite sense of humour can be seen in Rossiter's *Plato*, in which the eponymous figure is represented alongside a featherless chicken in reference to the apocryphal anecdote concerning Diogenes' plucking of a chicken as a response to Plato's tongue-in-cheek definition of man as a 'featherless biped'. I am very grateful to Paul Scade for pointing this out to me.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Winterbottom, "'Not Acceptable to Present Taste'", p. 15.

‘our rising painters’.<sup>72</sup> Further down, the cryptic and almost illegible mention of *Nephelokokkygia* refers to the ‘Cloud-Cuckoo Land’ of Aristophanes’ *The Birds*.<sup>73</sup>

Despite the number of skilled artists involved, the high cost of the Bookcase is nonetheless surprising given that the cabinet maker (probably the firm of Thomas Seddon) used simple pine wood primed with white lead, rather than English oak like Pugin – a point remarked upon in a piece in the *Illustrated London News*, in which the author states that the ‘clever paintings and illuminations’ jar with the ‘common carpenter’s work inside’.<sup>74</sup> However, this choice of materials should not be mistaken for parsimony on Burges’s behalf. Rather, he was almost certainly aiming at historical accuracy, as we can see from his comment in 1860 that the use of pine was common in medieval domestic architecture.<sup>75</sup> More precious materials were also used, notably inlaid Indian marble, which was partly replaced with Florentine *pietra dura* after the Bookcase fell over in 1878 (FIG).<sup>76</sup> The photograph of the Bookcase that Burges had taken before the fall reveals other changes made during the repair process (FIG). Fitzgerald’s series of figures representing the different *Metals* were, for instance, replaced by Weekes’s versions. As Matthew Winterbottom argues, the restoration of the Bookcase was an opportunity for Burges to simplify some of its decoration, possibly in response to the Aesthetic taste of the 1870s.<sup>77</sup> Many of the painted Gothic details on the pediment and on the vertical and horizontal elements of the Bookcase were thus removed in favour of simple gilded lines.

Despite these changes, this piece of painted furniture remains, even in its final simplified version, a highly complex object, a polychrome *chef-d’œuvre* of High Victorian eclecticism, fusing Byzantine gold, Florentine *pietra dura* and Della Robbia blues with motifs inspired by Egyptian and Pompeian artefacts, Greek sculptural bodies, medieval effigies and Japanese *katagami* stencils, all set within an overall cathedral-like, Gothicizing composition.<sup>78</sup> In 1862, its ‘tone of colouring’ appeared ‘much brighter’ than any of the other painted artefacts in the

---

<sup>72</sup> Burges, ‘The International Exhibition,’ *Gentleman’s Magazine* 213, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> I am very grateful to Matthew Winterbottom for helping me decipher the inscription.

<sup>74</sup> Anon., ‘The Medieval Court at the International Exhibition,’ *Illustrated London News* 27 (September 1862), p. 351. On Seddon, see Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, p. 299.

<sup>75</sup> Anon., ‘Ecclesiological Society [discussion of the use of pine in the Middle Ages],’ *The Ecclesiologist* 18 (1860), pp. 310–11.

<sup>76</sup> Burges’s 1873 Cabinet Stand (now in the Manchester Art Gallery) displays a similar combination of Agra and Florentine *pietra dura*.

<sup>77</sup> Winterbottom, “‘Not Acceptable to Present Taste,’” p. 24. See also Edward William Godwin, ‘The Home of an English Architect,’ *Art Journal* (1886), pp. 301–3.

<sup>78</sup> Burges’s 1858 article entitled ‘Architectural Experiences at Constantinople’ played a key role in fostering the Byzantine revival. See Bullen, *Byzantium Rediscovered. The Revival of the Art and Architecture of the Byzantine Empire*, London, New York: Phaidon, 2003. I am very grateful to John Barrie Bullen for sharing this information with me.

court, which puzzled Burges's contemporaries just as much as his interweaving of 'the literature of Paganism and the Middle Ages':<sup>79</sup>

Mr. Burges' Bookcase illustrative of Pagan and Christian art, is full of the childish follies which are spread over all this painted furniture. The outline of the case is simply ugly; the cornice is heavy and disproportioned; panels of what looks like real Florentine inlaid marble, are set in the commonest of deal frames, unredeemed even by good workmanship. The paintings are awkward and of unequal merit. [. . .] First we have a lot of flowers, then the fables illustrated, and thirdly, the 'History of Cock Robin'. As if such subjects were not sufficiently absurd, we have one half of one of the foxes, in the story of the Three Foxes, in one panel, whilst his tail and hind quarters are depicted with the fable of the Wolf and the Lamb. The panels are enclosed by crocketed arches, and they are the best parts of the detail. They show an amount of knowledge which ought not to be linked with the rest of the work. The lower part of the Bookcase is likewise painted, and in the same eccentric drearily-humorous fashion. [. . .] The plain surface is peppered with gilt shells, similar to those which children cut out and stick against the walls. We had almost omitted to mention a series of very humorous delineations of the metals, but what they have to do with a bookcase, with Cock Robin's history, with Gay's or Aesop's fables, with Pagan or Christian art, with red-haired women, with ornithological females, with calceolaria, wild rose, or daisy, with Florentine marble or painted pine, we must leave the mediaevalists to tell us. We confess ourselves fairly puzzled.<sup>80</sup>

The enumerative style of the reporter for *Building News* conflates material considerations with iconographic questions in order to mock the supposed lack of coherence of Burges's decorative scheme, the 'childish' and 'awkward' pictorial translations of which partly recall to the critic the works of the Pre-Raphaelites and their 'red-haired women'. The approach in this book will be rather different. In the chapters that follow, the chromatic and narrative consistency of this extraordinary piece of painted furniture will be highlighted, the overall design of which Burges so carefully thought through. As noted by Stacy Marks, the architect closely supervised the work of each artist:

In the centre of the room was a lofty cabinet for books on art, the doors divided out in a painted architectural arrangement of pillars and arches, the whole crowned with parapet and gables. The panels were arranged to have a figure composition in each, by young painters, adherents to the Gothic revival movement, of subjects from Pagan and Christian history. Burne-Jones, Albert Moore, Poynter, Smallfield, and others, had already contributed their work. The rectangular base had merely the ground laid for the decorations; these I painted under Burges' superintendence and from his suggestion – a concert of the Pierides, half women, half birds, occupying the two centre panels flanked by single figures of Arachne and Syrinx.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Burges, 'The International Exhibition', *Gentleman's Magazine* 213, p. 5.

<sup>80</sup> Anon., 'The Medieval Court, International Exhibition', *Building News and Architectural Review* 9 (8 August 1862), p. 100.

<sup>81</sup> Stacy Marks, *Pen and Pencil Sketches*, vol. 1, pp. 219–20.

Each contributor was given a theme and possibly a model sketch to work from so as to ensure an overall stylistic unity. A possible exception is Burne-Jones, whose more idiosyncratic *Art*, draped in a Renaissance dress with puff sleeves, is reminiscent of his *Sidonia von Bork* (FIG). However, given how significant these panel stories appear in the light of the subsequent career of some of these artists, it is my contention that Burges must have engaged in a creative dialogue with the group of painters to select and depict which topics should illustrate the Bookcase. This is why I will systematically refer to both Burges and each individual artist as the joint creators of each panel.

Drawings of all these panels, now in the RIBA Collections, will also be reproduced in the course of this book as they contain useful annotations (probably dictated by Burges himself to an unidentified clerk) which shed invaluable light on the visual and textual sources the architect and his artist friends used to decorate the Bookcase. In carrying out the research for this volume, it has become clear that these RIBA drawings were most certainly tracings made *after* the work was completed in order to record and explain its complex composition. Infrared reflectography and X-ray fluorescence mapping carried out by Ashmolean research conservator Tea Ghigo has indeed revealed much more complex underdrawings that were later covered up with alternating blue and gold backgrounds (FIG). In the original design, a horizontal line in each panel created a  $\frac{3}{4}$  banding effect that was reminiscent of the painted panels of the fourteenth-century French cabinet from Noyon which served as the main model for the Bookcase (FIG).<sup>82</sup> Burges knew the Noyon *armoire* from a plate in Didron's *Annales archéologiques* (1846), which Viollet-le-Duc later reproduced in colour in his *Dictionnaire raisonné du mobilier français*, first published in 1858 (FIGS).<sup>83</sup> The chromolithograph may have encouraged the architect to adopt a simpler system of counterchanging golds and (rather hastily applied) blues, using colour (rather than line) as a structural device. This approach was in keeping with his view that paintings used to decorate furniture should be 'kept flat with no landscape backgrounds', as in the Middle Ages.<sup>84</sup> The organization of the Pagan and Christian panels is thus both thematic and chromatic, as Burges incorporated the pictorial elements within the overall structure thanks to these alternating blue and gold backgrounds. In this respect, Burges's Bookcase is very different from the painted furniture, such as the Prioress's Tale Wardrobe (FIG), produced by Morris and his friends during the same period. In the case of the

---

<sup>82</sup> I am very grateful to Matthew Winterbottom for this suggestion.

<sup>83</sup> On the Noyon *armoire*, see Handley-Read, 'Notes on William Burges's Painted Furniture', p. 501.

<sup>84</sup> Burges, *Art Applied to Industry*, p. 76.

Morris firm piece, the wardrobe simply serves as an easel for the paintings, whereas Burges, by contrast, envisaged his bookcase as a three-dimensional constructed object, carefully integrating all the panels within its Gothicizing architecture, almost as if they were stained-glass windows in a cathedral.<sup>85</sup> This did not, however, prevent a harsh critic from advising both Burges and Morris in 1862 to burn their furniture and frame the paintings.<sup>86</sup>

The chromatic coherence of the Bookcase suggests that Burges exerted total control over the materials used by the artists who worked on the project most probably in his own rooms. Unfortunately, it is not clear who Burges's colour supplier was at the time; the Charles Roberson ledgers and index indicate only that Burges ordered colours from them after 1865.<sup>87</sup> In any case, the pigment analyses carried out by the Ashmolean conservation teams, and in particular by Tea Ghigo in 2020–21, have brought to light striking chromatic similarities between the various painted panels, such as the arsenate copper, possibly the new 'emerald green', that is found on the garments of both Dante and Sappho.<sup>88</sup> Because they offer crucial insight into Burges's ideologically charged, multi-layered use of colour, the results of Ghigo's chemical analyses presented in the conservation annex will also be referred to frequently throughout the book. When considering Burges, who had a passion for mystery and the occult, there is indeed always more to find than first meets the eye.<sup>89</sup> Colour, which in the Middle Ages was often understood as being etymologically connected with *celare* (Latin: 'to hide'), may well have been one of his best-kept secrets.<sup>90</sup>

One of Ghigo's key findings is that Burges made use of modern materials as well as historical pigments, which shows that, contrary to Ruskin, he did not shun industrial progress. Burges did, however, lament the coal-laden bleakness of his age which he believed colour, whether old or new, could help alleviate. Hence, for instance, his humorous and deliberately anachronistic evocation of a medieval train, 'made ornamental' thanks to the use of polychrome materials:

One is very much tempted to imagine and try and think out how our ancestors of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries would have treated a royal locomotive with its tender and carriage – say one for William Rufus, or King John, or Henry III., all of

---

<sup>85</sup> Handley-Read, 'Notes on William Burges's Painted Furniture', p. 502. For a further comparison between Burges's witty selection of subject matter in keeping with the purpose of each piece (Wines and Beers for a sideboard, Cadmus for an *escritoire*) and the furniture of Morris and Webb illustrated with scenes of romance, see Staley, *The New Painting of the 1860s*.

<sup>86</sup> The anecdote is recorded by Burges himself in 'The Late Exhibition', p. 337.

<sup>87</sup> See Sally Woodcock and Judith Churchman (eds), *Index of Account Holders in the Roberson Archive, 1820–1939* (Cambridge: Hamilton Kerr Institute, 1997), p. 31.

<sup>88</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>89</sup> On Burges's occult affinities, see Chapter 1.

<sup>90</sup> Michel Pastoureau, 'L'église et la couleur', p. 206.

whom were fond of magnificence: perhaps they would have converted the locomotive into the form of a dragon vomiting the smoke through his upraised head; his body and wings being rich with gold, colour, tin, and brass, and perhaps even great crystal balls would do duty for eyes.<sup>91</sup>

Despite his fascination with the medieval past, Burges's painted furniture was distinctively High Victorian. In designing his private bookcase, the architect evidently also had 'public' ambitions: his selection of real and mythical figures to represent the different arts partly anticipates both the Frieze of Parnassus at the base of the Albert Memorial, and the Kensington Valhalla, to which latter Poynter contributed. But in terms of colour, the Bookcase rather seems to be the materialization, in the form of one single artefact, of the Fine Arts' Courts which opened at Sydenham in 1854. These courts, which proved to be both highly popular and extremely influential, showcased the latest research into the polychromy of the past, from ancient Egypt and Greece to Pompeii, Medieval England and the Alhambra (FIG). Lady Eastlake, with whose works Burges was familiar, was one of the most vocal opponents of this generalized 'Polychromy', which she ironically capitalizes in an essay for the *Quarterly Review* published in 1855:<sup>92</sup>

Under the high-sounding, but now ever ridiculous, name of Polychromy they have introduced an element which may be familiar to the sailor in his figure-head, to the mechanic in his tea-garden, and to the child of five years old in the picture-book he has polychromed for himself, but which is simply a puzzle to the ignorant and a torture to the enlightened. We shall be told perhaps that no such view to the accommodation of all tastes presided over the application of the paint-pot; but this would invalidate their only excuse; for if the investing Egypt and Nineveh in the gaudiest hues of Manchester cottons, if the colouring Anglo-Saxon effigies with a coarseness of illusion Madame Tussaud would disdain, and if the transformation of the glorious Panathenaic Procession into a bad Pilgrimage to Canterbury – derogatory alike to Stothard and Phidias – were not intended to please the ignorant, for whom could it have been designed?<sup>93</sup>

Revisiting the familiar chromophobic argument that bright hues primarily appeal to the 'inarticulate' primitive Other ('the child of five', the coarse 'sailor' and 'mechanic', the Egyptian), Lady Eastlake's comment anticipates in many ways the puzzled reception of Burges's anachronistic painted furniture a few years later. Within this temporal and spatial narrative, 'Polychromy' is perceived as dangerously disruptive of aesthetic, social and racial categories. My aim in this book is to situate Burges's nostalgic chromophilia, as 'historiated'

---

<sup>91</sup> Burges, *Art Applied to Industry*, pp. 51–2.

<sup>92</sup> According to the 'Abstract of Diaries' (1864 entry), Burges even reviewed one of her books.

<sup>93</sup> Lady Eastlake, quoted in Stephanie Moser, *Designing Antiquity: Owen Jones, Ancient Egypt and the Crystal Palace* (London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 163.

by the eight panels of the Great Bookcase, within these mid-Victorian debates about colour, whether past or present, high or low.<sup>94</sup> In short, I explore the story of the making of this polychrome piece of furniture alongside the stories told by the Bookcase itself. These chromatic narratives relating to the rich literary and material culture of the Pagan and Christian past were mostly shaped by Pugin, Ruskin and Jones, and by the poetic sources, from Sappho to Browning, in which the architect immersed himself during this pivotal period.

The book is divided into four chapters, each bringing together two panels to highlight one specific aspect of the Victorian reception of the colours of the past. By analysing such key ‘details’ from the Bookcase, I open up a larger conversation between writers, critics and artists, and reveal how the complex polychromy of Burges’s work brings to light unexpected overlaps between art history and literature.

Drawing on Solomon’s New Jerusalem panel and Morten’s representation of Fra Angelico, the first chapter explores the sanctity of colour that Ruskin defended throughout his life, despite his numerous aesthetic *revirements*. Here I argue that Ruskin attempted to retrieve colour from its supposedly debased materiality by celebrating the translucent hues of the rainbow, his Romantic symbol for the pure colours of Nature and Art. Similar rainbow effects are achieved by Solomon and Morten in their depiction of the multi-coloured walls of the Heavenly City, on the one hand, and of Angelico’s luminous Virgin, on the other. And yet, in both instances chromatic matter surreptitiously resurfaces, as in the rhetoric of Catholic or High Church clergymen then calling for a return to the rich decoration of the pre-Reformation past. In the early 1860s, D.G. Rossetti was also moving away from the pure hues of Fra Angelico to embrace the rich palette of Venetian painters, reflected in the glowing red hair of Fanny Cornforth as in Morten’s ambiguous Mary-Magdalen-like Virgin.

The second chapter, devoted to the two panels on Poetry (featuring Sappho and Dante), explores another turning point in the history of colour perception: the advent of the ‘colour-sense’, coined in the wake of W.E. Gladstone’s 1858 three-volume study on Homer and the Homeric age. This concept, which analyses how colour vision translates into language, soon caught the interest of poets, artists and scientists alike, including Charles Darwin, who participated in the related debates. I argue that Burges, Poynter and Holiday sided with the artistic and literary avant-garde who believed that the poets of the past were *not* colour-blind. In the Sappho panel, the omnipresence of green – which Gladstone claimed the poets of the

---

<sup>94</sup> Burges was particularly fond of the term ‘historiated’, which was adapted from the medieval French usage of *historié* to describe illuminated manuscripts decorated with narrative scenes. He uses the word twice in his lectures on *Art Applied to Industry* (pp. 52 and 105).

archaic age could not see – thus brings to light the poetess’s elusive *chloros*. Dante’s green was just as controversial, and even beyond literary circles. In the context of the *Risorgimento*, green, the colour of the new nation, had become a ‘forbidden’ hue which the political exile Gabriele Rossetti, father to the painter, repeatedly complained had been erased, if not censored, from Giotto’s fresco of Dante in the Bargello.

In the third chapter, which brings together Poynter’s *Rhodopis* and Smallfield’s Pompeian scene, Burges takes on the role of ‘the learned archaeologist’ praised by Stacy Marks.<sup>95</sup> The two panels demonstrate Burges’s extensive knowledge of the rich material culture of ancient Egypt and Pompeii, characterized in both instances by its dazzling and perfectly preserved polychromy. His erudition, derived from textual as well as visual sources, is pressed into the service of a fantasized reconstitution of the domestic life of the controversial courtesan Rhodopis, on the one hand, and, on the other, that of a Pompeian couple who resemble the protagonists of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s best-seller, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). The allegorical purpose of the panels (representing the Pagan origins of painting and architecture) here recedes in favour of a more colourful and fictional relation to the past, ‘elevating domestic wares to centre stage’.<sup>96</sup>

The final chapter adopts a much broader scope, addressing colour as a matter of life and death through the prism of embodied colour. Embodied colour is illustrated here by the two panels devoted to the sculptural body: those depicting Pygmalion’s statue coming to life (Pagan sculpture, by Simeon Solomon) and Torrel’s carving of the funeral effigy of Eleanor for King Edward I (Christian sculpture, by Albert Moore). Both of these sculptural endeavours, presented in the making, use colour or the absence of colour as a means to reflect upon the thin line between flesh and inert matter. These key questions were being explored by many Victorian artists and poets in the wake of the rediscovery of the polychromy of Greek sculpture, which had led to new readings of Ovid’s tale. John Gibson himself appeared as a new ‘Pygmalion’, whose 1862 *Tinted Venus* betrayed his scandalous fascination with his own creation.

This brings us back to the 1862 London International Exhibition, a crucial moment both in the history of colour and for the Victorian understanding of history *through* colour. Burges’s Great Bookcase was given pride of place in this pivotal chromatic event. Here it stood, poised in the liminal space between private and public, Pagan and Christian, medieval and industrial,

---

<sup>95</sup> Stacy Marks, *Pen and Pencil Sketches*, vol. 1, p. 219.

<sup>96</sup> Stephanie Moser, *Painting Antiquity: Ancient Egypt in the Art of Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Edward Poynter and Edwin Long* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 92.



spiritual and material, an object 'glowing with imperishable colours' in the heart of 'smoky London'.<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup> Burges, *Art Applied to Industry*, p. 107.

## Chapter 1: Sanctifying colour

‘the hues of our cathedrals have died  
like the iris out of the cloud’  
John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849)

When the Great Bookcase was first publicly displayed at the 1862 London International Exhibition, Burges had not yet completed any major architectural project. Six years earlier, however, in 1856, Burges and his then associate Henry Clutton had defeated Viollet-le-Duc’s close collaborator, Jean-Baptiste Antoine Lassus in the international competition to build the cathedral Notre Dame de la Treille, in Lille. The jury’s verdict came as a surprise given the greater reputation of the French architect in his home country. Lassus did not even come second, but third, after William Morris’s mentor, G.E. Street. Burges’s and Clutton’s design was entitled ‘Foederis Arca’, or ‘Ark of the Covenant’ in reference to the inclusive and eclectic dimension of the project which included a rainbow-like range of Gothic fittings, from a ‘New Jerusalem’ font to a baldacchino glowing with ‘coloured mosaics, jewellery and a *repoussé* retable, of gilt metal.’<sup>1</sup> Although Burges never carried out his plans for the cathedral, the competition contributed to shifting the attention of English Revivalists away from Italian Gothic in favour of the architecture of 13<sup>th</sup> century France. William Morris, who had visited the Cathedrals of Northern France with Burne-Jones the previous year, accompanied Street to Lille, and may even have met Burges there.<sup>2</sup> Echoing Morris’s praise of the faded polychromy of Notre Dame d’Amiens, Burges’s ‘Ark of the Covenant’ project highlights the centrality of colour in mid-Victorian discussions of Gothic architecture and more generally of the medieval past.<sup>3</sup> Far from being strictly ornamental, the revelation of these medieval colours in the context of the Gothic revival testifies to a broader aesthetic and ideological reappraisal of the Middle Ages which Ruskin celebrated as a golden age. For Ruskin true colouring, as exemplified by the works of medieval artists, was not sensual, but ‘the purifying or sanctifying element of material beauty’.<sup>4</sup>

It is this tension between spiritual and material colours in the mid-Victorian reception of the Christian Middle Ages which this first chapter will explore in relation to Simeon Solomon’s New Jerusalem panel on the Christian origins of architecture and Thomas Morten’s

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Ecclesiologist* quoted in Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, 174.

<sup>2</sup> Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, 377.

<sup>3</sup> On the role of colour in Morris’ ‘Shadows of Amiens’ (1856), see my own ‘“The golden stain of time”: Remembering the colours of Amiens cathedral,’ 37-47.

<sup>4</sup> Ruskin, *CW*, 7:415 n.

representation of Fra Angelico as the allegory of the Christian origins of Christian painting (FIGS). Although they do not illustrate the same art, the two panels have common features: both St John and ‘Beato’ Angelico are depicted in postures of humility as if in awe of the sacred apparition of the multicoloured stones of the walls of the Heavenly City on the one hand and of a rainbow-like Virgin on the other. This chapter will contextualise the use of these spiritualised colours to shed light on Burges’s nostalgia for the sacred hues of the medieval age, which he shared and extolled with several of his High Victorian peers, notably Ruskin.

## I Medieval rainbows

### 1) The Gothic ‘school of colour’

In keeping with his strict evangelical upbringing, Ruskin believed that the ‘sanctity of colour’ was ‘distinctly stated in Scripture’ and that the ‘school of colour in Europe’ was ‘essentially Gothic *Christian*; and full of comfort and peace’.<sup>5</sup> Although terms of colour are rather scarce in the Bible, the image of the rainbow—the sacred and beautiful epitome of God’s covenant with Man—is a recurring one in Ruskin’s works. The ‘purity and brilliancy of its sevenfold hues’ appeared to him as primarily reminiscent and pre-Newtonian, like ‘the French windows of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries’ which Burges also favoured.<sup>6</sup> The example of the ethereal hues of the rainbow enabled Ruskin to embrace a purely sacred conception of colour as light reflected in the most beautiful of God’s creations:

...take a wider view of nature, and compare generally rainbows, sunrises, roses, violets, butterflies, birds, goldfish, rubies, opals, and corals, with alligators, hippopotami, lions, wolves, bears, swine, sharks, slugs, bones, fungi, fogs, and corrupting, stinging, destroying things in general, and you will feel then how the question stands between the colourists and chiaroscurists,—which of them have nature and life on their side, and which have sin and death.<sup>7</sup>

From rainbows to iridescent opals, Ruskin here moralizes colour as God’s beautiful gift to man which true colourists should celebrate. A natural theologian, he had already praised ‘the true colours of architecture’ as ‘those of natural stone’ in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), a text which soon became the manifesto of the advocates of Neo-Gothic constructional polychromy, exemplified by William Butterfield’s colourful All Saints’ Church in London (1859): ‘I cannot, therefore, consider architecture as in anywise perfect without colour. [...]’

---

<sup>5</sup> See Ruskin, CW, 6:69 and 20:140.

<sup>6</sup> Ruskin, CW, 10:457.

<sup>7</sup> Ruskin, CW, 6: 69.

Our building, if it is well composed, is one thing, and is to be coloured as Nature would colour one thing—a shell, a flower, or an animal.<sup>8</sup>

With its animal and flower frieze, Burges's Bookcase is a further illustration of Ruskin's romantic narrative of the organicity of Gothic architecture and a tribute to the dappled beauty of Nature. On par with the calceolaria, irises and pansies, the frieze representing butterflies, moths and tropical humming birds and aptly situated under the two panels devoted to architecture, appears particularly colourful (FIG). Some of these details may have been inspired by Rev. Francis Orpen Morris's *History of British Birds* (1850) and *History of British Butterflies* (1853), ornamented with numerous hand-coloured plates (FIG) which both featured in Burges's library.<sup>9</sup> For F.O. Morris and Ruskin, such iridescent creatures were 'divinely designed for human appreciation', a theory which Charles Darwin's 1862 study of the use of colour in the fertilization of orchids would soon challenge.<sup>10</sup>

From 'glittering fish' to the New Jerusalem, advocates of liturgical reform also drew on natural and Biblical examples to justify the extensive use of colour in Church decoration, as shown by this passage taken from the *Ecclesiologist*, a journal to which Burges regularly contributed:

Mere naked form, however graceful in itself is cold and unaffecting; may we not add unnatural? For whether we look at the inanimate works of creation, at the sky or the earth, at the setting sun, the glowing cloud; at the fields, mountains, trees, flowers, or at living objects, animals, reptiles, the glittering fish, the painted bird, the gaudy fly; or again at the description of the Tabernacle, the Temple, or the New Jerusalem; we see that every work of God—and from what other source has man any perception of beauty?—is adorned with colour.<sup>11</sup>

This passage is taken from a review of Pugin's *Glossary of Ecclesiastical Ornament and Costume* (1844). A 'wonderful man' in Burges's own words, Pugin was one of the most vocal proponents of the Gothic Revival in Victorian England.<sup>12</sup> Although Ruskin denied Pugin's influence, accusing him of having converted to Catholicism mainly for aesthetic reasons—'blown into a change of religion by the whine of an organ pipe; stitched into a new creed by

---

<sup>8</sup> Ruskin, CW, 8:176-7. However, as noted by John Unrau, Ruskin was not totally convinced by the polychromy of Butterfield's church: 'I do not altogether like the arrangements of colour in the brickwork; but these will hardly attract the eye, where so much has been already done with precious and beautiful marble, and is yet to be done in fresco. Much will depend, however, upon the colouring of this latter portion. I wish that either Holman Hunt or Millais could be prevailed upon to do at least some of these smaller frescoes.' Ruskin, CW, 11:229n quoted in Unrau, *Looking at Architecture with Ruskin*, 147.

<sup>9</sup> LS 1918, 11.

<sup>10</sup> On colour as a means to foster insect visitation in Darwin's 1862 essay *On the various contrivances by orchids are fertilised by insects*, see Richards, *Darwin and the Making of Sexual Selection*, 382.

<sup>11</sup> Anon. 'Review of Pugin's *Glossary of Ecclesiastical Ornament*,' 142. Burges owned the complete 27 volumes of *The Ecclesiologist* (1843-66). See LS 1918, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Burges, *The Church and the World*, 581. Burges owned almost all of Pugin's works, including the *Glossary of Ecclesiastical Ornament*.

the gold threads on priests' petticoats'—, it is evident that the two writers shared a common belief in the chromatic superiority of early Christian art over the modern.<sup>13</sup> But for Pugin, colour was not simply a metaphor. Published ten years after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, his *Glossary* is lavishly illustrated with chromolithographic plates, a technique he had first come across in the works of Owen Jones (FIG).<sup>14</sup> In opposition to the 'grey Protestantism of hue' inherited from the 'chromoclasm' of the Reformation, he enthusiastically embraced the polychrome decoration of Gothic churches as a reflection of heavenly beauty: 'the rich and varied hues of the stained windows, the modulated light, the gleam of the tapers, the richness of the altars, the venerable images of the departed just,—all alike conspire to fill the mind with veneration for the place, and to make it feel the sublimity of Christian worship.'<sup>15</sup>

Pugin contrasted in chromatic terms the moral superiority of medieval workmen, united in faith and fervour with the feeling of alienation brought about by the industrial Revolution. Similarly, Ruskin deplored that 'the hues of our cathedrals have died like the iris out of the cloud' which he interpreted as a sign of the soullessness of his own dark day and age:<sup>16</sup>

And first, it is evident that the title 'Dark Ages,' given to the mediæval centuries, is, respecting art, wholly inapplicable. [...]. They were the ages of gold: ours are the ages of umber [...]. The Middle Ages had their wars and agonies, but also intense delights. Their gold was dashed with blood; but ours is sprinkled with dust. Their life was interwoven with white and purple; ours is one seamless stuff of brown.<sup>17</sup>

The rich, luminous golds and purples of medieval fabrics are here made to jar with the common 'seamless stuff of brown' of modernity which Ruskin describes as 'umber', a material, earth pigment he most probably understood in its etymological, theologically-charged sense, derived from the Latin *ombra*, shadow.

While the conception of the Gothic as both materially and metaphorically 'dark' first emerged during the Renaissance, the Romantic rebellion against the rationalism of the Enlightenment further construed the medieval past as wild and sombre.<sup>18</sup> And yet, even the early Romantics were fully aware that the medieval past had been extremely colourful, as shown by the rich decoration of Horace Walpole's Neo-Gothic Strawberry Hill which strikingly contrasts with

---

<sup>13</sup> Ruskin quoted in Allitt, *Catholic Converts*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> See Wainwright 'Book Design and Production,' 162.

<sup>15</sup> Pugin, *A Glossary*, 4-5. On the 'chromoclasm' of the Protestant Reformation, see *The Ecclesiologist*, 'On Flowers as Employed in the Adornment of Churches,' 215 and Pastoureau, 'Morales de la couleur,' 36.

<sup>16</sup> Ruskin, CW, 8:80-81.

<sup>17</sup> Ruskin, CW, 5:321.

<sup>18</sup> Vasari, in particular, described the Gothic as both 'monstrous and barbarous'. See Sankovitch, 'The Myth of "the Myth of the Medieval"', 29.

the total absence of colour notations in his novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).<sup>19</sup> There were certainly more hues in the writings of Walter Scott describing the ‘Merrie England’ of old which fuelled Morris’ and Burges’s imagination in the 1850s.<sup>20</sup> For Charles Eastlake writing in 1872, ‘the service which Scott rendered to the cause of the Revival was to awaken popular interest in a style which had hitherto been associated, except by the educated few, with ascetic gloom and vulgar superstition’, an idea which Burges had already expressed fifteen years earlier: ‘the present revival of medieval art is due principally to the novels of Sir Walter Scott.’<sup>21</sup>

Scott’s novels unveil the rich material culture of the medieval past, strewn with bright heraldic colours and dazzling costumes, as shown by this passage describing the richly decorated setting of the Ashby tournament in *Ivanhoe* (1819):

Squires, pages, and yeomen in rich liveries, waited around this place of honour, which was designed for Prince John and his attendants. Opposite to this royal gallery was another, elevated to the same height, on the western side of the lists; and more gaily, if less sumptuously decorated, than that destined for the Prince himself. A train of pages and of young maidens, the most beautiful who could be selected, gaily dressed in fancy habits of green and pink, surrounded a throne decorated in the same colours.<sup>22</sup>

Such tournament scenes, which are among the most colourful in the novel, evoke Jean Froissart’s *Chroniques*, well-known to Morris and his circle (FIG). A collector of medieval manuscripts himself, Burges may well have consulted the original Froissart—whom he called ‘the medieval Herodotus’—in the British Museum.<sup>23</sup> Burges also owned a copy of H.N. Humphrey’s 1845 *Illuminated illustrations of Froissart* in which each image by the ‘Gothic artist’ is not only reproduced in vivid—albeit simplified—hues but usefully contextualised thanks to an accompanying commentary.<sup>24</sup> An early enthusiast of chromolithography, Humphrey collaborated with Owen Jones to revive the medieval art of missal painting. But for the *Froissart*, Humphrey added hand-colouring to perfect some of the plates.<sup>25</sup> These *Chroniques*

---

<sup>19</sup> As A. Charles Sewter notes, Walpole was also ‘among the first collectors of early stained glass.’ *The Stained Glass of William Morris and his circle*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> The expression ‘merrie England’ is repeated several times in Scott’s *Ivanhoe*.

<sup>21</sup> Eastlake, *A History of the Gothic Revival*, 113. Burges, ‘Paganism in the Middle Ages,’ 207. A copy of Eastlake’s *History* also featured in Burges’s library (1918 cat, 15).

<sup>22</sup> Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 78.

<sup>23</sup> Burges, *Art Applied to Industry*, 56. On the sixteen illuminated volumes in Burges’s collection, see Crook, *Burges*, 97-8.

<sup>24</sup> Humphreys, *Illuminated illustrations of Froissart*, n.p. See also LS 1918, 9.

<sup>25</sup> See Alice Beckwith’s commentary on Humphrey’s *Froissart*, on the Victorian web (consulted in September 2020) : <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/design/humphreys/8.html>  
See also Beckwith, *Victorian Bibliomania* (1987)

provided Morris with a certain number of key motifs, like the clumps of daisies in *Le Bal des Ardents* (FIG) which would later become one of the firm's favourite patterns.

This floral detail, which may have partly inspired the multicoloured flower frieze on Burges's bookcase (FIG), also appears in Morris's painting *La Belle Iseult* (1858), alongside the triangular, stylised trees of the blue tapestry directly copied from the same image in Froissart (FIG). Morris's painting of his then bride-to-be, Jane Burden, in medieval attire, is a glowing tribute to the colourful arts and crafts of the Middle Ages, from embroidery and woodcarving to illumination. The chromatic composition, alternating vivid heraldic hues, owes much to the Pre-Raphaelite sense of detail and medieval missal painting which shaped Morris' first volume of poetry, *The Defence of Guenevere* first published in 1858 and purchased by Burges two years later.<sup>26</sup> The complex patterning of the crown of yellow flowers in Jane's hair almost appears as a pictorial pendant to the intricate weaving of colours in 'The Gilliflower of Gold', Morris's poem about a knight fighting in a tournament. By translating the French 'jaune' as 'gold', Morris operates a translation of both meaning and value as the flower takes on a symbolic role in the unfolding of the story-line and in its metrical construction. 'Gold'—which plays a key structural role on Burges's bookcase—was a charged colour for Morris who used it in its material and metaphorical sense as noted by J.M.S. Tompkins: 'Gold is not invariably in Morris a token of social guilt ; much more often it is like the gold in the ballads, a radiant ceremonial splendour, a kingly emblem, a beauty won from the young and wealthy earth and shaped by human craftsmanship'.<sup>27</sup> The precious ore seems at first to play a contrapuntal function as the blood shed in combat is contrasted with memories of 'la belle jaune giroflée' over which the knight recalls his beloved Lady 'bow'd' her head:

A golden gilliflower to-day  
I wore upon my helm alway,  
And won the prize of this tourney.  
*Hah! hah! La belle jaune giroflée.* (l.1-4)

However from line 40 the rhythm of the poem changes as the golden flower is described as 'stain'd with red', suggesting the shedding of blood, not only of the knight's opponent but also of the lady herself. The temporality of the stained gillyflower then coincides with that of the tournament:

Until I thought of your dear head,  
Bow'd to the gilliflower bed,  
The yellow flowers stain'd with red;—  
*Hah! hah! La belle jaune giroflée.*

---

<sup>26</sup> Burges, Abstract of diaries, 1860.

<sup>27</sup> Tompkins, *William Morris, An Approach to the poetry*, 90.

Crash! how the swords met, "giroflee!"  
The fierce tune in my helm would play,  
"La belle! La belle jaune giroflee!"  
*Hah! hah! La belle jaune giroflée.* (l.41-8)

It is not only the swords that violently meet, but the colours themselves as the red stain disrupts the safe chromatic uniformity of medieval heraldry. By operating in 'strangely articulated temporal and spatial settings', as Elizabeth K. Helsinger argues, the 'lyric force' of Morris's medievalising hues not only stimulates emotion and memory, but provides 'a disturbing alternative to the ordered worlds of realist representation and to optimistic narratives of gradual progress and prosperity in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain'.<sup>28</sup>

Both Burges and Morris drew on such historically- and poetically-charged colours hues to dispel the 'gloomy' conceptions of the Middle Ages still prevalent in their own time. This is reflected in their decorative work, notably in the rich hues of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co.'s King René Honeymoon cabinet (FIG), exhibited alongside the Great Bookcase in 1862. 'Doubly unreal' with its decoration 'displaced to the Middle Ages' and inspired by Walter Scott's fiction *Anne von Geierstein* (1829), this cabinet evokes the life of King René of Anjou.<sup>29</sup> Burges, who contributed to this collaborative venture, owned a copy of a 19<sup>th</sup> century French edition of the writings of this 15<sup>th</sup> century King who happened to be also a poet and a patron of the arts.<sup>30</sup> As with the Great Bookcase, each panel of the cabinet allegorizes a specific art. Ford Madox Brown, who suggested the overall theme, designed the panel representing 'Architecture', Edward Burne-Jones the 'Painting' and 'Sculpture' panels while Dante Gabriel Rossetti illustrated 'Music' and 'Gardening'. The other small panels were by Val Prinsep ('Pottery', 'Weaving', 'Ironwork'). Morris (represented as smith in 'Ironwork') designed the decorative background for each panel. The figure of the lion rampant on the shield was drawn for Seddon by Burges, testifying to the architect's commitment to supporting the chromatic revival of the Middle Ages brought about by the young artists of Morris and Co..<sup>31</sup>

## 2) Reviving medieval colour in the 1850s

Burges designed the 1862 Medieval Court of the International Exhibition at the request of the Ecclesiological Society. If Oxford had been the home of the Tractarians, it was in Cambridge

---

<sup>28</sup> Helsinger, *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*, 84.

<sup>29</sup> Roquet, *Life in Costume*, 159.

<sup>30</sup> Comte de Quatrebarbes, *Les Œuvres choisies du Roi René*, 2 vols., 1849 in LS 1918, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, 299.



that the Cambridge Camden Society, later known as the Ecclesiological Society, was born, promoting ‘the science of Christian Aesthetics’.<sup>32</sup> Its journal, *The Ecclesiologist*, explicitly promoted the use of ‘Decorative Colour’ for church furnishings: ‘We are surely not called upon to prove that colour is beautiful. If it be not, why employ stained glass at all ? [...] We are consistent ; we would have every inch glowing. Puritans are consistent ; they would have every inch colourless.’<sup>33</sup> In the 1840s Francis Close of Cheltenham, author of *The Restoration of Churches is the Restoration of Popery*, thus ironized: ‘Romanism is taught *Analytically* at Oxford, it is taught *Artistically* at Cambridge...it is inculcated theoretically in tracts at the one University and it is *sculptured, painted and graven* at the other’.<sup>34</sup> Anti-Catholic rhetoric particularly focused on this dangerous taste for seductive colour favoured by suspiciously ‘popish’ advocates of liturgical reform who valued the lure of material splendour over the Word of God.<sup>35</sup>

Morris and Burne-Jones, who had originally envisaged a career as High-Church clergymen, certainly benefitted—like Burges himself—from the increase in commissions for the decoration of newly built or restored churches fostered by the Gothic Revival and pleas for liturgical reform. If the International Exhibition was the first venue where the newly-created firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. publicly displayed their work, the collaboration between the artists of the firm had started a few years earlier, in 1857, when Morris, Burne-Jones, Rossetti and Prinsep decorated the Oxford Union with frescos illustrating the Arthurian legends (FIG). This collective enterprise, which Kenneth Clark would later compare to the Great Bookcase, was enthusiastically praised by the poet Coventry Patmore in the *Saturday Review*:<sup>36</sup>

The characteristic in which (the paintings) strike us as differing most remarkably from preceding architectural painting is their entire abandonment of the subdued tone of colour and the simplicity and severity of form hitherto thought essential in such kinds of decoration, and the adoption of a style of colouring so brilliant as to make the walls look like the margin of a highly-illuminated manuscript. The eye, even when not directed to any of the pictures, is thus pleased with a voluptuous radiance of variegated tints, instead of being made dimly and unsatisfactorily conscious of something or other disturbing the uniformity of the wall-surfaces.<sup>37</sup>

The comparison with medieval manuscripts was a particularly apt one, as the young painters, who had no experience in mural painting, favoured saturated colours and simplified volumes.

---

<sup>32</sup> Anon. ‘Schools,’ 2.

<sup>33</sup> Anon. ‘On Decorative Colour,’ 200-201.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Yates, *Anglican Ritualism*, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Pastoureau, ‘Morales de la couleur,’ 40.

<sup>36</sup> ‘a minor realisation of the ideals behind such projects as the decoration of the Library of the Oxford Union’ Clark quoted in Winterbottom, ‘Not acceptable to present taste’, 15.

<sup>37</sup> Patmore, ‘Walls and Wall painting at Oxford’, 583.

Although medieval colouring techniques were becoming better known at the time thanks to the translation of treatises on fresco and missal painting, these young artists applied their coloured materials without undercoating directly onto the whitewashed walls before the mortar had dried, which resulted in quick fading.<sup>38</sup>

Patmore's review, published before the murals were completed and discoloured, opens with a reference to William Butterfield's intensely polychrome All Saints Church which had by then become the model church of the Ecclesiologists.<sup>39</sup> A similar sacred 'mysteriousness' pervades Rossetti's colour harmonies:

The apparition of the 'Damsel of the Sancgrael,' surrounded with angels, on the wall of the Union, is a remarkable example of this mysteriousness. It is no skilful balance, according to academical rules or recipes by Mr. Owen Jones, of a red robe here, with a blue one there – it is 'like a steam of rich, distilled perfumes,' and affects the eye much as one of Mendelssohn's most unwordable 'Lieder ohne Wörter' impresses the ear. The colour is as sweet, bright, and pure, as that of the frailest waif of cloud in the sunrise; and yet, if closely looked into, there is scarcely a square inch of half those hundred square feet of colour which has not half-a-dozen different tints in it. The colours, coming thus from points instead of from masses, are positively radiant, at the same time that they are wholly the reverse of glaring.<sup>40</sup>

Rossetti's colours, described as 'sweet, bright and pure' and almost prismatic seem dematerialized to the point of attaining the quality of music. Patmore here strikingly contrasts Rossetti's mystic palette with the cold, rational chromatic 'rules' prescribed by Owen Jones and shunned by Ruskin.<sup>41</sup>

Although by 1857 Morris had already left the Oxford office of his architectural mentor, in his lecture to the Ecclesiological Society entitled 'On the Future of Art in England' Street not only praised the murals but claimed 'the Pre-Raphaelite movement' was 'identical with our own', an assertion that Burges would later corroborate in his 1860 discussion of 'Pre-Raphaelitism and the Gothic Revival.'<sup>42</sup> According to Eve Blau, these experimentations carried out by Morris and his circle in emulation of the collaborative work of medieval craftsmen were decisive in promoting Burges and Street's new conception of 'art-architecture,' in which colour was to play a central role:

---

<sup>38</sup> Blau, *Ruskinian Gothic*, 89.

<sup>39</sup> Patmore, 'Walls and Wall painting at Oxford', 584. On the polychromy of Butterfield's All Saints Church, see Muthesius, *The High Victorian Movement in Architecture*, 59.

<sup>40</sup> Patmore, 'Walls and Wall painting at Oxford,' 583-584.

<sup>41</sup> See Ruskin, CW, 12:500 : 'a man of no talent, a bad colourist, would be ready to give you mathematical reasons for every colour' he uses, 'the real man of talent' works entirely by instinct.'

<sup>42</sup> Burges, 'Pre-Raphaelitism and the Gothic Revival,' 249.

At the present day there is, I think, absolutely no one point in which we fail so much, and about which the world in general has so little feeling, as that of colour. [. . .] The task, therefore, and duty of architects at the present day is mainly that of awakening and then satisfying this feeling [. . .]

Perhaps in all this there may be something more than art can ever grapple with ; it may be ingrain and part of the necessity of the present age ; but, if so. Oh ! for the days when, as of yore, colour may be appreciated and beloved, when uniformity shall not be considered beauty, nor an ugly plainness be considered a fit substitute for severity !<sup>43</sup>

With the exception of illuminated manuscripts, stained glass was the only Gothic art form whose colours ‘of yore’ had survived the test of time. From the late 1850s, Burne-Jones, Morris and Burges started designing such rainbow-like windows described in *Ivanhoe* as a ‘species of emblazonment, that breaks the golden light of God’s blessed day into so many fantastic hues.’<sup>44</sup> The mid 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of great ‘excitement and innovation’ in stained glass which had not been seen since the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>45</sup> High Victorian stained glass panels paid tribute to the jewel-like quality of medieval colour, analysed in the following terms by Francis Wilson Oliphant in 1855:

The power of glass [. . .] to convey colour is quite unique; no kind of painting can at all come up to it. [. . .] But to return to glass as a vehicle of light and colour;—made in the old manner, it is a luminous material, full of points which catch the light like the facets of a diamond; and it is this which accounts for the gemlike lustre of old windows. Always light, because always suspended against the day, they yet respond with indescribable sympathy to every change in the heavens, answering one by one, sweet vassals of the sunbeams, according to place and aspect, to the inspiration of the light.<sup>46</sup>

Here extolled in Biblical tones, the ‘old manner’ of stained-glass design consisted in a mosaic-like composition of small pieces of variously coloured glass, as opposed to the technique of glass painting which prevailed until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The writings of stained glass historian Charles Winston, and in particular his *Inquiry into the Difference of Style observable in Ancient Glass Painting* (1847), strongly contributed to the promotion of this medieval mosaic system, which Morris embraced.<sup>47</sup> Winston, who collaborated with Powell and Sons at the 1862 exhibition, was a pioneer in his use of chemistry as the means to retrieve the lost art of ancient stained-glass: ‘If the colours in these windows equal the best of the ancient, of which there is

---

<sup>43</sup> Street, ‘On the Future of Art in England,’ 278 and 285. Blau, *Ruskinian Gothic*, 91-2.

<sup>44</sup> Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 227.

<sup>45</sup> Lawrence and Wilson, *The Cathedral of Saint Finn Barr at Cork*, 92.

<sup>46</sup> Oliphant, *A Plea for Painted Glass*, 21-2.

<sup>47</sup> Sewter, *The Stained Glass of William Morris*, 4 et sq.

little doubt, it is owing to the various specimens he caused to be analysed, and the synthetic experiments he made, which enabled him to reproduce the glass, and furnish the recipes gratuitously to the glass-maker.’<sup>48</sup>

Burges, who owned several of Winston’s books and referred to him as ‘my friend Winston’ in his *Lectures on Art applied to Industry*, supported this revival of medieval techniques, which he may have wished to imitate in the eight mosaic spandrels he designed for the Bookcase (FIG).<sup>49</sup> Like Oliphant, he praised Gothic stained glass as the most jewel-like of art forms: ‘the old work looks like jewels...the new work resembles of bad kaleidoscope’.<sup>50</sup> Within the overall Gothicizing architectural design of the Great Bookcase, the eight panels could also be envisaged as stained-glass windows, especially as several contributors to the project like Henry Holiday or Nathaniel Westlake became full-time stained-glass artists in their own right following their decisive collaboration with Burges.<sup>51</sup> Simeon Solomon even produced a stained-glass version of his New Jerusalem panel as part of Burges’ 1859 commission for the restoration of Waltham Abbey, which had been vandalised during the Reformation (FIG).<sup>52</sup> Burne-Jones, whom Burges considered as ‘one of our best colourists’ owing to the dazzling quality of his coloured cartoons, also take part in this restoration project.<sup>53</sup> The painter revisited the typically Gothic motif of the *Tree of Jesse*, first introduced by Suger at Saint Denis, in a design that was showcased at the 1862 exhibition for James Powell & Sons (FIG). Burges however complained that this window ‘which in its place looks exceedingly rich and jewel-like’ appeared as ‘a mass of confusion’ in the modern lighting conditions of the exhibition building.<sup>54</sup> The perception of stained glass as a medievalising ecclesiastical art form, was evidently ‘challenged and complicated’ in such a secular, industrial spaces.<sup>55</sup>

### 3) Monastic hues: the Angelican ideal

When Morris and his friends embarked on the project of the Oxford Union murals in 1857, Street compared their dazzling hues with ‘all the gorgeous colour in which early—and indeed all pure—artists took so intense a delight.’<sup>56</sup> Although these ‘pure’ hues soon faded, this

---

<sup>48</sup> Apsley Pellat quoted in Goldring, ‘Recovered or Perfected’ <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.2893>

<sup>49</sup> Burges, *Art applied to Industry*, 22. Burges owned copies of Winston’s *Hints on Glass Painting* and his *Memoirs Illustrative of the Art of Glass Painting*.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Crook, *Burges*, 186.

<sup>51</sup> See Holiday, *Reminiscences of my Life*, 74

<sup>52</sup> Source: Wainwright, *Architect-Designers from Pugin to Mackintosh*, 18. For a more detailed analysis of this panel see infra.

<sup>53</sup> Burges, *Art applied to Industry*, 22.

<sup>54</sup> Burges, ‘The International Exhibition,’ 9.

<sup>55</sup> Allen, *Windows for the World*, 45.

<sup>56</sup> Street, ‘On the Future of Art in England’, 236.

collaboration revealed these artists' need to recreate an artistic brotherhood, in the manner of medieval guilds or of monastic artists like Fra Angelico, whom Street claimed had produced 'the best Early Italian Wall Painting.'<sup>57</sup> Burges also called for a revival of such artistic 'combinations' which he saw best epitomised by the firm Morris & Co.: 'they will not be ashamed of doing what Giotto and Fra Angelico, among many others, were not ashamed to do. The time is probably not so very far distant, when a nobleman, having built his house, will, as a natural consequence, call in, not his upholsterer but his artists or some such combination of artists, as the present firm of Marshall, Morris, and Co.'<sup>58</sup>

In this, Morris and his friends were following in the footsteps of the German Nazarenes who had been the first to encourage the revival of fresco painting. Rejecting neoclassical academism, this group of artists had formed in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to advocate a return to the spiritual values of medieval art. In 1810, four of their founding members moved to Rome and settled in the disused convent of San Isidoro, where they led a monastic existence, possibly in emulation of the Dominican friar and artist Fra Angelico, whose works they also engraved.<sup>59</sup> Although the group disbanded in the 1840s, their influence persisted well into the century as well as across borders, from France to England. In 1854, Burges thus visited Overbeck's studio in Rome to pay homage to 'the worthiest successor of Fra Angelico.'<sup>60</sup>

The Victorian rediscovery of Fra Angelico is closely tied to the revival of interest in Early Italian Masters which was primarily fostered in England by the Arundel Society. The Arundel Society had originally been founded in 1848, with the aim to 'collect diligently and with discrimination the highest and best examples of Art and to bring them before hundreds of English minds.'<sup>61</sup> Among these 'best examples' were the works of 'Beato' Angelico, whose paintings and frescoes were lithographed as early as 1849 by Georg Scharf to accompany the first English translation of Vasari's *Life* of the painter in 1850. This publication introduced the subscribers of the Society to the works of an artist who was already much appreciated by connoisseurs in Germany and in France. Elizabeth A. Pergam has retraced this primordial German influence in developing the fashion for Primitives in England encouraged by Prince Albert.<sup>62</sup> In England, the German scholar and museum director Dr Waagen, thus advised

---

<sup>57</sup> Street, 'On the Future of Art in England', 239.

<sup>58</sup> Burges, 'The Late Exhibition', 338.

<sup>59</sup> Gossman, 'Beyond Modern', 73.

<sup>60</sup> See Burges's Abstract of diaries, 1854 and Cartier, *Vie de Fra Angelico*, 400. This text, dedicated to the Dominican Friar Lacordaire, was translated into English in 1867.

<sup>61</sup> Ledger, *A Study of the Arundel Society*, 1.

<sup>62</sup> See Pergam, *The Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857* (2011).

Charles Eastlake in his purchase of Italian Primitives for the National Gallery.<sup>63</sup> In France, it was Seroux d'Agincourt, whose *Histoire de l'art par ses monuments* (1811-23) first reproduced Angelico's frescos in the Vatican, who played a crucial role in popularizing Early Italian Art. Burges owned two copies of this work (including a German translation).<sup>64</sup> Cartier notes that Seroux d'Agincourt was the first to single out the monk's most delicate colouring.<sup>65</sup> In turn the volume inspired Alexis-François Rio's *De la poésie chrétienne* (1836) which marked a turning point in the reappraisal of Early Christian art. The 1854 English translation of this text, illustrated with a single print of Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin*, even reached a far greater readership than the original French. Rio, in particular, was a major influence on Anna Jameson whose multi-volume series on Early Italian art all featured in Burges's library.<sup>66</sup> Like Rio, Jameson praised the delicacy and vividness of Fra Angelico's colours, a skill due as much to his faith as well as to having 'been taught by Starnina, the best colourist of that time.'<sup>67</sup>

Interest in Early Italian art in England further grew in the 1850s as collectors and galleries progressively acquired works by Giotto or Fra Angelico which until then could only be seen on the Continent. In 1850 the diplomat and art collector William Fox-Strangways donated to the Ashmolean Museum a portable altar by Fra Angelico (and his studio) representing in the brightest ultramarine *The Virgin and Child adored by Angels and Saint Dominic* (FIG). On 3 November 1855, the Arundel Society organised at the Crystal Palace an exhibition of works of art belonging to the Society, 'consisting of tracings and drawings from paintings by Giotto and other early Italian artists.' Matthew Digby Wyatt, Burges's mentor, delivered the opening address which, although very centred on Giotto, also discussed Fra Angelico: 'a most pious man [who] devoted his thoughts and his time to painting sacred subjects.'<sup>68</sup>

Two years later, in 1857, Waagen was commissioned to write a guide to the Manchester Art Treasures exhibition which in the section devoted to the ancient Masters displayed two works by Fra Angelico, listed by Georg Scharf as *The Entombment of the Virgin* (formerly misattributed to Giotto) and a fresco representing a crucifixion.<sup>69</sup> Following the success of the Manchester exhibition, the Arundel Society decided to develop its means of disseminating reproductions of Early Italian Masters, with the help of its new director, Henry Layard. Although Layard is now best known for his excavations in Mesopotamia, he was at the time

---

<sup>63</sup> Ledger, *A Study of the Arundel Society*, 29.

<sup>64</sup> LS 1918, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Cartier, *Vie de Fra Angelico*, 405.

<sup>66</sup> LS 1918, 13.

<sup>67</sup> Jameson, *Memoirs of the Early Italian Painters*, vol.1, 122 and 118.

<sup>68</sup> Wyatt, 'An address delivered in the Crystal Palace,' 16.

<sup>69</sup> Scharf, *Catalogue of the Art Treasures*, 15.

famed for his expertise in Italian Art and acted as advisor for Charles Eastlake on his purchases for the National Gallery.<sup>70</sup> He had consolidated this expertise during his tours of Italy in 1853 and then in 1855, in the company of Mrs. Higford Burr whose watercolours were exhibited at the Arundel Society's annual meeting on 29th May 1857.<sup>71</sup> His main area of interest was protecting the endangered trecento and quattrocento frescoes. In an 1858 lecture on fresco-painting, published in the *Quarterly review*, he evoked Fra Angelico and Gentile da Fabriano's defence of the old 'ideal and spiritual' order against the new, realistic tendency that was emerging in the 15th century.<sup>72</sup> Layard convinced the Society that these frescoes were in need of preservation and one of the means of doing this was to record them as faithfully as possible, not only through the limited medium of watercolour but thanks to the new technique of chromolithography, which he termed 'lithochrome'.<sup>73</sup> The Society then entered into a binding contract with a firm of German chromolithographers and notably with the Dresden-born engraver Ludwig Gruner, another of Prince Albert's personal 'advisers in art' who had previously engraved two plates after Fra Angelico.<sup>74</sup> Despite their technical limitations in rendering the texture of the fresco and the handling of the artist, these new chromolithographs of Early Italian art soon became precious collectibles, with a decorative rather than devotional function.<sup>75</sup>

By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the colourful works of Italian primitives had therefore become much more easily accessible. These sacred colours were soon emulated by the Pre-Raphaelites who included Fra Angelico in their 'List of Immortals' compiled in August 1848. The Brotherhood's predilection for hue over line was, however, viewed with growing distrust in the wake of the Oxford Movement. As Hilary Fraser explains, it was 'ironically' the advent of Pre-Raphaelitism that 'turned the hitherto uncontroversial respect for the early Italian painters into a taste and tendency to be regarded by some with deep suspicion' as if it implied 'a sympathy for Rome, via Pugin's Gothic Revival and the ecclesiological tastes engendered by Tractarianism'.<sup>76</sup> It is true that Pugin had singled out Fra Angelico as part of that 'most illustrious race of Catholic artists' which the Italian Middle Ages had produced before the iconoclastic and chromoclastic

---

<sup>70</sup> On Layard, see Cooper, 'The Popularization of Renaissance Art in Victorian England,' 273-4. Burges owned Layard's 2 volume study of *Nineveh and its Remains* (1849) See LS 1918, 11.

<sup>71</sup> On the collaboration between Layard and Mrs Higford Burr (whose watercolours D.G. Rossetti admired), see Ledger, *A Study of the Arundel Society*, 82.

<sup>72</sup> Layard, 'Fresco-painting', 301.

<sup>73</sup> Layard, 'Fresco-painting', 306.

<sup>74</sup> Ledger, *A Study of the Arundel Society*, 86-7. Burges owned a copy of Gruner's *Italian Fresco Paintings of Churches and Palaces in Italy* (1854) illustrated with numerous coloured plates. See LS 1882, 21. On chromolithography as a German specialty, see Twyman, *Images en couleurs*, 20.

<sup>75</sup> See Cooper, 'The Popularization of Renaissance Art in Victorian England', 284-5.

<sup>76</sup> Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, 103.

turn of the Reformation.<sup>77</sup> In this heated context, Rossetti even had to translate the Latin title of his second Marian painting, *Ecce Ancilla Domine* to dispel accusations of ‘popery’ and ‘Mariolatry’.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Morten’s Virgin appears more suspiciously Pre-Raphaelite than Early Italian. The Madonna’s awkward posture as well as the wrinkles on the pallid face of Angelico recall the uncompromising realism and crude colours of early Pre-Raphaelite painting.

Rossetti’s knowledge of early Italian art was mainly derived from Rio’s *De la poésie chrétienne*, whose Romanist leanings made many Victorian art critics most uncomfortable. When Jameson acknowledged her debt to her ‘friend Mr. Rio’ she was equally careful to distance herself from his openly Catholic perspective, by explaining in her preface to the *Sacred and Legendary art* that she had ‘taken throughout the aesthetic and not the religious view’ of medieval art.<sup>79</sup> However uneasy with Rio himself, Ruskin celebrated the Pre-Raphaelites as part of the same colourist school as the Early Italian Masters: ‘Orcagna, John Bellini, Perugino, and Angelico, are its leading masters. All the men who compose it are, without exception, *colourists*. The modern Pre-Raphaelites belong to it.’<sup>80</sup>

In order to sever the colours of Angelico from the material stuff of Catholic worship, Ruskin drew once again on the ethereal image of the rainbow. An exponent of ‘Pure Religious Art’, Fra Angelico was described by Ruskin as the type of the Christian painter: ‘he is not an artist – properly so called – but an inspired saint.’<sup>81</sup> The colours of the monk were a revelation which he related in a letter to his father:

Talk of chiaroscuro and colour; give me those burnished angel wings of which every plume is wrought out in beaten gold, in zones of crimson and silver colour alternately, which play and flash like, and with far more rainbow hue about them than, the breasts of the Valparaiso birds, which, however, will give you some idea of the effect and power of light in them. And then the faces, without one shadow of earth or mortality about them, all glorified.<sup>82</sup>

By the time the last volume of *Modern Painters* came out in print, Ruskin’s fascination with the religious art of Fra Angelico had abated in favour of the more sensual colours of Venice and of Tintoretto and Giorgione.<sup>83</sup> Despite his attraction to these Venetian hues, Ruskin never wavered from his praise of the sanctity of Angelico’s colours. For the Victorian critic, ‘The art

---

<sup>77</sup> Pugin, *Contrasts*, 12. Pettejohn, *Modern Painters, Old Masters*, 104.

<sup>78</sup> Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, 33.

<sup>79</sup> Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art*, vol.1, xxxii and xi.

<sup>80</sup> Ruskin, CW, 6:469. See also Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, 128.

<sup>81</sup> Ruskin, CW, 4:xxxiv.

<sup>82</sup> Ruskin, CW, 4:332n.

<sup>83</sup> Ruskin, CW, 7:373. See also Dellamora, ‘The Revaluation of “Christian” Art,’ 147-8 and Bullen, ‘Whoring after colour: Venetian Painting in England,’ 129-130.



of Angelico, both as a colourist and a draughtsman, is consummate; so perfect and beautiful that his work may be recognised at any distance by the rainbow play and brilliancy of it.’<sup>84</sup> This point he emphasized in his 57-page long review of Lord Lindsay’s *Sketches of the History of Christian Art* (1847) which had ranked Giotto’s art over Angelico’s ‘contemplative’ child-like ‘naiveté’. For Lindsay, ‘Fra Angelico and some later painters’ had ‘dipped their pencils in the rainbow that circles the throne of God, — they are pure and modest, but that is all.’<sup>85</sup> Ruskin, on the contrary, insisted on the monk’s pure colouring as a sign of his moral superiority:

We are sorry that our author cannot unreservedly praise the colouring of Angelico; [...] His colour is, in its sphere and to its purpose, as perfect as human work may be: wrought to radiance beyond that of the ruby and opal, its inartificialness prevents it from arresting the attention it is intended only to direct; were it composed with more science it would become vulgar from the loss of its unconsciousness; if richer, it must have parted with its purity, if deeper, with its joyfulness, if more subdued, with its sincerity.<sup>86</sup>

Here both men use the same metaphor, that of the rainbow and of its ‘many tints’ merging ‘imperceptibly into their following or succeeding ones’, a theologically-charged symbol to interpret the sacred palette of the Christian painter. A few years later, George Eliot, whose *Romola* (1863) acknowledged the Renaissance as a moment of ‘crisis in Western culture where medieval and modern collided,’ similarly described the frescoes in the convent of San Marco as ‘delicate as the rainbow on the melting cloud [...] as if they had been sudden reflections cast from an ethereal world, where the Madonna sat crowned in her radiant glory’.<sup>87</sup>

A plea in favour of the ‘radiant glory’ of medieval art(s), Morten’s and Solomon’s panels may therefore be read in the light of the moral dilemma which the ambiguous status of colour—both material and spiritual—posed to medieval and Victorian artists alike.

## II The Heavenly Jerusalem or the revelation of colour

### 1) Solomon’s ‘vision’

The second panel of the bookcase must have borne a special significance for Burges as it represents the sacred origins of his own art, architecture. Although he never travelled to the Holy Land, Jerusalem clearly exercised a powerful influence on the imagination of Burges who

---

<sup>84</sup> Ruskin, CW, 9:449.

<sup>85</sup> Lindsay, *Sketches*, vol.2, 264. On this image of the artist dipping his brush into the colours of the rainbow which recalls Angelica Kauffmann’s pictorial allegory of *Colour*, see Korzilius, ‘Constable et le problème de l’arc-en-ciel en peinture,’ 254.

<sup>86</sup> Ruskin, CW, 12:238-40.

<sup>87</sup> Eliot, *Romola*, 529. As a woman Eliot was banned from entering the convent so she had to rely on George Henry Lewes’s descriptions. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, 11.

owned several books on the Biblical, ancient and modern city.<sup>88</sup> The panel is the only one inspired by the Bible, more specifically by St John's vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem, related in Revelation 21:9-23.

A painter of religious 'visions', Simeon Solomon was the ideal choice to depict this theological subject. Burges probably first met Solomon through his friend and neighbour George Price Boyce on 13 February 1858 as he notes in his *Diaries*: 'Miss Cooke came to sit for me. Little Simeon Solomon called and stayed a long while and jawed and bored us considerably. Burges came up and I introduced them.'<sup>89</sup> In later entries, Boyce writes more enthusiastically of Solomon and his work, particularly his drawings on Biblical themes. It is certainly thanks to Boyce that Burges had access to these drawings, which may in turn have prompted Burges to ask Solomon to depict no fewer than three of the panels of the Great Bookcase: Christian Architecture, Pagan Sculpture and Christian Philosophy. The young painter was then starting to acquire a good reputation as a painter specialising in scenes from the Old Testament. One of his first major paintings was *The Mother of Moses* exhibited in 1860 at the Royal Academy, which received critical acclaim for its original and very colourful 'Egyptianesque' treatment of the Biblical figures.<sup>90</sup> The Dalziel brothers admired the painting and in 1862 invited Solomon (alongside Poynter and Burne-Jones among others) to contribute six engravings derived from the Hebrew Scriptures to their illustrated Bible.

The New Jerusalem panel, which features Solomon's monogram and the date of 1860, was his first venture into New Testament subjects. It represents an Angel clad in majestic purple measuring the colourful, celestial temple before a humbled St John, dressed in a dark green, who, rather than admiring the beautiful colours is head-bent, taking notes. John's tutelary animal, the eagle, evoked in Revelation 4.7 to symbolise the acuteness of the saint's vision, is depicted crowned with a golden halo. An admirer of the art of illumination, Burges may have wished to reference early medieval miniature portraits of St John the Evangelist in the act of writing. In this 12<sup>th</sup> century manuscript (then in the British Museum) the Greek name of John is similarly inscribed in Gothic letters against a gold background (FIG).<sup>91</sup> Burges was familiar with such medieval gilding techniques described in *De diversis artibus* by the 12<sup>th</sup> century monk Theophilus.<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> See Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, 51 and LS 1918, 22.

<sup>89</sup> Surtees, *The Diaries of George Price Boyce*, 21.

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Cruise, *Love Revealed*, 85.

<sup>91</sup> This MS was purchased by the British Museum in 1785 and is now kept in the British Library.

<sup>92</sup> Burges, RIBA discussion on illuminated MSS, 395.

Following Burges's commission, Solomon sketched in 1861 a more private 'Study for Ezekiel and the Angel' (FIG) formerly in the possession of Robert Ross. Depicting a naked Angel side by side with an elderly, bearded and head-bent Ezekiel, the sketch appears as a black and white homoerotic counterpart to the colourful bookcase panel. As in his earlier drawings of scenes from the Story of David and Jonathan (1856), Solomon here appropriates 'the authority of the Bible [...] to explore, interpret and define his own homoerotic yearnings'.<sup>93</sup> Ezekiel 40-48 is also the first record of the New Jerusalem: guided by an Angel with a measuring rod, the prophet discovers the beauty of God's Temple, made up of high walls and twelve gates. The two Biblical visions of the Heavenly City are strikingly similar in their reference to coloured materials which the Bible often favoured over abstract colour terms.<sup>94</sup> In both theophanies, precious stones emit a radiance illustrating the presence of God.<sup>95</sup> According to Athalya Brenner, 'the Ancients did not assign names to gems according to their mineral combination but according to external properties, mainly brilliance and colour or the strength and toughness of the stone.'<sup>96</sup> The depiction of the Heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation 21:9-23 nonetheless stands out as the more dazzling sight:

And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife.

And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, Having the glory of God: and her light *was* like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal;

And had a wall great and high, *and* had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are *the names* of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel:

On the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates.

And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

And he that talked with me had a golden reed to measure the city, and the gates thereof, and the wall thereof.

And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal.

And he measured the wall thereof, an hundred *and* forty *and* four cubits, *according to* the measure of a man, that is, of the angel.

And the building of the wall of it was *of* jasper: and the city *was* pure gold, like unto clear glass.

<sup>93</sup> Seymour, 'Simeon Solomon and the Biblical Construction of Marginal Identity in Victorian England', 98.

<sup>94</sup> On the colours of the Bible, see Jacquesson, 'Les mots de la couleur en hébreu ancien,' 67.

<sup>95</sup> See Jart, 'The Precious Stones in the Revelation of St John xxi.18-21', 150-181.

<sup>96</sup> Brenner, *Colour Terms in the Old Testament*, 165.

And the foundations of the wall of the city *were* garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation *was* jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald;

The fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, a topaz; the tenth, a chrysoprasus; the eleventh, a jacinth; the twelfth, an amethyst.

And the twelve gates *were* twelve pearls; every several gate was of one pearl: and the street of the city *was* pure gold, as it were transparent glass.

And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it.

And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb *is* the light thereof.

(King James's Bible)

Given how scarce colour terms are in the Scriptures, such a colourful revelation must have appealed to both Solomon and Burges who both favoured the art of the Middle Ages over its theology.<sup>97</sup> In his *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture*, Viollet-le-Duc had singled out St John's prophetic vision as a recurrent pictorial and stained-glass subject in the Middle Ages.<sup>98</sup> In Solomon's vision, the city of God is metonymically figured by a pillar made up of twelve different coloured foundation stones. The pillar was originally a whole multicoloured wall which served as a background to the panel, as revealed by the combined use of an infrared camera and XRF analyses (FIG). Burges had this wall subsequently covered in gold, possibly to simplify the overall chromatic composition of the bookcase. The infrared filter also shows under-drawing inscriptions on each of the stones, which may have been intended to guide Solomon whose colours strictly follow those listed in the King James's Bible (FIG).<sup>99</sup> The Hebrew letters next to the rainbow pillar read 'Min' indicating that it the gate is that of the tribe of Benjamin out of the twelve tribes of Israel symbolized by each gem.<sup>100</sup>

Alongside these precious stones, the gleaming gold background, the ruby-like vial containing the plagues of the Apocalypse which the Angel carries around his waist, the three golden halos as well as the mirror like glass floor further suggest the idea of divine radiance, reminiscent of the coloured rays of light filtering through stained-glass: 'the street of the city *was* pure gold, as it were transparent glass'. In chapter 28 of *De diversis artibus* entitled 'De gemmis picto vitro imponendis,' Theophilus directly addresses the role of art—and in particular stained glass—

---

<sup>97</sup> As Mordaunt Crook puts it (*Burges*, 171): 'His religion was the art of the Middle Ages, not its theology.'

<sup>98</sup> Viollet-le-Duc, 'Apocalypse,' *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture*, vol.1, 24. Burges owned numerous works by the French architect, including his 10 volume *Dictionnaire*. See LS 1882, 1.

<sup>99</sup> Thistlewood, 'An Examination of William Burges's Great Bookcase,' 29.

<sup>100</sup> I am very grateful to Clive Kennard for translating this inscription.

as the application of the ‘gifts of the Holy Spirit.’<sup>101</sup> Burges also owned a copy of Rev. Charles William King’s 1860 volume on antique gems which explained the ‘mystic virtues’ of medieval glass in the light of ‘the Gems of the Apocalypse.’ St John’s description of the walls of the Holy City, King notes, is surprisingly arranged, not ‘in the order of the gems in the High Priest’s breastplate [...] but according to their various shades of colour’, that is to say aesthetically rather than theologically.<sup>102</sup>

This emphasis on colour as light is even more striking in Solomon’s stained-glass version of this design which Burges commissioned in 1862. If the composition of the two images is exactly the same, the stained-glass window, however, presents a very different colour scheme. In this *grisaille* in grey and gold, the walls of the Heavenly Jerusalem appear a uniform purple and its jewel-like colours are displaced onto the angel’s wings, the landscape and the sun.

For the stained-glass windows of St. Fin Barre’s Cathedral in Cork (1865), Burges experimented with a third type of chromatic arrangement with the emphasis laid on the rich colours of Zechariah’s garments and the rainbow-like wings of the angel measuring Jerusalem (FIG). Similar iridescent effects can be found in Burges’s cartoon representing the ‘Creation of Birds and Fishes’, where glittering fish and a peacock with a glowing tail are given pride of place (FIG). This cartoon, like the *pietra dura* birds and flowers on the Bookcase, illustrate the beauty and the ‘spiritual power’ of iridescence which Diana Young attributes to it ‘labile quality’ which ‘moves with light between invisible and visible’ (FIG).<sup>103</sup> The recurrence of such colourful revelations in Burges’s iconography has led Richard Wood to assert that the architect was always ‘Searching for the New Jerusalem,’ a quest which was evidently more chromatic than religious.<sup>104</sup> Divesting colour from its material opacity, the colourful dream vision of the Heavenly City indeed emphasizes the purely spiritual, luminous quality of colour, in keeping with the Augustinian credo that God is light.

## 2) From St Augustine to Suger: A chromatic theophany

When Burges chose the colourful revelation of the Heavenly Jerusalem to represent Christian Architecture, he was certainly aware that the Biblical text had already served as a liturgical and theological justification for the use of coloured materials in the decoration of cathedrals in 12<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>101</sup> See Turner and Oltrogge in ‘Pigment Recipes for Knowledge Transmission,’ 89. Burges owned a copy of a 1847 translation of Theophilus by Robert Hendrie. LS 1918, 14.

<sup>102</sup> King, *Antique Gems*, 428.

<sup>103</sup> Young, *Rematerializing Colour*, 16.

<sup>104</sup> See Wood, *Searching for the New Jerusalem* (2013).

and 13<sup>th</sup> century France, a period which he emulated in his own architectural practice.<sup>105</sup> This idea is clearly stated in the works of the 13<sup>th</sup> century French bishop William Durandus, which Burges's friend the Rev. Benjamin Webb—founder of Cambridge Camden Society—translated in 1843: 'For the material church, wherein the people assemble to set forth God's holy praise, symboliseth that Holy Church which is built in heaven of living stones.'<sup>106</sup>

This Biblical reading of Gothic architecture seems particularly relevant to Solomon's panel which bears a metonymical relationship to the whole bookcase structurally and chromatically conceived as a Gothic edifice, or in Stacy Marks's terms: as 'a painted architectural arrangement of pillars and arches, the whole crowned with parapet and gables' designed by 'adherents to the Gothic revival movement.'<sup>107</sup>

But Solomon's depiction of the New Jerusalem as the Christian origin of architecture also be functions as a visual and rhetorical allegory. A visual allegory because the Heavenly City is materialised as a coloured wall and a rhetorical allegory because this representation draws on allegorical—in the sense of hermeneutical—interpretation of the Biblical text, equating each gem with the light of God. In her discussion of allegory as a medieval trope, Ann Meyer argues that Augustine's theology played a crucial role in defining the City of God as an architectural ideal during the Middle Ages for architects and poets alike.<sup>108</sup> Burges owned a rare 1590 edition of Augustine's *Civitate Dei* in which this Neo-Platonic discussion of divine radiance is expounded.<sup>109</sup> No wonder therefore Solomon was also asked to depict St Augustine as the representative of Christian Philosophy, on a par with Charles Rossiter's Plato (Pagan Philosophy) (FIGS).

In his analysis of Gothic architecture Otto von Simson notes that 'the Christian sanctuary is, liturgically and mystically, an image of the Heavenly Jerusalem, the eschatological vision described in the book of Revelation. The medieval dedication rite establishes this relationship in explicit terms and the twelfth and thirteenth centuries appear singularly preoccupied with this symbolic significance of sacred architecture'.<sup>110</sup> An heir to these Neo-platonic debates, abbot Suger extensively resorted to luminous, coloured materials (in particular jewels and stained glass) in the construction and decoration of his new church at Saint Denis, the first

---

<sup>105</sup> Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, 35.

<sup>106</sup> Durandus, *The Symbolism of Churches and Church Ornaments*, 17.

<sup>107</sup> Stacy Marks, *Pen and Pencil Sketches*, vol.1, 219-220.

<sup>108</sup> Meyer, *Medieval allegory and the building of the new Jerusalem* (2003).

<sup>109</sup> LS 1918, 21.

<sup>110</sup> Simson, 'The Gothic Cathedral: Design and Meaning,' 35.

Gothic church completed in 1144.<sup>111</sup> In opposition to his more ascetic contemporary Bernard of Clairvaux, Suger conceived a whole new spatial order for his abbey church to let more light into the edifice, drawing on both the Old and New Testaments to justify its luxurious ornamentation.<sup>112</sup> Alongside other theologians of the Cluny order, Suger indeed believed that colour was akin to light, both visible and immaterial and could thus be used to better celebrate the divine. For Virginia Chieffo Raguin, stained glass ‘resonated profoundly with the concepts of clarity and opacity that functioned as primary dichotomies for both moral and ontological systems. Light was transparent as it left the creator, acquiring colour, and thus its ability to be visible, as it penetrated the material world’.<sup>113</sup>

Drawing on the ‘properties of precious stones’ alluded to in Ezekiel 28:13 and in Revelation 21:9-23, Suger advocated an ‘anagogical’ approach to Church decoration, so as to bring about a shift ‘from the material to the immaterial’:

Thus, when - out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God - the loveliness of the many-colored gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.<sup>114</sup>

Many Victorian writers were familiar with the writings of Suger, including Burges who mentions him in his 1865 lecture on ‘Gold and Silver’.<sup>115</sup> Henry Newman had also drawn on similar ‘anagogical’ imagery to justify the controversial ‘rich embellishments’ of medieval churches:

The other point commonly insisted on is the Medieval Church’s wealth and splendour, the rich embellishment of her temples, the jewelled dress of her ministers, the offerings, shrines, pageants, and processions, which were part of her religious service. All these are supposed to be denoted by ‘the purple and scarlet colour, and gold, and precious stones, and pearls,’ with which the sorceress in the Apocalypse is arrayed; [...] precious stones are no peculiar mark of Antichrist; which is sufficiently clear even from a later chapter of the Apocalypse, in which jasper, sapphires, and other jewels are mentioned among the treasures of the New Jerusalem.<sup>116</sup>

---

<sup>111</sup> On ‘the orgy of neo-Platonic light metaphysics’ to which Suger abandons himself in some of his poetry, see Panofsky, *Abbot Suger*, 21-2.

<sup>112</sup> On the opposition between Suger and Clairvaux, see Pastoureau ‘Morales de la couleur,’ 29-30.

<sup>113</sup> Raguin, *The History of Stained Glass*, 13.

<sup>114</sup> Suger, *De administratione* translated in Panofsky, *Abbot Suger*, 20-21.

<sup>115</sup> Burges, *Art Applied to Industry*, 61.

<sup>116</sup> Newman, ‘The Protestant Idea of the Antichrist,’ 184-5.

In this discussion of ‘The Protestant idea of the Antichrist’, published five years before his conversion, Newman replaces the anti-Catholic assimilation of the Pre-Reformation Church to the Scarlet Whore of Babylon with a reference to Saint John’s vision of the New Jerusalem in order to redeem colour from its debased materiality and suspiciously ‘Popish’ associations. Here it is precisely ‘the combustible mix of attraction and repulsion towards colour’ fostered by the heated context of the Oxford movement which brings out its ‘sacred qualities’ as defined by anthropologist Michael Taussig.<sup>117</sup>

In 1846 Viollet-le-Duc was asked to restore the abbey church of Saint-Denis, Suger’s tribute to divine radiance. In 1861 Burges complained about the controversial restoration: ‘No such edifice as the Abbey of St Denis now exists. It was utterly spoilt many years ago’.<sup>118</sup> Probably for the same reasons, Morris and Burne-Jones avoided Saint Denis on their tour of the Gothic Churches of the North of France in the summer of 1855. Burne-Jones however managed to convince his friends to visit the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, an edifice consecrated in 1248, which was then also being restored under the supervision of Felix Duban, Lassus and Viollet-le-Duc. The gaudy chromolithographs of the ‘new’ Sainte-Chapelle published by Decloux and Doury in 1857 attracted a lot of attention on both sides of the Channel (FIGS). With its walls of colourful stained-glass, the Sainte Chapelle appeared as an architectural jewel, the Gothic materialization of St John’s ‘New Jerusalem’, as noted by Burges himself: ‘some buildings, like the Sainte Chapelle at Paris, are so constructed that the walls themselves appear to be suppressed, with the exception of a few pillars, and to give place to a gorgeous tapestry of living and imperishable colours’.<sup>119</sup>

In keeping with Suger’s celebration of coloured materials as a source of divine radiance, Solomon’s depiction of the glass-like walls of the Holy City turns pigments into gems. A similar tension between colour as light and colour as substance can be found in Morten’s panel which represents Fra Angelico at work on the impossible task of painting a celestial, rainbow-like Virgin.

### **III Fra Angelico’s ‘wonderful, bright colouring’**

#### **1) ‘See Vasari’: Morten’s portrait of the artist as saint**

---

<sup>117</sup> Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred*, 9.

<sup>118</sup> Burges quoted in Crook, *Burges*, 223.

<sup>119</sup> Burges, ‘Art and Religion,’ 575.



If Solomon was already known as religious painter when he embarked on Burges's project, Morten seems a less obvious choice for this panel depicting the Christian origins of painting. The subject may have better suited an artist like Dante Gabriel Rossetti who had already established his reputation as a follower of early Italian art and a painter of the girlhood of the Virgin, using the 'bright colouring' which Burges specifically praised as the distinctive feature of Fra Angelico's work in the caption to his RIBA drawing (FIG): 'Beato Angelico born 1387 died 1455. A painter of the Florentine school he was a monk of the Dominican order—his paintings are distinguished by extreme beauty of expression and wonderful bright colouring (See Vasari)'.<sup>120</sup>

Little is known of Morten's short life. He received formal training in James Mathews Leigh's General Practical School of Art which prepared candidates for the Royal Academy Antique School and which he attended with H.S. Marks. Despite having exhibited an oil painting at the Royal Academy when he was only 19, Morten's reputation in the early 1860s mainly rested on his work as an illustrator, as he sporadically contributed to second-rate periodicals such as *Everybody's Journal* (1859), *The Welcome Guest* (1860-1) and *Entertaining Things* (1861-2).<sup>121</sup> During this period he collaborated twice with Burges, whom he may have met at Leigh's where the architect occasionally sketched: first for the Bacchus wine cooler in 1858 and then for the Great Bookcase, for which he painted both the Fra Angelico panel and St Cecilia. Morten soon joined the 'Paris Gang', which included James McNeill Whistler, George Du Maurier and E.J. Poynter, and yet G.P. Boyce described Burges as one of the 'only men...having known Morten very well'.<sup>122</sup> The two men remained in close contact at the Hogarth club of which Morten was one of the earliest members, joining only a month after its foundation in April 1858. Possibly encouraged by his collaboration with Burges, Morten then embarked on more ambitious projects, including illustrations for *London Society* (1863) and, most notably, for a 1864 edition of *Gulliver's Travels* which was favourably reviewed by the *Art Journal*. Despite these early successes, Morten never attained the fame that he had longed for, and following financial difficulties and accusations of plagiarism, he committed suicide in September 1866. Although W.M. Rossetti proved very active in setting up a fund to support Morten's widow after the illustrator's tragic death, it seems that the Rossetti circle had never accepted Morten

---

<sup>120</sup> See RIBA sketch.

<sup>121</sup> Life, 'That Unfortunate Young Man Morten', 381

<sup>122</sup> Boyce quoted in Life, 'That Unfortunate Young Man Morten', 375n.

as one of their own.<sup>123</sup> And yet, his works from the late 1850s bear a clear Pre-Raphaelite influence, most strikingly exemplified by this rainbow Virgin with flowing red hair who is more reminiscent of Rossetti's Venetian works than of Early Italian paintings. This complex nexus of aesthetic influences reflected in Morten's panel sheds new light on the rather underexplored reception of Fra Angelico's works in the Victorian age.

The RIBA drawing and the golden inscription on the panel identify the saintly painter as 'Beato Angelico' and yet Morten's depiction of the Christian origins of painting equally brings to mind the Gospel of Luke relating the Annunciation in 1:26-38. It is almost as if Angelico were posing as St Luke himself, the originator of Christian icon-painting, an apt pendant not only to Solomon's St John but also to St Cecilia, the patron saint of musicians, whom Morten represented on the side of the Bookcase (FIG).

As early as the 6th century, the Gospel of Luke had supported the apocryphal identification of the evangelist as the painter of the Virgin and later as the patron saint of all artists.<sup>124</sup> This is evident in many Byzantine icons, of which the gold, flat nimbus over the Virgin's head in Morten's panel is most certainly a reminiscence.<sup>125</sup> Michele Bacci gives the example of the monk Dionysios of Fournas, who addressed the following prayer to the Virgin to 'assert the authority of Byzantine iconographic tradition as a legacy of apostolic times':

Oh Mary Mother of God, St Luke, wishing he might clearly manifest to everybody the most holy affection he felt for Thy Highness beloved of God, realized that it was not sufficient to present Thy noblest Majesty with any of his most numerous spiritual gifts as an offering of first fruit, but that he, who had been a careful eyewitness, should carve and paint on panels with colours and gilded tesserae, by means of his pictorial skill, the image, full-of-grace, of Thy appearance.<sup>126</sup>

The background to Morten's image, however, is not gold but blue—either to make the nimbus better stand out or to refer to what had become in the 12<sup>th</sup> century the tutelary colour of the Virgin who also wears a blue mantle in the panel.<sup>127</sup> Burges may have equally wished to refer

---

<sup>123</sup> Life, 'That Unfortunate Young Man Morten', 377. D.G. Rossetti wrote in a letter to Madox Brown in 1858 that he considered Morten's election to the Hogarth club as a 'mistake'. However, he was still a member in March 1860, when Burges joined the club.

<sup>124</sup> Bacci, 'With the Paintbrush of the Evangelist Luke', 79–89. See also Schaefer, 'Saint Luke as Painter,' vol.1, 413-427.

<sup>125</sup> As noted by Bacci, 'With the Paintbrush,' 82. Lord Lindsay had also described Beato Angelico as belonging to the 'Semi-Byzantine school at Florence' in his *Sketches*, vol.3, 151.

<sup>126</sup> Bacci, 'With the Paintbrush,' 79.

<sup>127</sup> On blue as the colour of the Virgin see Pastoureau, *Bleu*, 50-55.

to Fra Angelico's Florentine contemporary, Luca Della Robbia, whose cobalt blue ceramics he praised in his lectures.<sup>128</sup> Our pigment analyses have revealed many traces of cobalt in this panel, for instance on the blue pot and in the superior section of Angelico's painting.<sup>129</sup>

This iconographical tradition presenting the monk and physician St Luke as a painter developed in the 14th and 15th centuries, parallel to the growth of independent guilds for painters.<sup>130</sup> Representations of the saint at work on his sacred representation of the Virgin and child were no longer confined to manuscripts and icons but featured frequently as favourite subjects for altar decorations, reflecting the changing status of the painter, from medieval artisan to Renaissance artist. The medieval image of the icon-maker as servant of God was nonetheless revived in the 19th century, notably by the Nazarene painters who called themselves the 'Lukasbrüder' or Brothers of St. Luke. The lead painter of the Nazarenes, Johann Friedrich Overbeck even designed a seal depicting St. Luke framed by an arch on top of which the letter *W*—for *Wahrheit*—to emphasize the founding principle (Truth) of their art.<sup>131</sup> The Austrian artist Eduard Steinle, who had been close to the Nazarenes, also painted several versions of 'St Luke painting the Virgin', including one (now in the Royal Collection) which he presented to Queen Victoria as a birthday gift in 1851 and which the *Art Journal* had engraved and praised in 1856. In her *Legends of the Madonna* (1852), Anna Jameson noted that 'St. Luke the Evangelist was early regarded as the great authority with respect to the few Scripture particulars relating to the character and life of Mary; so that, in the figurative sense, he may be said to have *painted* the portrait of her which has since been received as the perfect type of womanhood'.<sup>132</sup> At that time, the Arundel Society, particularly active in promoting the Italian primitives as we saw, published engravings after Fra Angelico by prominent Nazarene artists, thus strengthening the association between Fra Angelico and St Luke. Rossetti's now lost accompanying drawing to his sonnet entitled 'St Luke the painter' was also sketched in 1857, around the same time as his two painter drawings, *Fra Angelico painting* (FIG) and *Giorgione painting*. For Jerome McGann, Rossetti was particularly drawn to 'St. Luke's legendary association with the art of painting, on the one hand, and the mythology of the Virgin on the other—both essential Rossettian preoccupations.'<sup>133</sup>

---

<sup>128</sup> For Burges's view on the 'pottery of the Middle Ages' and Della Robbia's work in particular, see *Art Applied to Industry*, 32-35.

<sup>129</sup> Thistlewood, 'An Examination of William Burges's Great Bookcase,' 31.

<sup>130</sup> Schaefer, 'Saint Luke as Painter', 414. Bacci ('With the Paintbrush,' 82) also rightly points out that the professions of physician and painter were not at odds in the Byzantine age, as both had a close interest 'in colouring agents and natural substances.'

<sup>131</sup> Gossman, 'Beyond Modern', 61.

<sup>132</sup> Jameson, *Legends of the Madonna*, 28.

<sup>133</sup> See the Rossetti archive : <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/2-1849.s102.raw.html> Consulted July 2018.

These converging influences may have prompted Burges to choose Fra Angelico as the ideal representative of the early Christian painter. Even if the Christian origins of painting were obviously much more ancient than Angelico, the Victorians perceived the so-called Beato Angelico as the epitome of the saintly artist, in keeping with Vasari's hagiographic biography, which Burges evokes in the annotations to the panel sketch. His mention 'see Vasari' is not, however, an invitation to visualize one of Vasari's paintings, not even his own 1565 self-portrait as St Luke painting the Virgin in the Santissima Annunziata, in Florence, but rather a reference to the *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (first published in 1550 and expanded in 1568) which was extremely popular at the time, in accordance with what Hilary Fraser has described as the Victorian 'passion for life-writing'.<sup>134</sup> When Burges embarked on the bookcase project, an abundantly annotated English translation by Giovanni Bezzi of Vasari's biography of Fra Angelico illustrated with 20 black and white lithographic plates of paintings and frescoes, had been available since 1850. That same year, Mrs Jonathan Forster also published her own translation of Vasari's *Lives*.

Burges was as familiar with these textual sources as with the works of Fra Angelico which he admired during his first visit to Florence in 1854, and then again in 1861 for a longer period of six weeks, in the company of Smallfield.<sup>135</sup> In his articles and reviews for the *Ecclesiologist* relating this Florentine visit of 1861, Burges refers to the frescoes of the convent San Marco which had not yet been turned into a museum.<sup>136</sup> However, as none of these represent a full-length Madonna, Morten's panel should be read less as a reference to a specific work by Angelico than as a tribute to his saintly life and sacred palette, extolled in Vasari.

## 2) Angelico's 'Colour spiritual'

Among the key aspects of Angelico's life and work that Vasari emphasizes is that his 'colouring' was indeed that of a 'saint'.<sup>137</sup> For Beato Angelico, both 'a Painter and Illuminator,' art was a form of devotional practice.<sup>138</sup> The monk worked on his knees and with eyes filled with tears, according to Count Montalembert whose *Du Vandalisme et du catholicisme dans l'art* (1839) was possibly another source for Burges, who met the French collector in 1862.<sup>139</sup>

---

<sup>134</sup> Fraser, 'Vasari's Lives and the Victorians', 278. Burges was quite dismissive of Vasari's pictorial work, see Burges, 'Florence', 160.

<sup>135</sup> See Burges, 'Supplemental notes on Florence,' 26-32.

<sup>136</sup> Burges, 'Florence,' 161. The Convent was declared a national historical monument and museum in 1869.

<sup>137</sup> Vasari, *The Life of Giovanni Angelico da Fiesole*, 10.

<sup>138</sup> Vasari, *The Life of Giovanni Angelico da Fiesole*, 5.

<sup>139</sup> See Burges, Abstract of diaries, 1862. In his *Sketches* (vol.3, 197), Lord Lindsay quotes Montalembert's description of Angelico painting Jesus and Mary on his knees. On the kneeling St Luke, see Schaefer, 'Saint Luke as Painter,' 416.

Similarly, Jameson remarks that ‘to Angélico the art of painting a picture devoted to religious purposes was an act of religion, for which he prepared himself with fasting and prayer, imploring on bended knees the benediction of heaven on his work.’<sup>140</sup> Infrared viewing shows ivy growing on the background wall which suggests that the scene was originally intended as an outdoor one (FIG). By covering up this natural décor, Burges and Morten may have wished to emphasize the ascetic life of the Dominican friar in his bare cell.

Angelico’s favourite sacred model was the Virgin as suited to his religious order, primarily devoted to celebrating the motherhood of Mary. In Morten’s panel which depicts Angelico in the attire of his order, this devotion is suggested both by the open missal inscribed to ‘*Sancta Maria mater creator*’ and by the Dominican rosary lying on the floor which were used by the friars as a material aid to count the number of ‘Hail Marys’.

Beato Angelico completed numerous works depicting the Virgin holding the Infant Jesus, but his preferred Marian topic for both his altarpieces and his frescoes was the Annunciation, related in the Gospel of St Luke. Although the passage describing the sacred encounter of the Archangel Gabriel and Mary is rather laconic and scarce in visual detail, it is, according to Daniel Arasse, a theologically-charged text which captures the creative tensions which underlie the mystery of the Incarnation, between the temporal and the intemporal, the impure and the pure, the figurable and the unfigurable, the visible and the invisible.<sup>141</sup> An erudite monk, Fra Angelico engaged with these complex debates in his numerous representations of the Annunciation.<sup>142</sup> The golden Gothic letters identifying the kneeling monk as ‘Beato Angelico’, bring to mind the golden inscriptions of the Holy Word in the Master’s own Annunciations which visually reproduce the performative message of Archangel:

The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. [...]  
For with God nothing shall be impossible.  
And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.<sup>143</sup>

Although Morten’s panel is not a depiction of the Annunciation *per se*, several iconographical *topoi* recall the Archangel’s revelation. The kneeling posture of the artist-monk—which was also

---

<sup>140</sup> Jameson, *Memoirs of the Early Italian Painters*, vol.1, 119.

<sup>141</sup> Arasse, *L’annonciation italienne*, 12.

<sup>142</sup> On these theological controversies underlying the representation of the Annunciation, see Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico, Dissemblance and Figuration* (1995).

<sup>143</sup> Luke 1:35-37. On the use of gold letters in Angelico’s annunciations, see Arasse, *L’annonciation italienne*, 137.

the liturgical posture for the *Ave Maria*—is that of Gabriel in several of Fra Angelico’s depictions of the Virgin in San Marco.<sup>144</sup> However the dazzling iridescence of the wings of the Archangel in some of these Annunciations finds itself displaced onto the flowing dress and hair of Mary. While the hues of her raiment strangely differ from that of its earthly representation by the painter the monk’s plain, white robe (which Dominicans wore under the black mantle of their order), matches the lily in the saintly model’s hand. There are very few representations of the Virgin holding this symbol of the Immaculate conception in Fra Angelico’s works but Burges and Morten probably wanted to allude to the more traditional iconography of the subject. Similarly, the orange tree in the background of the otherwise bare and almost two-dimensional cell, partly recalls the stylized depictions of the Garden of Eden in many of Fra Angelico’s Annunciations. According to Janet Cox-Rearick, orange trees or *pomo d’oro* were one of the symbols of the Medici family which may explain why they are included in the *Bosco ai Frati* altarpiece, the last work commissioned by Fra Angelico’s patron Cosimo (FIG).<sup>145</sup>

Again, Morten and Burges seem to have been more interested in suggesting the devotion of the artist—in keeping with the Victorian belief in ‘the centrality of the life of the artist to an appreciation of his œuvre’—than in copying a specific painting or fresco.<sup>146</sup> This may be why the Virgin holds a womb-like glass (or crystal) orb in her other hand—a detail which appears in none of Angelico’s works but which functions as a theological reference to the Immaculate Conception, as glass lets light pass without shattering.<sup>147</sup> The medieval abbot Bernard of Clairvaux, who valued light over colour, had discussed the transparency of stained glass in similar terms: ‘just as the brilliance of the sun fills and penetrates a glass window without damaging it, and pierces its solid form with imperceptible subtlety, neither hurting it when entering nor destroying it when emerging : thus the word of God, the splendor of the Father, entering the virgin chamber and then came forth from the closed womb’.<sup>148</sup>

Alternatively, the detail of the translucent orb—partly reminiscent of the Angel’s gem-like vial—could be linked to Burne-Jones’s mystical representation of Art holding a glass sphere presiding over the Bookcase, a particularly apt pictorial echo as the painter was a fervent admirer of Angelico himself. Burne-Jones, who kept one of these orbs in his studio, often tried to capture the reflective qualities of the object in his work, for instance in his 1863 pastel entitled *Astrologia* (FIG). A more established painter than the other contributors to the Bookcase, he

---

<sup>144</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*, 226-7.

<sup>145</sup> Cox-Rearick, *Dynasty and Destiny in Medici Art*, 48.

<sup>146</sup> Fraser, ‘Vasari’s Lives and the Victorians’, 293.

<sup>147</sup> See Verdon, *Mary in Western Art*, 98.

<sup>148</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux quoted in Meiss, ‘Light as Form and Symbol in Some 15th century Paintings,’ 5.

may even have suggested the inclusion of this detail to Burges.<sup>149</sup> Such glass balls were also part of Rosicrucian paraphernalia and used by the Brownings during their *séances*.<sup>150</sup> Burges may even have had in mind the glass ball referred to in Browning's poem 'Old Pictures in Florence' (1855) which evokes both Fra Angelico and the decaying of Early Italian frescoes. A mention 'see Vasari' is found in stanza 9, which strengthens the possible connection with Morten's panel.

Fra Angelico was also described by Ruskin as a master in 'colour spiritual', whose jewel-like draperies seemed painted with light, rather than with pigments:<sup>151</sup>

he has used only rays or dashes of light in clusters, not joined at the roots [...], and curved lines with dots at the end not particularly graceful, but varied and irregular looking like no earthly ornament, but simple and childish and therefore heavenly. The Madonna's dress is blue; the angel's, lilac-purple. No other work of the painter can be set beside this for action and expression. The Virgin's face is absolutely luminous with love.<sup>152</sup>

'Childish and therefore heavenly': Ruskin's statement about the pure colours of Early Italian painters directly challenges 19<sup>th</sup> century narratives of colour as primitive owing to its supposedly greater sensual appeal on 'uncivilized nations and children'.<sup>153</sup> But with the 'childish' Italian 'Primitives', reliance on colour rather than on drawing becomes a sign of purity and innocence. Ruskin described their palette (notably the costly ultramarines of Angelico's Virgins) as sacred hues with a luminous and henceforth spiritual quality, amply compensating for possible defects in execution. In this he followed Vasari's description of Angelico's colouring as 'the handiwork of a Saint or Angel'. For Vasari, who nonetheless valued *disegno* over *colore*, the painter-monk belonged to a medieval tradition of painting and colouring.<sup>154</sup> This is reflected in Angelico's indebtedness to the system put forward by Cennino Cennini, whose *Libro dell'arte* was rediscovered in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century thanks to Mary Merrifield's translation which Burges was familiar with.<sup>155</sup> Fra Angelico had been trained in Cennini's medieval chromatic system which offered invaluable practical guidance about pigments and materials, including on how to paint draperies in frescoes. Cennini-style painters favoured bright, unmixed and hence uncorrupted colours like that of stained-glass or manuscript

---

<sup>149</sup> Thistlewood, 'An Examination of William Burges's Great Bookcase,' 29.

<sup>150</sup> See Burges's mysterious diary entry of 1868: 'Rouge Croix.' When Morten committed suicide, W.M. Rossetti organised a 'spiritual séance' to contact him on 18 October 1866. See Life, 'That Unfortunate Young Man Morten', 387.

<sup>151</sup> Ruskin, CW, 12:211.

<sup>152</sup> Ruskin, CW, 4:263-4.

<sup>153</sup> Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, 835. Quatremère de Quincy, *Le Jupiter olympien*, 3.

<sup>154</sup> Hall, *Color and Meaning*, 2.

<sup>155</sup> Cennini's *On Painting* is listed in the LS 1918, 16.

illumination. Fra Angelico for instance used the technique of ‘cangiantismo’ in which shifts of hue create the midtones and the lights, beginning with the pure pigment in the shadow and modeling up with gradations of white, as with the draperies of the Angels in the *Deposition of San Marco* (FIG). Following the publication of Alberti’s treatise *On Painting* (1435-6) a new generation of artists introduced a novel, more naturalistic colouring system in which black was added to the shadows.<sup>156</sup> Alberti’s discussion of the aesthetics of colour and light was primarily secular, contrary to Cennini’s *Libro* which opened with an invocation to God, the Virgin and the Saints.<sup>157</sup> Fra Angelico nonetheless remained faithful to this more sacred understanding of his materials. A memorandum on his *Linaioli Tabernacle* in Florence thus stipulated the use of ‘colours gold and blue and silver of the best that can be found’, in honour of the Mother of God.<sup>158</sup> This paradoxical conjunction of materiality and spirituality has been well analysed by Didi-Huberman who reads Angelico’s pigments as theologically significant:

It is fascinating to discover to what extent this affirmation to the point of excess of painting’s *materiality* could, in the middle of the quattrocento, constitute the support for the highest imperative of mystery and its theological, devout memory. Dissemblance, by marring the aspect, by forbidding strict representational definitions, *opened up the image* to the play of associations. [...] It became the pictorial place for a contemplation that no longer needed visible objects to occur, but only a visual and colored intensity. The visual thus became the instrument par excellence of the virtual. [...]: A means—called ‘anagogical’ in the Middle Ages — of exacerbating the proximal in order to glorify the distant, of presenting the strange to represent divine Otherness; a means of figurally foregrounding color to suggest an invisible image beyond the ‘figurative’ aspect.<sup>159</sup>

Drawing on Suger’s anagogical transmutation of coloured materials into divine radiance, Didi-Huberman sheds new light on the ‘colored intensity’ of Fra Angelico’s palette. Like the patches of colour in the *Bosco ai Frati* Altarpiece, Morten scattered abstract colour stains throughout his image – for instance at the base of the wall of his cell (FIGS). The portrait of the Virgin almost appears as a ‘marred’ mass of colour, as if the artist, favouring ‘dissemblance’ and the ‘imperative of mystery’ wished to suggest the impossibility of divine likeness. For Ruskin, no shadows were ever to blur such celestial figures:

Another mode of attaining supernatural character is by purity of colour almost shadowless, no more darkness being allowed than is absolutely necessary for the explanation of the forms and the vividness of the effect, enhanced, as far as may be, by use of gilding, enamel, and other jewellery. [...] the colours of the draperies always pure and pale, blue, rose, or tender green, or brown, but never dark or

---

<sup>156</sup> Hall, *Color and Meaning*, 42-44.

<sup>157</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*, 43.

<sup>158</sup> Gage, *Colour and Culture*, 129.

<sup>159</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*, 9-10.



gloomy; the faces of the most celestial fairness, brightly flushed; the height and glow of this flush are noticed by Constantin as reserved by the older painters for spiritual beings, as if expressive of light seen through the body.<sup>160</sup>

### 3) ‘Half-Virgin ?’ The shifting colours of Preraphaelitism

Angelico’s palette of ‘blue, rose, or tender green, or brown[s]’ described here by Ruskin recalls the subdued hues of Burne-Jones, another apostle of the ‘Angelic ideal’. For Burne-Jones, Fra Angelico’s colouring was so brilliant that next to a painted ‘Heaven by him...jewels are as lumps of coal.’ By comparison, he confessed, ‘the brightest I can do is like a fog.’<sup>161</sup> And yet, his *Annunciation* of 1862 commissioned by the Dalziel brothers (FIG) is a dazzling ‘harmony in red’ which Fiona MacCarthy describes as ‘his most heartfelt homage to Fra Filippino Lippi and Fra Angelico’.<sup>162</sup>

This fascination with the saintly painter led Burne-Jones to review in glowing terms Ruskin’s third volume of *Modern Painters* for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856.<sup>163</sup> Ruskin had by then partly qualified his early enthusiasm for Early Italian art. This did not prevent Burne-Jones from singling out the critic’s praise of ‘the *passionate* or *Angelic* ideal’ as opposed to the ‘old false claims of High Art’:

As long as this ideal remained, and was understood to be purely conventional, making no pretence to historical accuracy, but expressive only of the painter’s love and veneration for his subject, arraying it in all devices of fair transparent colour and gold, setting it off with whatever, in his great simple heart, spoke of power and majesty, so long the religious ideal was noble, and stands to this day unapproachable in its touching purity and solemnity.<sup>164</sup>

The ‘religious ideal’ expressed in ‘fair transparent colour and gold’ certainly applies to Morten’s depiction of Angelico ecstatically kneeling in front of the hieratic Mary.<sup>165</sup> Poised between archaism and modernity, inside and outside, sacred and profane, the panel occupies a liminal space epitomized by the shifting iridescence of the elusive Virgin.

Morten’s use of colour indeed appears as most ambiguous. Although the original Pre-Raphaelite brothers had partly borrowed their bright shadowless palette from Early Italian Art, the blending hues displayed by this rainbow Virgin somewhat differ from the clear-cut primaries favoured by Rossetti and his friends. Morten’s oblique treatment of the Annunciation

---

<sup>160</sup> Ruskin, CW, 4:323-4.

<sup>161</sup> Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, vol.2, 65.

<sup>162</sup> MacCarthy, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite*, 165

<sup>163</sup> See the Rossetti archive (consulted in August 2018)

<http://www.rossettearchive.org/docs/ap4.o93.1.April.rad.html#p212>

<sup>164</sup> Burne-Jones, ‘Mr. Ruskin’s New Volume’, 218.

<sup>165</sup> *Punch*, 19 (1850), 199. See Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, 45.

is also significantly different from Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (FIG). Mary is represented crouching in fear of the masculine, towering archangel who is holding the lily, whereas in the bookcase panel it is the monk who kneels and seems to back away from the imposing Virgin. The monk's delicate, etiolated body, clothed in an immaculate white cloak appears almost feminized.

But by 1859, Rossetti was no longer an Angelican disciple. His encounter with sensual Fanny Cornforth had led him to move away from the primitive colour symbolism of his earlier oils to embrace the sensual allure of Venetian hues, exemplified in half-length portraits in the manner of Titian or Giorgione, which took Fanny (rather than the more ethereal Christina or Lizzie) as their model. This change of palette is best reflected in the sexually-charged flowing golden hair of all his portraits of the late 1850s, early 1860s which Morten's red-haired Virgin partly recalls. Morten knew of these works through the Hogarth club where Rossetti exhibited his first Venetian oils, including his sensual *Borgia* and *Bocca Baciata* which both belonged to Boyce.<sup>166</sup> A member of the Hogarth Club himself, Burges would have witnessed this aesthetic *revirement* and maybe even have met Fanny, the mistress of his neighbour Boyce who had commissioned Rossetti to paint *Bocca Baciata*. Swinburne probably encouraged Rossetti's change of style as he was himself starting to question the Angelican ideal in favour of the more subversive colours of the later Renaissance: 'we had better admit also that the divine Bacchus and Venus of Tintoretto is worth more than the virgins and angels of Angelico.'<sup>167</sup> In his unfinished novel entitled *Lucretia Borgia: the chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei* (written in 1859-60), the flowing hair of the heroine bears a strong resemblance to that of Rossetti's *femmes fatales*, in particular his *Lucrezia Borgia* of 1860-1: 'Her hair was thick, yellow-coloured like most rare gold or like new juice shed out of honeycombs, and so long that it lay in her lap when she sat and yet ran further over her knees to her ankle.'<sup>168</sup>

Frederick Sandys, who became close to both Swinburne and Rossetti from 1860, was then exploring similar feminine subjects, to the point of being accused of plagiarism by Rossetti.<sup>169</sup> Probably modelled on Rossetti's *Mary Magdalen leaving the house of feasting* (1857), Sandys's sensual *Mary Magdalen* of 1859 (FIG) represented holding the jar of aromatic ointment with which she anointed Christ, may have been a source of inspiration for both Morten's sensual

---

<sup>166</sup> In 1858 Rossetti borrowed from Boyce the watercolour *To caper nimbly in a Lady's Chamber* which he had completed in 1850 and turned it in another picture entitled *Borgia*. See Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite body*, 86.

<sup>167</sup> See Swinburne 1863 essay on 'The Chaotic School,' 58.

<sup>168</sup> Swinburne, *Lucretia Borgia*, 24-5. As noted by Randolph Hughes (104), Lucrezia's father, Rodrigo Borgia had 'Giulia Farnese, the girl mistress of his old age, painted as the Virgin Mary.'

<sup>169</sup> See Elzea, *Frederick Sandys*, 120.

devotion and his Virgin represented in profile with flowing reddish gold hair.<sup>170</sup> This resemblance with the penitent prostitute, a ‘trope of spiritualized sexuality in Western art’, covering her nakedness with her long, red hair, reinforces the suggestion of moral ambivalence conveyed by the panel.<sup>171</sup> More generally, the colours of Morten’s Virgin—however ‘wonderful’ and ‘bright’—reflect the tensions at work in Pre-Raphaelite art regarding the fleshliness of art.

This may also have to do with the aesthetic and moral dilemma between Florentine spirituality and Venetian sensuality often dramatized in the Victorian art literature on Early Italian painting, as well as with the fantasized opposition between Fra Angelico and his profligate contemporary Fra Lippi whose works were also being actively collected at the time.<sup>172</sup> Echoing Vasari’s *Life* which had first opposed the saintly artist and the ‘villain’ monk, both Rio and Jameson described Lippi’s work as ‘degraded by his immorality’ because he abducted a nun, Lucrezia Buti, whom he had convinced to pose as the Virgin.<sup>173</sup> The episode is related by Landor in his ‘Imaginary Conversation’ entitled ‘Fra Filippo Lippi and Pope Eugenius IV’ (1845):

*Filippo.* [...] A novice of fifteen, my own sweet Lucrezia, came one day alone to see me work at my Madonna. Her blessed countenance had already looked down on every beholder lower by the knees. I myself who made her could almost have worshipped her.

*Eugenius.* Not while incomplete; no half-virgin will do.

*Filippo.* But there knelt Lucrezia! there she knelt! first looking with devotion at the Madonna, then with admiring wonder and grateful delight at the artist. Could so little a heart be divided? ’Twere a pity! There was enough for me; there is never enough for the Madonna. Resolving on a sudden that the object of my love should be the object of adoration to thousands, born and unborn, I swept my brush across the maternal face, and left a blank in heaven. The little girl screamed; I pressed her to my bosom.

*Eugenius.* In the chapel?

*Filippo.* I knew not where I was; I thought I was in Paradise.

*Eugenius.* If it was not in the chapel, the sin is venial. But a brush against a Madonna’s mouth is worse than a beard against her votary’s.

*Filippo.* I thought so too, Holy Father!<sup>174</sup>

Casting aside the Madonna in favour of the ‘half-virgin’ Lucrezia, Fra Lippi’s phallic brush appears as the sinful counterpart of Fra’s Angelico ethereal palette.

---

<sup>170</sup> Betty Elzea, *Frederick Sandys*, 120.

<sup>171</sup> See Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, 75.

<sup>172</sup> In the catalogue of Italian works in the collections of the National Gallery, Poynter notes that four Lippis were purchased in the mid to late 1850s, early 1860s. See *The National Gallery*, 270. On Lippi as the ‘villain’ monk, see Ladis, *Victims & Villains in Vasari’s lives*, 46.

<sup>173</sup> Jameson, *Memoirs of the Early Italian Painters*, vol.1, 113. On Jameson as a ‘Modern Vasari’, see Fraser, ‘Vasari’s Lives and the Victorians’, 278.

<sup>174</sup> Landor, ‘Fra Filippo Lippi and Pope Eugenius IV,’ vol.2, 396.

Robert Browning nonetheless favoured the immoral painter over his saintly contemporary. As we saw, Burges, like Rossetti and his circle, greatly admired Browning's poetry. In his diary entry for 29 May 1858, George Boyce notes that he, Rossetti and Burges read aloud 'a lovely little MS. Poem of Browning's about a portrait of a golden-haired beauty on a golden ground that he had copied from some lady's album', most probably 'My Last Duchess,' also painted by an artist monk, the fictitious Fra Pandolf.<sup>175</sup> In 'Fra Lippo Lippi' (1855) Browning imagines the encounter of the painter with a group of bandits one night in Florence, to whom he relates the story of his life and work—most at odds with that of his saintly 'Brother Angelico'.<sup>176</sup> Taking up the image of the desirable niece in Landor's text, 'the value and significance of flesh' is given precedence over soul, a dilemma encoded in chromatic shifts, from yellow to white, black and blue:

A fine way to paint soul, by painting body  
 So ill, the eye can't stop there, must go further  
 And can't fare worse! Thus, yellow does for white  
 When what you put for yellow's simply black,  
 And any sort of meaning looks intense  
 When all beside itself means and looks nought.  
 Why can't a painter lift each foot in turn,  
 Left foot and right foot, go a double step,  
 Make his flesh liker and his soul more like,  
 Both in their order? Take the prettiest face,  
 The Prior's niece . . . patron-saint—is it so pretty  
 You can't discover if it means hope, fear,  
 Sorrow or joy? won't beauty go with these?  
 Suppose I've made her eyes all right and blue,  
 Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,  
 And then add soul and heighten them three-fold?<sup>177</sup>

In these Victorian narratives, Lippi's fleshly palette seems to capture the tensions between idealism and naturalism, soul and body in ways which Fra Angelico's saintly colouring eluded. By choosing to depict Angelico's Virgin in shifting iridescent hues, her body paradoxically hidden and revealed through colour, Morten and Burges may have wished to evoke these chromatic controversies which, in the late 1850s questioned the primacy of 'colour spiritual' in favour of a more kaleidoscopic perspective on the past.

---

<sup>175</sup> Surtees, *The Diaries of George Price Boyce*, 23.

<sup>176</sup> Browning, 'Fra Lippo Lippi', l.235, 33.

<sup>177</sup> Browning, 'Fra Lippo Lippi', ll.199-214, 32-33.

## Chapter 2: Translating Colour

‘Costume may be very useful indeed. It will enable you to realise past scenes and past times; it will add a colouring to your reading.’

William Burges, *Building News* (1879)

On 8 December 1865, the sculptor Thomas Woolner hosted a dinner party attended by the poet and essayist John Addington Symonds, his father, the physician J.A. Symonds, Sr., Lord Alfred Tennyson, the critic Francis Turner Palgrave, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer E.W. Gladstone, and the painter William Holman Hunt. Among the numerous topics broached, colour was given a surprising prominence. Despite the presence of the colourist Holman Hunt, the controversial hues discussed during this dinner were not the pigments of painters but the *literary* colours of a poet, Homer:<sup>1</sup>

γλαυκῶπις: Tennyson translated this ‘grey eyed’ in the Shakespearian meaning of ‘blue eyed’. Gladstone said it ought to be ‘bright eyed’. Homer knew nothing about colours: the human eye had not yet learned to distinguish colours. Question raised whether it were not that the nomenclature of colours had not yet been perfected. Gladstone preferred to think that the Sense itself had not been educated to perceive colours. No green in Homer.<sup>2</sup>

In 1865, this was by no means a new debate as Gladstone had already commented on the supposed ‘paucity’ of colour terms in the works of the Greek poets of the archaic age in his 3-volume *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age* published in 1858. Translating colour in physiological rather than in aesthetic terms, the statesman believed the ancient bard to have been almost colour-blind. Although there is no evidence that Burges had read Gladstone’s essay, Symonds’s report on the dinner organized by Woolner—who was also a friend of the architect—shows that Gladstone’s findings were still discussed in literary and artistic circles during the 1860s. Burges’s two panels dedicated to the Pagan and Christian origins of poetry may be read in the wake of this new awareness of the poetic colour sense which Gladstone’s essay spurred. For the architect, the colours of Homer, Sappho or Dante could be translated both from one language to another and into material form. Drawing on stories from all ages, he imagined poetic artworks in keeping with their function, such as his own ‘Sleeping Beauty’ bed (1865-7) decorated by Henry Holiday with colourful illustrations from Tennyson’s poem ‘The Day Dream’ (FIG). Similarly, Burges designed his Great Bookcase to contain his books on art

---

<sup>1</sup> On Hunt’s colours, see Jacobi, W.H. Hunt, *Painter, painting, paint* (2006).

<sup>2</sup> *The Letters of J.A. Symonds*, vol.1, 596-597.

and his volumes of verse, some of which he had illustrated, like his own Tennyson.<sup>3</sup> Here colour, including *literary* colour, functions as a key hinge between the arts of poetry and painting, sculpture and architecture.

Moving away from the spiritualised hues of Solomon's *New Jerusalem* and Morten's *Beato Angelico*, this chapter will therefore address how poetic colour translates from text into image in Holiday's *Sappho and Phaon* and Poynter's *Dante* (FIGS). These two panels with alternating backgrounds of blue and gold are, in many ways, complementary: first in terms of gender (the male vs the female poet; the male vs the female object of desire); of composition (vertical in the case of the Dante panel and horizontal for the Sappho panel) and of setting (indoor scene vs outdoor scene). But they also have a striking chromatic feature in common: the green of the two poets' clothes which the chemical analyses carried out by Tea Ghigo have revealed to be in both instances arsenic-based. Given how important historical costume was to Burges, who believed it 'add[ed] a colouring to [his] reading' of art and poetry, I wish to argue here that the anachronistic use of this modern pigment to highlight the Christian and Pagan *origins* of poetry reveals his rejection of Gladstone's colour-blind theory.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to the statesman who refused to translate antique colours and in particular green which he saw as lacking from the works of Homer and Sappho, Burges allegorized the works of the poetess and the medieval bard in vividly coloured terms, thereby shedding a new, controversial—if not 'forbidden'—light on both the verse and the desiring bodies of the Lesbian poet and the Florentine exile.

## **I The Victorian colour-sense**

### **1) Chromatic bodies**

How can colour be translated into a literary text, when more often than not in a novel or in a poem, we see no colour, only colour words? Colour may even cause a 'crumbling of all discursive modes' because in itself, it does not signify or resemble anything.<sup>5</sup> And yet, in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, colour was increasingly discussed and translated into texts, among literary and artistic circles as much as in scientific laboratories. Romantic poets, in particular, embraced chromatic innovation as creative potential. Charles Baudelaire, whom Burges's friend

---

<sup>3</sup> Crook, *Burges*, 326.

<sup>4</sup> *Building News* 37 (1879) 143-5. On Burges's passion for historical costumes, see Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, 56-7.

<sup>5</sup> Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color*, 195. The literary colour-sense has recently received much critical attention. See in particular Gaskill, *Chromographia* (2018), Ripoll, *Penser la couleur en littérature* (2018), and Conquer, *Reading Colour* (2019).

Swinburne admired, celebrated the emancipation of colour as a specific feature of modern art and poetry: ‘Colour [...] thinks by itself, independently of the object it clothes.’<sup>6</sup>

This was in many ways a revolution, as colour had always been shunned in poetic language or reduced to conventionalized heraldic terms, such as azure for blue or gold for yellow.<sup>7</sup> Although such heraldic hues can be found in the early volumes of Morris’s poetry, the new lyrical force ascribed to colour and notably to the chromatic body in his verse goes beyond the context of the Gothic revival, and testifies to the new role played by colour in modern aesthetics.<sup>8</sup> The French art critic Charles Blanc viewed such chromatic experiments with great suspicion claiming that it would cause the ‘fall’ of painting as well as a ‘decadence’ of letters, just as Eve had caused the fall of Adam.<sup>9</sup> And yet colour is everywhere to be found in Blanc’s *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin* (1867), aptly published the year of the death of Charles Baudelaire, whom he longed to replace as the champion of the colourist Eugène Delacroix. Blanc rejected Baudelaire’s synaesthetic understanding of colour in favour of a more scientific approach based on a strict ‘grammar’ of hues in line with the laws of chromatic contrast devised by the chemist Eugène Chevreul. Embracing the industrial revolution which had ushered colour into the realm of modernity, Blanc supported a strict standardization of colour understood not only from a chemical perspective but also in terms of nomenclature. This in turn raised new questions for poets whose chromatic vocabulary was radically transformed during this period.

Nineteenth-century chemistry indeed succeeded in ‘dematerialising’ colour by replacing it with new, beautiful names, as Michael Taussig explains:<sup>10</sup>

Then there are the name choices for what are generally thought of as the first synthetic, meaning aniline, dyes discovered in the mid-nineteenth century, the best known of which is mauve, the French name of the common mallow plant. [...] The fakeness of these bodies conjured up by market hype is a fakeness brought about because the body was killed off by mid-nineteenth century. What took its place were these names as substitutes for what had gone, and the names were marvelous.<sup>11</sup>

But for Symonds, those modern colours of ‘commerce’ were unsatisfactory for poetic use:

...the jargon of commerce supplies us liberally with terms like mauve, magenta, eau-de-Nile, peacock, merdad'oca, Prussian-blue, crushed strawberry, Venetian-red, gris-de-perle, and so forth to infinity. It is obvious that for purely literary

---

<sup>6</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Exposition Universelle, 1855’, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol.2, 241. My translation.

<sup>7</sup> Vaillant, Introduction to *La Couleur au XIXème siècle*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> On the role of lyric colour in Morris’ and Rossetti’s poetry, see Helsinger, *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts* (2008).

<sup>9</sup> Blanc, *Grammaire*, 23 and 610.

<sup>10</sup> On modern science and the dematerialisation of colour, see Young, ‘The Colour of things’, 173-185 and *Rematerializing Colour* (2018).

<sup>11</sup> Taussig, *What color is the sacred*, 43.

purposes these designations have a very unequal value. Some of them are inadmissible in serious composition.<sup>12</sup>

Burges seemed to have shared Symonds's distrust of the new dyes and their new names. Despite his call for a greater chromatic diversity in fashion, art and architecture, the architect was skeptical as to the aesthetic impact of the aniline revolution:

Since the great French Revolution all colour has been gradually dying out of the male costume, until we have got reduced to our present gamut of brown, black and neutral tint [...] this absence of colour is really a very serious consideration, for the eye of the designer is naturally affected by what he sees around him. [...] it may probably be objected that at least we get colour in our female costume. This is true, but then the form is so utterly bad that it is totally unfit for art purposes. As Mr. Beresford Hope most justly observed some time since [...] 'if we search into the reason of this falling off, I am afraid we must refer it to no less a person than the Empress of the French.'<sup>13</sup>

Although Burges does not here explicitly name the controversial 'mauve' which *Punch* had described as a form of French 'measles' a few years earlier, the mention of Empress Eugénie, who launched the fashion for mauve throughout Europe, brings to mind this modern hue 'unfit for artistic purpose' at odds with the more beautiful and meaningful colours of the past.<sup>14</sup>

This quotation shows that colour was at the time already acknowledged as a historical construct. In *The Queen of the Air* (1869), Ruskin launches into a similar diatribe against Magenta (originally *fuchsine*), named after one of Napoleon III's victories in 1859. Drawing on the example of the Homeric epics, Ruskin contrasts the precious antique purple, extracted from the sea and the murex shell, with the new aniline dye, extracted from coal mines:

I was long puzzled by Homer's calling the sea purple; and misled into thinking he meant the colour of cloud shadows on green sea; whereas he really means the gleaming blaze of the waves under wide light. [...]

We moderns, who have preferred to rule over coal-mines instead of the sea (and so have turned the everlasting lamp of Athena into a Davy's safety-lamp in the hand of Britannia, and Athenian heavenly lightning into British subterranean 'damp'), have actually got our purple out of coal instead of the sea! And thus, grotesquely, we have had enforced on us the doubt that held the old word between blackness and fire, and have completed the shadow, and the fear of it, by giving it a name from a battle, 'Magenta.'<sup>15</sup>

Ruskin's celebration of the poetic and symbolic implications of Homer's 'purple' contrasts with his scorn for his own 'grotesque' industrial age, described in terms of 'blackness'. Set against

---

<sup>12</sup> Symonds, *In the Key of Blue*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Burges, *Art applied to Industry*, 8-10.

<sup>14</sup> *Punch*, 'The Mauve Measles', 20th August 1859, 81.

<sup>15</sup> Ruskin, CW, 19:379-380.



the more culturally-charged colours of the poets of the Pagan and Christian pasts, the new hues of modernity appear as shadows, whose very names the critic sees and reads as symptoms of a diseased ‘materialist’ world.

By choosing the example of Homer’s purple sea, Ruskin joined the debate on the colour-sense, which Gladstone had launched a few years earlier with his translation of the Homeric *porphureos* as ‘dark’.<sup>16</sup> Before becoming one of the most prominent political figures of his age, Gladstone had received a classicist’s training at Oxford. Like Ruskin, he was a keen reader of the great poets of the past, from Homer to Dante. But despite his admiration for Homeric epics, Gladstone was puzzled by the Greek poet’s limited use of colour and his unusual choice of chromatic terms to describe certain natural phenomena, such as the sea or the rainbow. In the third volume of his *Studies*, he notes the five ‘signs of immaturity’ of ‘Homer’s Perceptions and Use of Colour’:

I. The paucity of his colours.

II. The use of the same word to denote not only different hues or tints of the same colour, but colours which, according to us, are essentially different.

III. The description of the same object under epithets of colour fundamentally disagreeing one from the other.

IV. The vast predominance of the most crude and elemental forms of colour, black and white, over every other, and the decided tendency to treat other colours as simply intermediate modes between these extremes.

V. The slight use of colour in Homer, as compared with other elements of beauty, for the purpose of poetic effect, and its absence in certain cases where we might confidently expect to find it.<sup>17</sup>

The passage is followed by a list of the six chromatic adjectives which Gladstone believed Homer’s chromatic vocabulary was limited to: λευκός (white), μέλας (black), ξανθός (yellow), ἐρυθρός (red), πορφύρεος (purple, or ‘dark’ according to Gladstone), κυάνεος (indigo). This leads him to conclude ‘that the organ of colour and its impression were but partially developed among the Greeks of the heroic age.’<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Gladstone, *Homer*, vol.3, 472. See also *The Letters of J.A. Symonds*, vol.1, 596-597.

<sup>17</sup> Gladstone, *Homer*, vol.3, 458.

<sup>18</sup> Gladstone, *Homer*, vol.3, 488.

In 1877, having read both Darwin's *Origin of Species* and the works of Hugo Magnus who had become interested in colour vision both as an ophthalmologist and as a student of the classics, Gladstone published a second essay on Homer entitled 'The Colour sense' in which he went as far as to imply that the Greeks of the Homeric age had been 'colour-blind'. On discovering this piece, Charles Darwin immediately wrote to the statesman to correct some of Gladstone's and Magnus's assumptions: As 'some facts tending to show that very young children have great difficulty in distinguishing colours; or as I suspect, of attaching the right names to them' [...] 'early colour naming was a matter of word association, not of colour perception *per se*; a refined colour vocabulary would tend to develop around some focus of interest.'<sup>19</sup> Refusing to read colour *terms* as direct translations of colour *sensations*, Darwin directly challenged Gladstone's conclusions: the issue was linguistic and cultural rather than physiological.<sup>20</sup>

But even Gladstone himself believed, somewhat paradoxically, that the colour-sense could be 'educated', as if the perception of colour were also a 'historical accomplishment'.<sup>21</sup> Hence the perceptual superiority of his contemporaries over the poets of the past: 'as our own country has some special aptitude in this respect, we may judge from the comparatively advantageous position, which the British painters have always held as colourists among other contemporary schools'.<sup>22</sup> If Homer's colour vision remained deficient and 'primitive' it was because it had not been fostered by the arts of painting and dyeing which the statesman surprisingly claimed to have been 'unknown' to the Greeks of the Homeric age despite archeological evidence testifying to the contrary. Ignoring the polychrome antique remains which archeologists were then starting to unveil, Gladstone praised the greater sense of chromatic discrimination of his fellow contemporaries, whose perception was constantly stimulated by the dazzling new synthetic dyes:

The art of painting was wholly, and that of dyeing was almost, unknown; and we may estimate the importance of this element of the case by recollecting how much, with the advance of chemistry, the taste of this country in colour has improved within the last twenty years. The artificial colours, with which the human eye was conversant, were chiefly the ill-defined, and anything but full-bodied, tints of metals. The materials, therefore, for a system of colour did not offer themselves to Homer's vision as they do to ours.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Bellmer, 'The Statesman and the Ophthalmologist', 34.

<sup>20</sup> See Lyons, 'Colour in Language', 216.

<sup>21</sup> Gaskill, *Chromographia*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> Gladstone, *Homer*, vol.3, 457.

<sup>23</sup> Gladstone, *Homer*, vol.3, 488.

Gladstone's discussion of the colour-sense of the poets of the past cannot, therefore, be severed from the context from which it originated, and in particular from the aniline revolution. As noted by Nicholas Gaskill these new dyes 'modernized the stuff of colour', while the colour sense, which 'linked the sensing body to civilization', modernized the 'relational dynamics of color experience itself'.<sup>24</sup> For the statesman, this colour experience could only truly take place in a modern, industrial world. This was not only an ethnocentric standpoint: it was consistent with his Oxford training as a classicist. At the time, the so-called classical tradition indeed favoured a purely abstract relation to Hellenic heritage understood as a colourless textual corpus, so as to match the fantasized whiteness of its marmoreal statues.<sup>25</sup> The year Gladstone published his *Studies*, the Parthenon marbles kept in the British Museum were even 'scrubbed' to look whiter, confirming the purity of the Hellenic paradigm which Matthew Arnold would later praise in terms of 'Sweetness and Light'.<sup>26</sup> In his own *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873-6), Symonds compared this denial of the colours of the Hellenic corpus to a form of 'whitewashing', a term more often used to describe covering up of medieval frescoes in the wake of the Reformation.<sup>27</sup> The Aesthetic critic Walter Pater would later make a similar allusion to Gladstone's own 'colour-blind' translations of Homer in his 1878 lecture on Greek sculpture, delivered shortly after the publication of the statesman's essay on 'The Colour-Sense':

The whole black and grey world of extant antique sculpture [needs] to be translated back into ivory and gold, if we would feel the excitement which the Greeks seem to have felt in the presence of these objects. [...] We must seek to relieve the air of our galleries and museums of their too intellectual greyness. Greek sculpture could not have been a cold thing [...] whatever a colour-blind school may say.<sup>28</sup>

As suggested by Pater, Gladstone's own blind eye to the colours of Homer and of the poets of the archaic age not only denied the body of colour but the Greek body itself as translated into polychrome art works. Anticipating Symonds's and Pater's aesthetic—in the original Greek sense of *sensuous*—approach to colour, Burges's colourful adaptation of the works of the poets of the past, and of Homer, Sappho and Dante in particular, was, on the contrary, firmly grounded in the material.

---

<sup>24</sup> Gaskill, *Chromographia*, 24.

<sup>25</sup> See Jockey, *Le mythe de la Grèce blanche* (2013).

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Jenkins, *Cleaning and Controversy*, 5. See also Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) and chapter 4 of this book.

<sup>27</sup> Symonds, *Studies of the Greek Poets*, vol.1, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Pater, 'The Beginnings of Greek Sculpture', in *The Works of Walter Pater*, vol.6, 191.

## 2) ‘No green in Homer’?

Among the hues Gladstone seems to have been particularly keen to erase, features the colour green, a problematic colour with a controversial material history. For Gladstone, the ancient Greeks had no word for green:

Gladstone preferred to think that the Sense itself had not been educated to perceive colours. No green in Homer. *χλωρήτις ἀηδών* means truly ‘the nightingale that loves the greenwood.’ But this is a rare instance, and the idea of greenness is not predominant. [Query whether this has not reference to the colour of the bird itself. Scholiast says ἡ ἐν χλωροῖς διατρίβωσα : L & S add ‘but wrongly.’] Again *πορφύρεος* means simply dark—brown or blue even *ιοειδής* is applied to sheep. [Query what *ἴον* really meant a violet? or some other flower?] There was of course some probability in this argument; but Gladstone overworked it, & denied that even Egyptians understood colour, who, however, in frescoes at least as old as Homer, as my father suggested, evince a most accurate sense of colour. [...] It seemed as if Gladstone were a champion in the medieval schools, throwing down theses & defending them for pure argument sake, not for any real love of truth – a dangerous quality in a statesman, and apt to make him an untrustworthy debater.<sup>29</sup>

Gladstone did not consider the adjective *chloros* as a colour term because he could not understand how the term could be applied to fear (Il. X. 376), honey (Il. Xi.630) and the nightingale (Od. Xix. 518). What particularly puzzled Gladstone was that this *chloros*, covering various shades ranging from yellowish to green, could not simply be translated as the *abstract* colour term ‘green’:

Upon the whole, then, *χλωρὸς* indicates rather the absence than the presence of definite colour, although it is derived from *χλοή* meaning young herbage. If regarded as an epithet of colour, it involves at once a hopeless contradiction between the colour of honey on the one side, and greenness on the other. Again, the more we assume it to mean green, the more startling it becomes that it could have taken paleness, as is manifestly the case, for its governing idea. Next to paleness, it serves chiefly for freshness, i. e. as opposed to what is stale or withered: a similar combination with the former sense. The idea of green we scarcely find, unless once, connected with this word in the poems of Homer: and yet it is a remarkable fact that there is no other word in the poems that can even be supposed to represent a colour, which, not the rainbow only, but every day nature, presents so largely to the eye.<sup>30</sup>

The rainbow, here, appears as a case in point. In the light of Newton’s decomposition of the prism, the Greek description of this phenomenon seemed most inadequate: ‘Homer’s perception of the prismatic colours or colours of the rainbow, which depend on the decomposition of light

---

<sup>29</sup> *The Letters of J.A. Symonds*, vol.1, 596-597.

<sup>30</sup> Gladstone, *Homer*, vol.3, 468.

by refraction, and *a fortiori* of their compounds, was, as a general rule, vague and indeterminate.<sup>31</sup>

Gladstone was not the only, or even the first to question the meaning of the Greek *chloros*. Ruskin had also discussed the term in the third volume of *Modern Painters* (1856) in which he questioned Sophocles' description of 'green (*chloran*—see Persus) sand' in his tragedy *Ajax*, jumping to the conclusion: 'that Sophocles really did not know green from yellow or brown.'<sup>32</sup> However this did not lead Ruskin to comment on the supposedly deficient perceptual capacities of the ancient Greeks as a whole.

The two men appeared most unsettled by the fact that 'every day nature' was not described as green by the ancient Hellenes. But in Antiquity, Nature was primarily understood according to the four elements, that is to say in shades of yellow, white, red or black. According to Pastoureau, it was only in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century that the Pre-Romantics started celebrating the beauty of the natural world in terms of greenness.<sup>33</sup> Green may have also become a favourite colour with the Romantics because it was a modern hue with revolutionary potential. Since the Middle Ages, green had indeed always been considered a *couleur maudite*, a colour of subversion and disorder long shunned by dyers for its chemical instability.<sup>34</sup> It rose to new prominence as Romanticism broke free from the strictures of Neoclassicism, which shunned colour in general and more particularly colour *mixture*—of which green is a striking example. Following the invention of synthetic dyes, more stable greens were devised but the colour retained its subversive reputation.

But in the early 1860s, the dangers of green were far from simply metaphorical. In a series of chromolithographs (FIG) published in 1859, the year of the mauve and magenta patents, the French medical doctor Maxime Vernois revealed how the arsenic based greens used by flower girls to dye floral wreaths greener than nature had become a major health hazard. Two years later, as Alison Matthews David has shown, Matilda Sheurer, a young London artificial flower maker died of arsenic poisoning, vomiting green.<sup>35</sup> This event was recorded in the popular press including in *Punch*, with an 'Arsenic Waltz' (FIG) depicting a *dance macabre* of two skeletons, a man and a woman wearing an artificially dyed 'green wreath' on her head.<sup>36</sup> In 1862, several children died in an east London home after they had torn down the wallpaper and licked the

---

<sup>31</sup> Gladstone, *Homer*, vol.3, 483.

<sup>32</sup> Ruskin, CW, 5:220.

<sup>33</sup> See Pastoureau, *Vert*, 172-177.

<sup>34</sup> On green as colour of decadence and disorder, see Pastoureau, *Vert*, 90-102.

<sup>35</sup> See Matthews David, *Fashion Victims*, 70.

<sup>36</sup> Cobbold, 'Adulation or Adulteration?': 23-50.

arsenic green off its surface. These tragedies caused Morris's own green wallpapers to be viewed with increasing suspicion—his family's fortune had, after all, come from the Devon Great Consols mine, one the leading producers of copper and arsenic at the time.<sup>37</sup>

Given the press coverage these chromatic scandals received, it is evident that Burges was fully aware of how toxic this modern colour was. And yet it is precisely an arsenic-based pigment which he chose to depict the clothes of both Dante and Sappho, as opposed to the chromium-based green used for the sea in the Sappho panel. Such copper arsenates were sold at the time under the various names of Scheele's (Schloss) Green, Emerald Green, Paris Green, etc. Emerald Green was the most famous of these new greens. Invented in 1814, its use as a pigment increased from the 1830s. It was particularly popular with the Pre-Raphaelites, until its toxicity was called into question in the late 1850s.<sup>38</sup> By choosing to represent Sappho and Dante with this notoriously unstable and dangerous colour, Burges was not simply attempting to bridge the gap between Pagan and Christian poetry as he often did in his lectures, but showing how a controversial body of texts could still be translated into a modern work of art.

## II Sappho's 'Green sickness'

### 1) Ovid's Sappho and Phaon

Henry Holiday is better known today as a stained-glass artist than as a painter although in his lifetime his painting of *Dante and Beatrice* was extremely popular and frequently reproduced in Victorian homes.<sup>39</sup> In his *Reminiscences of my life* (1914), Holiday recounts his artistic training at the Royal Academy Schools, and his subsequent acquaintance and collaboration with various artists, like Solomon, Moore, Burne-Jones, Poynter, D.G. Rossetti and Burges, whom he may have met at Leigh's art school in the mid 1850s. The autobiography primarily emphasizes his stained-glass work for Burges, notably at Waltham Abbey and Worcester college chapel. A short paragraph evokes his contribution to the Great Bookcase, which he describes as his first major artistic collaborative project:

Early in the year (1861), William Burges, the well-known architect, commissioned me to paint a panel for a cabinet which he had had constructed for himself, and for which he already had commissioned panels from Burne-Jones, Albert Moore, Simeon Solomon, and some other painters. My subject was 'Sappho and Phaon.'<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> On Morris and toxic wallpapers, see Hawksley, *Bitten by Witch Fever* (2016).

<sup>38</sup> Eastaugh, et al., *Pigment Compendium*, 155. See Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 148-152 and Townsend, *Pre-Raphaelite Painting Techniques* (2005).

<sup>39</sup> Holiday also painted *Dante and Beatrice as children* in the spring of 1860, a painting which was rejected by the RA. *Reminiscences of my life*, 67.

<sup>40</sup> Holiday, *Reminiscences*, 74

When Burges met Holiday, the painter had not yet shown any particular interest in classical subjects, although he would later travel to Greece and even befriend Gladstone. It was therefore Burges who suggested the subject of Sappho and Phaon to illustrate the Pagan origins of Poetry, in keeping Plato's praise of the poetess as the tenth Muse and the originator of the lyric tradition.<sup>41</sup> The other Muses are represented on the Bookcase as small medallion portraits alongside the pediment paintings of Art, Love and Religion.

Holiday's panel represents Sappho serenading her lover Phaon. The dark-haired Sappho is holding her lyre against her heart, her face is pale and her expression dejected as she looks at her distant, muscular and surprisingly red-haired lover who does not return her gaze. Two unidentified birds fly over the mast of the ship, echoing the frieze of birds and the cruel story of Cock Robin under the panel. Sappho and the poet Orpheus (likewise represented on the Great Bookcase) were often paired with the nightingale, a bird associated with pain and loss. Just like the nightingale which produces its supreme song 'at the moment of self-destruction,' Sappho's poetry was closely tied to her mythical leap from the Leucadian cliff, after her supposed rejection by the handsome ferryman Phaon which Symonds would later discard as 'legend' rather than as biographical evidence.<sup>42</sup> The leap and the impossible love between Phaon and Sappho seem to have been a literary creation of the comic poets, later taken up by Ovid, who related Sappho's abandonment in greater detail in his *Heroides* 15. Until the second half of the 19th century, the popular reception of Sappho was indeed primarily mediated by Ovid's fictional postmortem letter of 'Sappho to Phaon', the only epistle staging a real rather than mythological female figure. And yet, throughout the Ovidian text, Sappho appears very much as a 'fictional persona' dying of unrequited love.<sup>43</sup> This image of the suffering woman poet, whose song of pain recalls that of the birds Procne and Philomela in Ovid's own *Metamorphoses*, shaped centuries of heterosexual readings of Sappho's poetry. In the epistle, which Prins aptly analyses as defining 'Sapphic authorship in terms of authorial dispossession,' Sappho is stripped of her poetic powers ('I wish I was eloquent now! Pain obstructs art'), a diminutive figure unworthy of the beauty of her lover as shown by this verse adaptation by Pope:<sup>44</sup>

Brown as I am, an Ethiopian dame  
Inspir'd young Perseus with a gen'rous flame;

---

<sup>41</sup> Plato quoted on Campbell, *Greek Lyric, Volume I: Sappho and Alcaeus*, 49.

<sup>42</sup> Maxwell, *The Female Sublime*, 32; Symonds, *Studies of the Greek Poets*, 194.

<sup>43</sup> Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, 179.

Turtles and doves of differing hues unite,  
And glossy jet is pair'd with shining white.  
If to no charms thou wilt thy heart resign,  
But such as merit, such as equal thine,  
By none, alas! by none thou canst be mov'd,  
Phaon alone by Phaon must be lov'd!<sup>45</sup>

A similar chromatic complementarity is perceptible in Holiday's panel where the dark Muse is contrasted with the fair-skinned Phaon, whom Ovid had compared to the sun-god Phoebus:

Whom would not all those blooming charms surprise,  
Those heav'nly looks, and dear deluding eyes?  
The harp and bow would you like Phoebus bear,  
A brighter Phoebus Phaon might appear;  
Would you with ivy wreath your flowing hair,  
Not Bacchus' self with Phaon could compare.<sup>46</sup>

Joan DeJean has analysed Phaon as a doublet for Phaeton, a symbol of light. The name recalls that of the ferryman transformed into a beautiful youth for having transported for free an old woman who happened to be Aphrodite in disguise.<sup>47</sup> Ovid's epistle literarizes these mythological echoes 'in order to make them into elements from which a biography can be constructed', a biography deliberately ignoring the homoerotic dimension of Sappho's poetry.<sup>48</sup> While the *Heroides* is the most likely source for Holiday's panel, new images of Sappho were progressively emerging by the late 1850s. During this period the poetess appeared more and more as an ambiguous, liminal figure, a figure torn between polar opposites: Greek/Latin, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, Greek/Ionian.<sup>49</sup> This liminality is partly figured by the ferryman Phaon and by the embarcation itself which, like the cliff, appears as a Foucauldian heterotopia 'a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea.'<sup>50</sup> Burges's decision to place the pale Sappho at sea rather than leaping from the cliff contrasts with 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century representations of the suffering poetess. His visual interpretation of the story therefore needs to be replaced not only within the Ovidian tradition but more specifically within its complex Victorian reception in the 1850s and 1860s which marked a turning-point in how Sappho's poetic, erotic as well as *chromatic* afterlife was envisaged.

---

<sup>45</sup> Pope, *Complete Poems*, l.41-47, 60.

<sup>46</sup> Pope, *Complete Poems*, l.21-26, 60.

<sup>47</sup> Nagy, *Greek Mythology*, 229.

<sup>48</sup> DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho*, 52.

<sup>49</sup> Sappho was called the 'masculine Sappho' by Horace in his *Epistles* 1.19.28 as noted by Campbell, *Greek Lyric*, 33.

<sup>50</sup> Reynolds, *The Sappho History*, 74.



## 2) Changing colours: ‘Anti-Ovidian’ Sapphos

The emphasis on colour in Holiday’s panel openly challenges Gladstone’s *Studies on Homer* which ignored the chromatic body of the Hellenic heritage in favour of a colourless reading of a selection of texts. Here, on the contrary, both Sappho and Phaon are placed on a multicoloured embarcation, reminiscent of the stylized ships depicted on Greek vases, a particularly popular subject with Attic painters.<sup>51</sup> Burges and Holiday may not have had in mind a specific vase, but the representation of Phaon’s sails evokes a 5th century BC red-figure *stamnos* representing Odysseus and the sirens, acquired by the British Museum in 1843 (FIG). ‘Gleaming with gold and blue and cinnabar’ like Jason’s ship the Argo in Morris’s 1867 *Life and Death of Jason*, Sappho’s ship with its scarlet sails decorated with blue-and gold-lined palmettes—Owen Jones’s emblematic Greek ornament—further testify to the rich and colourful material culture of the Pagan past (FIG).<sup>52</sup> The sea itself is strewn with red stains, which could either be read as a proleptic sign of the poetess’s tragic leap from the Leucadian cliff, or as an allusion to Homer’s description of the ‘purple (*porphureos*) sea’.

While the Homeric question was increasingly discussed in the wake of Gladstone’s *Studies*, interest in Sappho soared throughout the 19th century as more and more of her fragments were retrieved and translated, which questioned previous readings of her works mainly concentrating on fragment 1 (the ‘Ode to Aphrodite’) and fragment 31. These two well-known fragments were explored anew in the mid-19th century as more material approaches to Sappho’s work and life came to the fore. Partly anticipating J.E. Harrison’s reading of Sappho through the prism of Greek vases, Holiday’s panel depicts the poetess in the same posture as the female lyre-player (identified as Sappho) rejecting the amorous advances of a fellow lyric poet on a votive terracotta plaque acquired by the British Museum in 1842 (FIG).<sup>53</sup> Burges may have wished to respond to this new fascination for the poetess whose poetic body of verse appeared particularly attuned to the avant-garde tastes of his close literary and artistic acquaintances, notably the Rossettis and Swinburne.

Christina Rossetti started writing verses about the poetess as early as 1846. Like most women of her age who were denied access to classical education, she did not read Greek. And yet, in

---

<sup>51</sup> Williams, ‘Ships in Greek vase-painting’, 132.

<sup>52</sup> Morris, *The Life and Death of Jason*, III, 53. Cinnabar, the ore of mercury, was used by artists in Antiquity to produce a bright scarlet red.

<sup>53</sup> See Harrison’s ‘The Pictures of Sappho’ published in 1888 in *Woman’s World*, under the editorship of Oscar Wilde. The article contains large quotations from the Sapphic poems of Swinburne who launched the aesthetic craze for the Lesbian poetess in the 1860s.

both her ‘Sappho’ (1846) and ‘What Sappho Would Have Said Had Her Leap Cured Instead of Killing Her’ (1847), she offers alternative readings of her mythical suicide and poetic afterlife as told in Ovid.<sup>54</sup> Christina Rossetti was familiar with translations of Sappho, in particular Ambrose Philips’s first English translations of the ‘Ode to Aphrodite’ in 1711. But contrary to this adaptation, her lines are far more colourful when she depicts the pain Sappho longs to feel in order to retrieve her lyrical inspiration:<sup>55</sup>

‘O blessed Love, return, return  
Brighten the flame that needs must burn.  
Among the stately lilies pale,  
Among the roses flushing red,  
I seek a flower meet for my head,  
A wreath wherewith to bind my veil:  
I seek in vain; a shadow-pain  
Lies on my heart; and all in vain.  
The rose hath too much life in it;  
The lily is too much at rest.  
Surely a blighted rose were best,  
Or cankered lily flower more fit;  
Or purple violet, withering  
While yet the year is in its spring.’ [...]

My pillow underneath my head  
Shall be green grass; thick fragrant leaves  
My canopy.<sup>56</sup>

In these two passages, the Lesbian poetess craves to be at one with the natural world, notably with the ‘green grass’ (l.50) which could be read—had Christina Rossetti known Greek—a reference to fragment 31 in which the poetic persona on seeing her beloved with a man becomes ‘*chlorotera de poias*’ (greener than grass).<sup>57</sup>

Four years later, in 1850, her brother W.M. Rossetti published a short text describing a statue of Sappho sitting on a rock (possibly the Leucadian cliff from which she leapt) by Baron Carlo Marochetti (FIG):

Sappho sits in abject languor, her feet hanging over the rock, her hands left in her lap, where her harp has sunk; its strings have made music assuredly for the last time. The poetry of the figure is like a pang of life in the stone: the sea is in her ears, and that desolate look in her eyes is upon the sea; and her countenance has fallen.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup> On Victorian women and ancient Greek, see Prins, *Ladies’s Greek* (2017).

<sup>55</sup> Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, p.203n.

<sup>56</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Complete Poems*, 1.5-18, vol.2, 166 and 1.49-51, 167.

<sup>57</sup> This line is absent from Philips’s version. See Wharton, *Sappho*, 67.

<sup>58</sup> Rossetti, ‘The Royal Academy Exhibition’, 383.

The Lesbian poetess seems to have been a popular subject with sculptors at the time, especially with ‘polychromatists’ as shown by the three scandalous tinted Sapphos presented by Jean-Baptiste Clésinger at the 1859 Salon (FIG).<sup>59</sup> Burges, who purchased a ‘bronze Sappho’ from Paris the following year, would have therefore been aware that the figure of the poetess was increasingly associated with avant-garde aesthetic experiments, whether in stone, paint or verse.<sup>60</sup>

But the true heir of the Greek poetess during this period was Swinburne who may have first suggested the subject of the panel to Burges in the late 1850s. Swinburne was a devoted reader of Sappho whom he described as ‘the very greatest poet that ever lived’.<sup>61</sup> One of his first sapphic ventures was the poem ‘August’, which he probably composed as early as 1861:

There were four apples on the bough,  
Half gold half red, that one might know  
The blood was ripe inside the core;  
The colour of the leaves was more  
Like stems of yellow corn that grow  
Through all the gold June meadow’s floor.<sup>62</sup>

As noted by Catherine Maxwell, this poem—later included in *Poems and Ballads, First Series*—was first published in the *Spectator* on 6 September 1862, shortly before Swinburne’s glowing review of Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal*.<sup>63</sup> However, contrary to Baudelaire’s lesbian *femmes damnées*, Swinburne’s echoes of Sappho’s fragment 68 depict erotic desire not as deviant but as conducive to a sensual mood expressed in highly synaesthetic terms.<sup>64</sup>

The colour soothed me like a tune,  
Green leaves all round the gold and red.<sup>65</sup>

The emphasis on lyric colour, partly reminiscent of Morris’s *Defence of Guenevere* and Christina Rossetti’s own Sapphic verse, blends changing colours and natural imagery, although Maxwell notes Swinburne goes further in establishing ‘an almost seamless correspondence between the natural world and the world of human desire’.<sup>66</sup> Poetic colour plays a key role in mediating such sensations.

---

<sup>59</sup> On Clésinger’s polychrome Sapphos, see Héran, ‘L’évolution du regard sur la sculpture polychrome’, 67.

<sup>60</sup> Burges, Abstract of diaries, 1860.

<sup>61</sup> Swinburne’s ‘Sappho’ quoted in Haynes in his notes to Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads*, 332.

<sup>62</sup> Swinburne, ‘August’, vol.1, 1.1-6, 215.

<sup>63</sup> Maxwell, *The Female Sublime*, 197.

<sup>64</sup> Swinburne may not have known the poem ‘Lesbos’ which was excised from Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal* as soon as it was published.

<sup>65</sup> Swinburne, ‘August’, 1.41-2, 216.

<sup>66</sup> Maxwell, *The Female Sublime*, 198.

Swinburne claimed that Sappho ‘took possession of his soul’ when he was at Eton, which is also when he first experienced flagellation.<sup>67</sup> Yopie Prins has shown that this experience shaped his conception of poetry as passion, understood in the etymological sense of ‘suffering’.<sup>68</sup> If Sappho features prominently in his unpublished novel *Lesbia Brandon* (watermarked 1863), his best-known tribute to her can be found in *Poems and Ballads, First Series* (1866), a collection of poems which the ‘Dedication’ describes as ‘scattered in seven years’ traces/As they fell from the boy that was then’ indicating that the earliest were possibly drafted in 1858, when Swinburne still was at Balliol College, Oxford.<sup>69</sup> His ‘Anactoria’ may therefore have been in the making around the time his artist friends were working on the bookcase. In this poem, Swinburne ventriloquizes Sappho in a very different way from Ovid: the Ode is not addressed to a man—Phaon—but to a woman, Anactoria, whose body the poetess longs to consume:

Ah that my lips were tuneless lips, but pressed  
 To the bruised blossom of thy scourged white breast!  
 Ah that my mouth for Muses’ milk were fed  
 On the sweet blood thy sweet small wounds had bled!<sup>70</sup>

Pain is eroticised and presented as conducive to poetic creation as ‘pain animate(s) the dust of dead desire’ (l.180), rather than ‘obstructing art’. Embracing the fragmentary form of Sappho’s poetry, the Victorian poet insists on breaking away not only from Ovid but also from a whole Latinate tradition emphasizing a heterosexual reading of her work from Catullus to Ambrose Philips which he denounced in his ‘Notes on Poems and Reviews’ published in 1866 to defend the most reviled pieces in *Poems and Ballads, First Series*.<sup>71</sup> Swinburne would later go as far as to defend the ‘anti-Ovidian theory’ that it was Sappho rather than Philomela who had been transformed into a nightingale.<sup>72</sup> For Maxwell, if Sappho’s lyric verse has always been read as ‘implicated with pain’ it is not only owing to the legend of her violent death, but also because her own poetry emphasizes the ‘bittersweetness’ of love (as in fragment 130) and emotional turmoil (as in fragment 31).<sup>73</sup> These violent emotions are intimately connected with the desiring body, omnipresent in ‘Anactoria’ which incorporates lines from both fragments 1 and 31 in an attempt to re-member the Sapphic corpus.<sup>74</sup> While Swinburne acknowledged that he

---

<sup>67</sup> Rooksby, *Swinburne*, 30.

<sup>68</sup> Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, 140 and sq.

<sup>69</sup> Rooksby, *Swinburne*, 87 and 132.

<sup>70</sup> Swinburne, ‘Anactoria’, *SP*, vol.1, l.105-108, 60.

<sup>71</sup> Swinburne, ‘Notes on Poems and Reviews’, 406. Sections of Swinburne’s ‘Notes on Poems and Reviews’ were reproduced in Dr. H. Wharton 1885 edition of the various translations of the poetess’s fragments.

<sup>72</sup> Letter to Watts-Dunton, 30 July 1879 in *Swinburne Letters*, vol.4, 78.

<sup>73</sup> Maxwell, *The Female Sublime*, 32.

<sup>74</sup> Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, 115-6.

could not come anywhere near Sappho, his ‘paraphrases’ of the fragments were in fact much closer to the original Greek text than to its Latin versions, thanks to his use of Sapphic stanzas.<sup>75</sup> In a later poem entitled ‘On the Cliffs’, Swinburne’s Sapphic echoes are highlighted by the use of italics :

*O thou of divers-coloured mind, O thou  
 Deathless, God's daughter subtle-souled lo, now,  
 Now too the song above all songs, in flight  
 Higher than the day-star's height,  
 And sweet as sound the moving wings of night!  
 Thou of the divers-coloured seat behold,  
 Her very song of old!  
 O deathless, O God's daughter subtle-souled!  
 That same cry through this boskage overhead  
 Rings round reiterated.*<sup>76</sup>

Swinburne here disseminates the first word of Sappho’s ‘Ode to Aphrodite’ by interpreting it either as ποικίλοφρον ‘O thou of divers-coloured mind’ or as ποικιλόθρον ‘Thou of the divers-coloured seat’. Drawing on scholarly controversies about this opening line, Swinburne opens the Hellenic corpus to multiple interpretations.<sup>77</sup> The adjective *poikilos* suggests this changefulness which Pater would later associate with the ‘Ionian’ pole of Greek, that is to say with the Asiatic Greece the Lesbian poet came from.<sup>78</sup> According to Adeline Grand-Clément, this *poikilos*, recurrent in archaic poetry, could describe a wide range of crafts, often associated with feminine adornments:

*Poikilos* can be translated in several ways: ‘many-coloured, spotted, pied, dappled; tattooed; wrought in various colours’ (according to LSJ). [...] The reference to craftsmanship is confirmed by the uses that ancient authors, especially Archaic poets, make of *poikilos* and of the verb *poikill*. (‘work in various colours, work in embroidery, embroider garments; embellish, adorn, vary, change,’ according to LSJ). Both words refer to finely crafted valuable objects—painted, sculpted, chiseled, or woven—that offer a fascinating show when their variegated surface is animated by the vibration, gleaming, and shivering of light.<sup>79</sup>

*Poikilos* does not, therefore, refer to a specific colour but to a mutiplicity of hues often with synaesthetic connotations. It is the term Sappho resorts to when evoking the sandals of a young woman in fragment 39, which may have in turn inspired Anacreon’s depiction of the poetess

<sup>75</sup> Swinburne, ‘Notes on Poems and Reviews,’ 407.

<sup>76</sup> Swinburne, ‘On the Cliffs’, *SP*, vol.3, 321. Emphasis in the original text.

<sup>77</sup> Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, 138.

<sup>78</sup> Pater, ‘The Beginnings of Greek Sculpture’, in *The Works of Walter Pater*, vol.6, 216.

<sup>79</sup> Grand-Clément, ‘Poikilia’, 406-7.

as ‘the young woman with multicoloured sandals.’<sup>80</sup> By highlighting this *poikilos* and its connection with the desiring body, Swinburne opened Sappho’s poetry to textual and sexual variations. This was a deliberate break away from previous renderings of fragment 1 which not only changed the sex of the beloved invoked in the poem but often discoloured Sappho’s *poikilos* by translating it simply as ‘beauty’ or ‘beautiful’.<sup>81</sup> Rebelling against the hegemony of a white Greece celebrated solely in philological terms, Swinburne thus restored Sappho to her original colours and Lesbian desires.<sup>82</sup> In this he paved the way for other subversive sapphic variations, including Burges’s and Holiday’s colourful representation of her intertwined life and work.

### 3) *Chlorotera*: Re-membering the green body of Sappho

In Holiday’s panel, Sappho is dressed in green, a rather unusual colour for the *chiton* of a Hellenic poetess. This implicitly connects her verse with the rhythmic motion of the green sea which Swinburne frequently evokes in his own Sapphic stanzas. Sappho’s ambiguous *poikilos* was indeed not the only chromatic signifier which the Victorian poet highlighted in his ‘paraphrases’: the controversial *chloros* of fragment 31 features prominently in his poems evoking the desiring female body. As Swinburne reminds his readers and detractors in his ‘Notes on Poems and Reviews’, fragment 31—the ‘Ode to the beloved woman’ or the ‘Ode to Anactoria’—was the most celebrated of Sappho’s poems, known to every student of Greek:<sup>83</sup>

Peer of gods he seemeth to me, the blissful  
 Man who sits and gazes at thee before him,  
 Close beside thee sits, and in silence hears thee  
 Silverly speaking,  
 Laughing love's low laughter. Oh this, this only  
 Stirs the troubled heart in my breast to tremble!  
 For should I but see thee a little moment,  
 Straight is my voice hushed;  
 Yea, my tongue is broken, and through and through me  
 'Neath the flesh impalpable fire runs tingling;  
 Nothing see mine eyes, and a noise of roaring  
 Waves in my ear sounds;  
 Sweat runs down in rivers, a tremor seizes  
 All my limbs, and paler than grass in autumn,  
 Caught by pains of menacing death, I falter,

<sup>80</sup> See Grand-Clément, *La Fabrique des couleurs*, 436.

<sup>81</sup> On heterosexual readings of Sappho’s Ode to Aphrodite from Ambrose Philips to Palgrave see Snyder, *The Woman and the Lyre*, 11. As for colourless translations of Sappho’s *poikilia*, see Wharton, *Sappho*, 51 and 54.

<sup>82</sup> Linda Dowling has convincingly argued that this *poikilia* signifying dappledness and variety was used as a ‘homosexual code’ by a certain number of Oxonian hellenophiles. Dowling, ‘Ruskin’s pied beauty’, 1-8.

<sup>83</sup> Swinburne, ‘Notes on Poems and Reviews’, 406.

Lost in the love-trance.<sup>84</sup>

Sappho's text, here quoted in Symonds's 1883 translation, has always played a crucial role in the reception of Sappho as it is one of the only poems to have survived in its entirety. It was frequently appropriated and modified, notably by the Latin poet Catullus in his poem 51 known as 'Ille mi par'. In this text, the male poet addresses his passive and voiceless muse Lesbia, giving a 'heteroerotic dynamic' to the Sapphic triangle of desire.<sup>85</sup> Catullus' version also suppresses one key line in the Greek original: *Chlorotera de poia*. As with Sappho's *poikilos*, Catullus was neither the first or the last to omit this passage. The reason for this may be that the comparative form of '*chlorotera*' is evidently feminine, suggesting the intensity of female desire which many male authors sought to tone down, if not to erase altogether. The following lines from Catullus:

Lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus  
Flamma demanat, sonitu suo pte  
Tintinant aures, gemina teguntur  
Lumina nocte —

...were thus rendered by Gladstone:

My tongue is palsied. Subtly hid  
Fire creeps me through from limb to limb :  
My loud ears tingle all unbid :  
Twin clouds of night mine eyes bedim.<sup>86</sup>

This omission of *chloros*—signifying light as well as yellowish green hue—is all the more surprising as the adjective was very frequent in archaic poetry: Grand-Clément lists over 35 occurrences, including 17 in Homer.<sup>87</sup> Etymologically, the term *chloros* is closely linked to fresh grass (*χλόη*) and to bile (*χολή*), evoking both nature and human emotions. This is the case in a passage from the *Odyssey* in which Penelope, lamenting what she believes to be her widowed state, compares herself to Aedon the daughter of Pandareus who accidentally killed her son Itylus and was changed into a nightingale, described as '*chlôrêis aêdôn*' (pale/green nightingale), an episode reminiscent of the story of Philomela told in Ovid's 'Sappho to Phaon' and in Swinburne's 'Itylus'.<sup>88</sup> Many commentators were puzzled by this formula which could either describe the green plumage of the bird, its natural setting or, in synaesthetic fashion, the

---

<sup>84</sup> Wharton, *Sappho*, 69.

<sup>85</sup> Greene, 'Re-Figuring the Feminine Voice', 2.

<sup>86</sup> Wharton, *Sappho*, 66.

<sup>87</sup> Grand-Clément, *La Fabrique des couleurs*, 91.

<sup>88</sup> Od. XIX 518, quoted in Grand-Clément, *La Fabrique des couleurs*, 95

clarity of its pure song of pain. As noted by Eleonor Irwin, nowhere are these strong emotions better felt than in Sappho's fragment 31 in which the poetess describes herself as '*chlorotera de poias*' on seeing the girl to whom the poem is addressed, sitting next to a man.<sup>89</sup> This fragment was popularised by Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime*, which had praised Sappho for the accuracy of her depiction of love madness:

Are you not amazed how at one and the same moment she seeks out soul, body, hearing, tongue, sight, complexion as though they had all left her and were external, and how in contradiction she both freezes and burns, is irrational and sane, is afraid and nearly dead, so that we observe in her not one single emotion but a concourse of emotions?<sup>90</sup>

Longinus mentions the lover's change of complexion—among other symptoms of emotional torment—but without referring to any specific colour. And yet Helen King remarks that 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century readers of Longinus understood this passion as a form of 'green sickness', or *chlorosis*, a pathology affecting young women only.<sup>91</sup>

For Irwin, who notes an evolution of the meaning of *chloros* from 'green' in the 8th century BC (and in particular in Homer) to 'pale' or discoloured by the 4th century BC, the problem with most interpretations of Sappho's poem is that *chloros* is applied to dried, yellowish herbage.<sup>92</sup> But *chloros* also contains the idea of a transitional state, which could be associated either with discolouring or with colouring.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, in Greek poetry, grass was often described as soft, tender and linked with sexual love.<sup>94</sup> '*Chlorotera de poias*' should therefore not to be 'taken not as a symptom of exhaustion, but of excitement' which Sandra Boehringer explicitly connects with same-sex desire.<sup>95</sup>

It is precisely this omitted line and ambiguous hue which resurfaces in Holiday's panel and in several of Swinburne's poems, where it is paraphrased either as 'pale as grass' (*Atalanta in Calydon*), 'paler than grass in summer' ('Sapphics'), 'Made like white summer-coloured grass' ('Aholibah') or as 'Are not my cheeks as grass, my body pale,/And my breath like a dying poisoned man's?' ('Phaedra').<sup>96</sup> Although the reference to a poisonous green is here certainly more Victorian than Hellenic, Swinburne was careful to follow the Greek text as closely as

---

<sup>89</sup> Irwin, *Colour Terms*, 65-67.

<sup>90</sup> Campbell, *Greek lyric*, 80-81.

<sup>91</sup> King, *The Disease of Virgins*, 36.

<sup>92</sup> Irwin, *Colour Terms*, 66.

<sup>93</sup> Grand-Clément, *La Fabrique des couleurs*, 99.

<sup>94</sup> See for instance, Homer, *Il.* 14.317 and the reference to the grass growing under the feet of Aphrodite in Hes. *Theog.* 194-5.

<sup>95</sup> See Irwin, *Colour Terms*, 67 and Boehringer, *L'homosexualité féminine*, 56.

<sup>96</sup> Swinburne, *Atalanta*, vol.4, l.1391, 296; 'Sapphics', vol.1, l.35, 205; 'Aholibah', vol.1, l.135, 270; 'Phaedra', vol.1, l.27-28, 28.



possible. This may have been part of a strategy to deflect the subversive charge of his own Sapphic verse by invoking the immunity conferred by the prestige of the Hellenic heritage. In his ‘Notes on Poems and Reviews’, Swinburne explains that the offences of previous translators—or ‘traitors’—of Sappho were more grievous than his supposedly immoral poems. For the Victorian poet, Catullus’, Ambrose Philips’s and Nicolas Boileau’s ‘translations’ of fragment 31, which all have in common the part or total removal of this ‘*chlorotera de poias*’, were indeed ‘colourless and bloodless.’<sup>97</sup> Here ‘colourless’ is not simply a metaphor signifying ‘dull’ but literally ‘without colour’ as both the hue—whether green or yellow—and the desiring body of the poetess were deliberately expunged by Catullus and his followers. Swinburne, on the contrary, chose to revive these controversial colours in his own poetry so as to translate the intensity of Sappho’s same-sex desire and original body of song.

In the early 1860s Solomon started exploring Sapphic themes in similar subversive chromatic terms, possibly under Swinburne’s influence. His watercolour entitled *Sappho and Erinna in the Garden of Mitylene* (1864) may have been in the making as early as 1862 as he drew a pencil study for Sappho’s head with the exact same expression on 14 April that year (FIG).<sup>98</sup> Possibly modelled on the Romany dark-haired model Keomi Gray, the poetess, crowned with laurel, is presented both as a lover and as an artist. Her lyre and lines of verse rest under a bronze statue of Aphrodite. In the background, two doves emulate the embraced couple, like the two birds in Holiday’s panel. The blue sea is visible in the distance so as to remind the viewer that Sappho and Erinna are here depicted in their Lesbian setting, welcoming to same-sex love. In contrast to most of the pictorial representations of Sappho which, from the 18th century, only retained the heterosexual aspects of her love-life and notably her emblematic suicide, Solomon’s painting explicitly depicts Sappho’s homoerotic desire.<sup>99</sup> The emphasis is on the intensity of the poetess’s emotions, which could be an allusion to fragment 31 and in particular to the missing line in Catullus’s heterosexual reading of the poem: ‘*chlorotera de poias*’. The watercolour, often considered a more ‘feminine’ medium than oil, explores all the shades of *chloros*, from offwhite paleness (Sappho’s skin highlighted with touches of green, like the marmoreal body of Aphrodite presiding over her lesbian passion for the ‘purple’ Erinna) to yellow (Sappho’s drapery) and to green, or partly discoloured green like that of the summer scorched vegetation in the background, reflecting the ‘green sickness’ evoked in fragment 31.

---

<sup>97</sup> Swinburne, ‘Notes on Poems and Reviews’, 406.

<sup>98</sup> Prettejohn, ‘Solomon, Swinburne, Sappho,’ 107-8.

<sup>99</sup> Prettejohn, ‘Solomon, Swinburne, Sappho,’ 104.

Viewed in the light of these new poetic and visual adaptations of Sappho, Holiday's panel appears far more controversial than the Ovidian subtext may at first suggest. Representing Sappho as '*chlorotera*', in the sense of both pale and green, it shows the poetess suffering from a love-sickness that does *not* 'obstruct her art' as in Ovid's version. I believe this emphasis on chromatic excess and more particularly on green, the colour of disorder, to be borrowed from Swinburne's early sapphic verse. This, in turn, should lead us to think twice about the representation of Phaon. What if it were not Phaon, but Sappho's more faithful lover, Swinburne himself, who was depicted on Holiday's panel? Phaon's rather unHellenic red hair and moustaches indeed resemble Rossetti's 1861 watercolour of the poet who would certainly have enjoyed such a cameo appearance (FIG). The thickness of Phaon's moustache may even be a visual pun to highlight the medieval etymology of Swinburne's first name 'Algernon' signifying 'with moustache' (*grenons*).<sup>100</sup> That same year Swinburne had, after all, already posed for the moustached figure of St George on Morris's eponymous cabinet which was also displayed at the 1862 Exhibition (FIG). Burges knew this cabinet well as he was then collaborating with Morris & Co: the technique used for the interior decoration (layers of tinted varnish on a ground of silver leaf) of the cabinet was a medieval method taken from Theophilus which he himself had contributed to reviving for an earlier piece of painted furniture commissioned by H.G. Yatman in 1858. Moreover, Burges was particularly fond of representing his friends on his painted furniture. Stacy Marks's *Pierides* even recall the features of Poynter, Burne-Jones and Holiday, and one of the figures is almost certainly a portrait of the architect himself (FIGS).<sup>101</sup>

In line with Swinburne's Sapphic colourful verse, Holiday and Burges therefore embraced new images of the poetess which they translated in green—the same liminal, ambiguous, and forbidden hue Poynter used to give pride of place to the youthful poet of the *Vita Nuova*.

### III Revealing Dante's true colours

#### 1) Dante's 'vision'

Although the panel dedicated to the Christian origins of poetry bears the inscription 'Rossetti' on the lower right-hand side, it was painted by one of Burges's closest collaborators at the time: E.J. Poynter. Burges met Poynter in the early 1850s through his father, the architect Ambrose

---

<sup>100</sup> The name 'Algernon' comes from the Old French *als gernons*, from *a les* 'to the, with the' + *germon*, variant of *grenon* 'moustache'. I would like to thank Catherine Maxwell for informing about this etymology.

<sup>101</sup> I am very grateful to Matthew Winterbottom for suggesting this.

Poynter.<sup>102</sup> In 1853-4, they visited Rome together and possibly Paris in 1856.<sup>103</sup> The first architectural project on which they worked together was the restoration of Waltham Abbey. But prior to these stained-glass commissions, Poynter had collaborated with Burges on a series of painted pieces of furniture in 1857 and 1858 (the Sun Cabinet, The Cadmus escritoire and The Wine and Beers sideboard) which contributed to placing Burges in the avant-garde of designers.<sup>104</sup> The escritoire, which was displayed in the Medieval Court of the 1862 International Exhibition alongside the Great Bookcase (FIG), relates the myth of Cadmus who supposedly invented the Greek alphabet, as well as allegories of inscription (an Assyrian sculptor at work on clay tablets), composition (Dante writing the *Divine Comedy*) and printing and publication (the 15<sup>th</sup> century English printer William Caxton setting his letterpress).<sup>105</sup> These illustrations were chosen to mirror the purpose of the escritoire, in keeping with Burges's conception of medieval furniture as telling stories (FIG).<sup>106</sup> The Cadmus piece was based on the same polychrome armoire from Noyon as the Great Bookcase, with a similar use of colourful ornamentation alternating bands of red and deep blue stencilled with flower or animal motifs.<sup>107</sup> In both works, Poynter depicts Dante at his desk. Dantean themes are also found in the decoration of both the Dante Bookcase (1862-69) representing from top to bottom the Paradise, Purgatory and Hell of *The Divine Comedy* (FIG) and the *Vita Nuova* Washstand (1879-80) (FIG). Burges was indeed well acquainted with Dante's verse (which he seems to have read in the original Italian) as with some of its later visual interpretations, including John Flaxman's 1793 *Compositions* from Dante and D.G. Rossetti's watercolours from the 1850s.<sup>108</sup> The composition of the Great Bookcase panel differs, however, from that of the Cadmus cabinet. The frontal view of Dante adopted for the escritoire is replaced by his more iconic profile, found in the portraits of the poet by Botticelli, Raphael and even Gustave Doré (FIG). By conjuring up this complex nexus of texts and images, Poynter strengthened Dante's allegorical status as the 'originator' of Christian poetry. Lost in melancholy thoughts, his head resting on one of his hands, the poet equally evokes the *Melencolia* by Dürer, whose prints Burges collected (FIG). The writing cabinet depicted in the panel particularly resembles the lectern depicted in Dürer's *St Jerome* in Burges's collection (FIG).<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> Crook, *Burges*, 86.

<sup>103</sup> Burges, Abstract of diaries, 1853.

<sup>104</sup> Crook, *Burges*, 295-6.

<sup>105</sup> Donnelly, 'Rapture and ridicule', 114.

<sup>106</sup> Burges, *Art applied to Industry*, 71.

<sup>107</sup> Roquet, *Life in Costume*, 144.

<sup>108</sup> Dante's *Divina Commedia* and Flaxman's *Compositions From The Hell, Purgatory, And Paradise, Of Dante Alighieri*, were both presented at the 1918 sale of his library holdings (LS 1918, 23 and 19).

<sup>109</sup> Burges, LS 1918, 22.

And yet by softening the severe outline of the hatchet nose, Poynter also referenced the new visual life given to the Florentine poet by D.G. Rossetti.<sup>110</sup> In the late 1850s Dante's vision was primarily a Rossettian subject, which may explain the inscription on the side of the panel (FIG). Rossetti's obsession with Dante was so strong at the time that he changed the sequence of his three Christian names to emphasize the artistic filiation. Dante was even a family obsession, as D.G. Rossetti's father Gabriele Rossetti was both a Dante scholar and an exile, who identified with the medieval poet who had been expelled from Florence in 1302 due to his opposition to Pope Boniface VIII. Rossetti's reading of Dante was, however, less politicized than his father's. He started writing and painting Dante-inspired works in the late 1840s. In collaboration with his brother, he completed a translation of Dante's poetic autobiography, the *Vita Nuova*, in September 1848, a project which launched his career both as a poet and as a painter.<sup>111</sup> Published in 1861 as part of *The Early Italian Poets*, it reveals what Jerome McGann describes as the 'devotional and even cultic relation operating between Dante and D.G. Rossetti'.<sup>112</sup> In his preface to the volume, Rossetti advocates aesthetic fidelity rather than linguistic 'literality', in keeping with the strong oneiric and mystical dimension of the *Vita Nuova* which Dante completed shortly after the death of his beloved Beatrice in 1295.<sup>113</sup> His vision or dream of her lifting her white veil surrounded by angelic figures is taken from the second *canzone* of the *Vita Nuova* which Rossetti translated in the following terms:

Then lifting up mine eyes, as the tears came,  
 I saw the Angels, like a rain of manna,  
 In a long flight flying back Heavenward;  
 Having a little cloud in front of them,  
 After the which they went and said, 'Hosanna!'  
 And if they had said more, you should have  
 heard.  
 Then Love spoke thus: 'Now all shall be  
 made clear:  
 Come and behold our lady where she lies.'  
 These idle phantasies  
 Then carried me to see my lady dead:  
 And standing at her head  
 Her ladies put a white veil over her;  
 And with her was such very humbleness  
 That she appeared to say, 'I am at peace.'<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>110</sup> See Reid, 'Textual Physiognomy, 16-27.

<sup>111</sup> Treuherz, et al., *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 156.

<sup>112</sup> See Rossetti archive on the *Vita Nuova* consulted on 12 March 2020: <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/9d-1861.raw.html>

<sup>113</sup> Moriconi, 'Dante's dream: Rossetti's reading of the *Vita Nuova*', 58.

<sup>114</sup> Rossetti, *Dante and his Circle*, l.57-70, 74.

Rossetti chose these lines as the epigraph to his prose ekphrasis of the oil version of *Dante's Dream* (1871):

The scene is a chamber of dreams, where Beatrice is seen lying on a couch recessed in the wall, as if just fallen back in death. The winged and glowing figure of Love (the pilgrim Love of the *Vita Nuova*, wearing the scallop-shell on his shoulder,) leads by the hand Dante, who walks conscious but absorbed, as in sleep. In his other hand Love carries his arrow pointed at the dreamer's heart, and with it a branch of apple-blossom, which may figure forth the love here consummated in death,—a blossom plucked before the coming of fruit. As he reaches the bier, Love bends for a moment over Beatrice with the kiss which her lover has never given her; while the two dream-ladies hold the pall full of may bloom suspended for an instant before it covers her face for ever. These two green-clad women look fixedly on the dreamer as if they might not speak, with saddened but not hopeless eyes.<sup>115</sup>

In keeping with this description, the painting explores the relation between dream, love and art with a focus on Beatrice as both a spiritual and aesthetic presence. Burges and Poynter may have had the same passage from the *Vita Nuova* in mind when preparing the composition of the panel, which features the angels and the white veil. This would also explain why Beatrice is represented by Nathaniel Westlake (FIG) as the allegory of Religion, alongside the figures of Art and Love, in the pediment section of the Bookcase, just above Poynter's panel.<sup>116</sup> Like the Virgin in the Angelico panel, Beatrice's head is circled with a halo and she holds a sacred lily in her hand. At her feet, the green grass is strewn with lilies of the valley, another floral symbol of Mary.

Rossetti's very personal interpretation of Dante's works is further reflected in his pictorial production of the period. In the late 1840s Rossetti started to plan a series of designs to accompany his translation of the *Vita Nuova*. In September 1848 he produced a study for a drawing of *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice* which he completed the following year. The 1850s were Rossetti's most prolific Dantean decade as he painted no fewer than five Beatrice-related works during this period, including *Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast, Denies Him Her Salutation* (1853); *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice* (1853); *The Meeting of Dante and Beatrice in Paradise* (1853-4), *Dante's Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice* (1856). In 1859, Rossetti decorated the cupboard doors that formed the upper part of a settle belonging to William Morris with a diptych representing *The Salutation of Beatrice* (in Florence and in the Garden of Eden) and *Dantis Amor* (FIG). Burges would have seen this settle during his visit to Morris's Red House in 1860 or at the Hogarth Club where

---

<sup>115</sup> Rossetti, *Dante's Dream on the Day of the Death of Beatrice: 9th of June, 1290*, 1881, 1. Reproduced in Rossetti archive: [http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/23p-1881.broadside.rad.html#p\[1\]](http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/23p-1881.broadside.rad.html#p[1])

<sup>116</sup> Winterbottom, 'Not Acceptable to Present Taste', 22.

*The Salutation of Beatrice* was presented in May that year. The medallioned Beatrice in Poynter's panel partly recalls the circled figures in *Dantis Amor*.

These Dante works in turn spurred Solomon to draw his own *Dante's First Meeting with Beatrice* in 1859 (FIG). By that date, Dante had evidently become the focal point of the poetic and pictorial work not just of Rossetti, but of his whole circle of friends. Burges certainly seems to have shared Rossetti's obsession with Dante, as shown by an anecdote reported in George Boyce's diaries dated 7 February 1858: 'Gave Burges (in exchange for something he is to do for me) a sketch I made of Llyn Crafant in N. Wales [...] which he persists in calling the 7th Hell, as it reminds him of Dante's Inferno. The only alteration I made in it (to suit his fancy) is giving a red flush as of flame in the horizon.'<sup>117</sup> Whether through Boyce or the Hogarth Club, Burges was familiar with Rossetti's jewel-like watercolours, which bear many chromatic similarities to Poynter's Dante panel for the Bookcase.

However, Poynter's panel and Rossetti's Dantean works also differ in many notable ways. For instance, the horizontal composition of Rossetti's *Dante's Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice* contrasts with the vertical movement predominating in Poynter's panel which represents Dante as a poet composing, rather than grieving his beloved (FIG). Moreover, Poynter's representation seems far more grounded in the aesthetic and material culture of Dante's day and age as shown by the elaborately inlaid polychrome writing cabinet, the 'Dante' chair and the maiolica lusterware, although both became popular in slightly later periods.<sup>118</sup> But for Burges maiolica was *medieval*, an art which he described in his *Lectures on art applied to industry* as combining 'beautiful form and imperishable colour', following a reference to Dante.<sup>119</sup> The 1850s and 1860s had brought about a revival of this type of colourful pottery which triumphed at the 1862 International Exhibition with Minton's 'majolica fountain' (FIG). The slightly anachronistic Dante connection may be explained by the fact that Burges believed such lustreware to have been 'by no means uncommon in Tuscany'.<sup>120</sup> He particularly praised the early Italian Renaissance ceramics in the South Kensington Museum, even if the pot included in the panel does not appear to have been copied after a specific piece from this collection. Dante's *escritoire* cannot be traced back to a particular piece of furniture either. The upper part displaying elaborate polychrome marquetry may well have been Burges's invention, illustrating the shift from painted furniture to inlaid wood in the 14<sup>th</sup> century described in

---

<sup>117</sup> Boyce, Abstract of diaries, 21.

<sup>118</sup> Blakemore, *History of Interior Design Furniture*, 96.

<sup>119</sup> Burges, *Art applied to Industry*, 101.

<sup>120</sup> Burges, *Art applied to Industry*, 101.

Viollet-Le-Duc's *Dictionnaire raisonné du mobilier français* (1854).<sup>121</sup> On the other hand, the X-shaped chair (reserved at the time for royalty or ecclesiastical dignitaries) and the lectern section of the cabinet resemble some examples reproduced in the French architect's work (FIGS). Infrared viewing has revealed the covering up of a Madonna and child and two heraldic blasons on the writing cabinet, which partly downplays the spiritual dimension of Dante's devotion for Beatrice, so central to Rossetti's works (FIG).

A *mise en abyme* of late medieval and early Renaissance furniture and decorative art as much as an allegory of Christian poetry, the Bookcase panel therefore casts Dante as a transitional figure, torn between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This idea can also be found in Frederic Leighton's *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna* which the artist painted in Rome in 1853, under the guidance of Burges who helped him with the details of the candlesticks and draped fabrics (FIGS).<sup>122</sup> Dante, whose figure appears among the onlookers of the procession, is dressed in a striped garment similar to the one that the poet is wearing on the Bookcase. His position seems somewhat awkward, leaning on a wall as if slightly detached from the group, as well as from the picture itself. According to Alison Milbank, this suggests that the poet straddled the gap between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance:

Since Leighton's *Cimabue* was indeed altered to make its figures faultlessly, if romantically, 13<sup>th</sup> century, the anachronism of (Dante's) dress must be conscious, presenting the alienated Dante of contemporary iconography, who is out of step with his own time. He represents his age and yet is alienated from it, as the medieval dress is incongruous with the Renaissance attire. Even his central position in the painting is not literally central but asymmetrical. [...] Dante's own poetic translation of history into eternity permits identity to be located in this very uncertainty.<sup>123</sup>

In Poynter's panel, this 'uncertainty' is translated in green, a colour with a long history of chemical instability.

## 2) The New Dante: From the *Divine Comedy* to the *Vita Nuova*

Like Sappho, Dante was reinvented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although representations of the poet greatly varied according to which of Dante's texts was the focus of attention. The 1850s were a pivotal period in this respect as the youthful poet of the *Vita Nuova* progressively superseded the grave author of the *Divine Comedy*. The poetic and pictorial work of Rossetti during this decade reflects this shift. In the 1830s and 1840s the *Divine Comedy* was still considered as the

---

<sup>121</sup> Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonné du mobilier français*, vol.1, 11.

<sup>122</sup> See Crook, *Burges*, 46 and 350.

<sup>123</sup> Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians*, 55.

major opus of the Florentine poet. The Dante of the *Divine Comedy* was for instance Gladstone's poetic hero, alongside Homer. As noted by Anne Isba, the figures that decorate Gladstone's memorial tomb at St Deiniol's Church, Hawarden are all characters from the *Divine Comedy*.<sup>124</sup> Gladstone discovered Dante at Eton and started translating passages from the *Divine Comedy* in the mid 1830s. Although his friend Arthur Henry Hallam had plans to publish the first English translation of the *Vita Nuova*, it was the *Divine Comedy* which Gladstone chose as a guide to his own life. His translations from this text were published in 1861, alongside adaptations from the Greek (Aeschylus, Homer), Latin (Horace, Catullus), and German (Schiller).<sup>125</sup> All of these remain faithful to the original rhyming pattern, the *terza rima*, which was a challenge for English translators, including Rossetti himself.

In the 1830s and 1840s Dante became more and more perceived as a Romantic rebel, a 'representative of a nascent national culture'.<sup>126</sup> The context of the *Risorgimento*, strengthened this politicized and subversive image of the Florentine poet, which D.G. Rossetti's father actively conveyed. A strong supporter of Italian revolutionary nationalism, Gabriele Rossetti had been forced into exile in 1821. Ten years later he was appointed Professor of Italian at King's College, London. His numerous works on Dante are full of political undertones, notably his discussions of Beatrice whom he saw 'as an allegory of political harmony.'<sup>127</sup> Gabriele Rossetti seems to have been particularly obsessed with the occult dimension of Dante's works, which might have appealed to Burges who later joined the Free Masons and the Rosicrucians. In his elegiac tribute to his father, entitled 'Dantis Tenebrae' (1861), Dante Gabriel Rossetti evokes 'The vale of magical dark mysteries' which attracted his father.<sup>128</sup> The golden medallion through which Beatrice appears to the poet in Poynter's panel suggests this mystical dimension: allegorized as a saintly figure rather than as a real-life *donna*, she has risen from the dead and ascends into Heaven.

Burges may have known Gabriele Rossetti's books on the *Divine Comedy* although the only scholarly work on the poet which can be found in the sales catalogue of his library holdings is a 16th century critical edition of this text by Christoforo Landino: *Dante, Con l'espositioni di Christoforo Landino, et d'Alessandro Vellutello. Sopra la sua Comedia dell'Inferno, del*

---

<sup>124</sup> Isba, *Gladstone and Dante*, 1.

<sup>125</sup> Gladstone's selections from the *Divine Comedy* included Ugolino from the Hell Canto 33, 1-78, the Lord's prayer from the Purgatory Canto 11, 1-21 and the speech of Piccarda Donati from Paradise canto 3, 1-85, all originally translated in 1835-1837. See Isba, *Gladstone and Dante*, 105.

<sup>126</sup> Isba, *Gladstone and Dante*, 31.

<sup>127</sup> Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians*, 103. On the gendering of Italy as a new nation, see Straub, 'Dante's Beatrice and Victorian Gender Ideology', 208.

<sup>128</sup> Rossetti, 'Dantis Tenebrae (In Memory of my Father)', *Poems*, 1.6, 274.



*Purgatorio, & del Paradiso*.<sup>129</sup> The volume opens with a profile representation of the poet which functions as a ‘visual counterweight to the text’, *indicating* a seamless continuity between Dante’s body and corpus of texts, equally suggested by the poet’s index in Poynter’s image (FIG).<sup>130</sup> Burges was certainly more familiar with Ruskin’s works from the period which frequently allude to Dante, with over 1,000 references in the index to his *Complete Works*.<sup>131</sup> Ruskin discovered the visual dimension of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* during his first trip to Italy without his parents in 1845, when he encountered the frescoes of Giotto, Angelico and the Campo Santa at Pisa. In the second volume of *Modern Painters*, he even lists Dante among the greatest artists of all times, alongside Phidias and Michelangelo. In *Stones of Venice*, Dante becomes ‘the central man of all the world, as representing in perfect balance the imaginative moral and intellectual faculties all at their highest.’<sup>132</sup> For Ruskin, 1300 was indeed a pivotal year in the history of European art, the year he believed Giotto painted the portrait of Dante:

...it seems to me that there is a kind of central year about which we may consider the energy of the Middle Ages to be gathered; a kind of focus in time, which, by what is to my mind a most touching and impressive Divine appointment, has been marked for us by the greatest writer of the Middle Ages, in the first words he utters; namely, the year 1300, the ‘mezzo del cammin’ of the life of Dante. Now, therefore, to Giotto, the contemporary of Dante, and who drew Dante’s still existing portrait in this very year, 1300, we may always look for the central medieval idea in any subject.<sup>133</sup>

Ruskin is here alluding to the discovery of Giotto’s portrait of Dante in the Bargello in 1840 which was a turning point in the 19<sup>th</sup> century history of the reception of the Florentine poet. Before that date, Romantic representations of Dante had mainly focused on his wretched life post-exile. As noted by Ellis, the ‘new’ portrait uncovered in the Bargello spurred interest in Dante’s early life and the *Vita Nuova* in particular.<sup>134</sup> On 2 June 1840, the Anglo-Italian artist and writer Seymour Kirkup together with a few colleagues removed the whitewash from part of a fresco by Giotto in the Capella of the Palazzo del Podestà (Bargello) in Florence. Kirkup then sent an exciting report of his discovery to his friend Gabriele Rossetti along with a watercolour copy of the portrait:

The poet looks about 28—very handsome—un Apollo colle fattezze di Dante. The expression and character are worthy of the subject, and much beyond what I expected from Giotto...Add to which it is not the mask of a corpse of 56—a ruin—

<sup>129</sup> See Burges’s 1918 LS, 8.

<sup>130</sup> Ried, ‘Textual Physiognomy’, 12.

<sup>131</sup> Isba, *Gladstone and Dante*, 20.

<sup>132</sup> Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians*, 37.

<sup>133</sup> Ruskin, CW, 10:400.

<sup>134</sup> Ellis, *Dante and English Poetry*, 103.

but a fine, noble image of the Hero of Campaldino, the Lover of Beatrice...A parchment book under his arm—perhaps the *Vita Nuova*.<sup>135</sup>

Several notices of the discovery were then published in the periodical press, including by W.S. Landor, Mrs Shelley and Charles Eastlake, before the image was first reproduced in the 1842 edition of Charles Lyell's *Poems of the Vita Nuova and Convivio*. The portrait shifted the attention away from the figure of the isolated exile and author of the *Divine Comedy*, towards a more youthful poet, the lover of the *Vita Nuova*, who was close to the major artists of his time. It is this Dante holding the *Vita Nuova* that Holiday would also depict in 1875 (FIG). The revelation of the Bargello portrait particularly influenced Rossetti's vision of 'Dante and his Circle', or what he called the connexions between 'Art, Friendship and Love' in his commentary of his own picture of *Giotto painting the portrait of Dante* (FIG) in which the poet is anachronistically represented alongside Cimabue, Calvacanti and Beatrice, a prefiguration of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.<sup>136</sup> Beatrice, possibly modelled here on Lizzie Siddal, appears as a real woman rather than as a spiritual presence guiding Dante into Paradise. This finds an echo with Charles Eliot Norton's own commentary and translation of the *Vita Nuova* published in 1859, which both Ruskin and Rossetti admired:

The figure of Beatrice, which appears veiled under the symbolism and indistinct in the bright halo of the allegory of the *Divine Comedy*, takes its place in life and on the earth through the *New Life* as definitely as that of Dante himself. She is no allegorized piece of humanity, no impersonation of attributes, but an actual woman, —beautiful, modest, gentle, with companions only less beautiful than herself,—the most delightful personage in the daily picturesque life of Florence. [...] she remains, and will always remain, the loveliest and most womanly woman of the Middle Ages,—at once absolutely real and truly ideal.<sup>137</sup>

In Rossetti's painting, Dante holds a pomegranate, a symbol of both his immortality as a poet and his pilgrimage through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. According to Kirkup Giotto's Dante had held three pomegranates in his right hand so as to 'denote the three Kingdoms', before its disastrous restoration by Antonio Marini.<sup>138</sup> This could also be the red fruit depicted by Poynter in the vase on Dante's escriptorio.

During this period, Rossetti painted very few works inspired by the *Divine Comedy*, except his *Paola and Francesca di Rimini* (1855) which was a favourite passage of Gladstone's. In his

---

<sup>135</sup> Letter dated 12 September 1840 in Gabriele Rossetti's *Versified Autobiography*, quoted in Ellis, *Dante and English Poetry*, 104.

<sup>136</sup> See Rossetti's letter to Thomas Woolner in *Letters* vol.1, 122-3.

<sup>137</sup> Norton (trans.), *The New Life of Dante Alighieri*, 95.

<sup>138</sup> Quoted in Holbrook, *Portraits of Dante from Giotto to Raffael*, 91.

dyptich *The Salutation of Beatrice* (FIG), he attempts to bridge the gap between the two works by reassessing the importance of the *Vita Nuova* as a stepping stone towards the *Divine Comedy*: the panel on the left shows Beatrice greeting Dante ‘in Terra’ (*Vita Nuova* III) and the right-hand one ‘In Eden’ (Purgatory XXX).<sup>139</sup>

The 1850s were therefore a key transitional period for the reception of the Florentine poet, wavering between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as well as between the spiritual pilgrimage of the *Divine Comedy* and the poetic autobiography of the *Vita Nuova*. In many ways, Poynter’s panel illustrates this. The poet is represented not as guided by Virgil and Beatrice through the various circles of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise but in ‘the solitude of (his) room’ as in *Vita Nuova* III, 2. And yet, in this dream vision taken from the second canzone, Beatrice appears both as a woman and as a saintly figure, the allegory of religion surrounded by Angels, as in Paradise. Just as Holiday strove to suggest the changing perspectives on Sappho, Burges thus merged the two Dantes of the *Divine Comedy* and the *Vita Nuova* in a subtly subversive interpretation of his work more indebted to Victorian readings of his poetry than to the original text.

### 3) Dante’s ‘forbidden Green’

This new image of Dante sheds light on Burges’ and Poynter’s chromatic choices for the panel. Beatrice is clothed in exactly the same three colours described in Purgatory (XXX 28-33): a red dress, a green cloak and a white veil, which reappear in Westlake’s image of Religion:<sup>140</sup>

So inside a great cloud of flowers  
Which leapt out of the angelic hands  
And fell inside the chariot and all around it ;  
Over a white veil, crowned with olive,  
A lady came to me, under her green cloak  
Clothed in the colour of flame.<sup>141</sup>

A few lines earlier, these three colours had been identified as those of the theological virtues of Hope (green), Charity (red) and Faith (white):

Three ladies came dancing in a circle  
By the right wheel ; and one of them was so red  
That she would hardly have been visible in a fire ;  
The next was as if her flesh and bones  
Had been entirely made of emerald,  
The third appeared to be of a new fallen snow ;  
And now they seemed to be guided by the white,

---

<sup>139</sup> Ellis, *Dante and English Poetry*, 113.

<sup>140</sup> Cherry, ‘The Hogarth Club 1858-61’, 241.

<sup>141</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Purgatory, XXX, ll.28-33, 330.

Now by the red ; from the way that one sang  
The others took the time, whether slow or quick.<sup>142</sup>

The chromatic composition of *Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast, Denies Him Her Salutation* (FIG) is also based on this sacred trichromy. According to Jerome McGann, it was this particular watercolour, described by Ruskin as ‘a most glorious piece of colour’, which first drew the critic to Rossetti’s work in 1852.<sup>143</sup> Rossetti had already used such liturgical colours in earlier paintings, including in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1849) where the pile of books is colour-coded: ‘FIDES’ (Faith) is white, ‘CARITAS’ golden, and ‘SPES’ (Hope) green.<sup>144</sup> (FIG)

Colour symbolism plays a key role in the *Divine Comedy* and attracted much scholarly attention throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. L. Oscar Kuhns’s 1897 book on the *Divine Comedy* discussed for instance Dante’s use of colour in the light of Gladstone’s colour-sense:<sup>145</sup>

The sense of colour among the ancients does not seem to have been highly developed ; the same terms are used to describe things essentially different in colour ; to Homer the sea is always purple or dark, and Vergil speaks of black blood, sweat and sand. In the Middle Ages there was a certain love for bright and brilliant colours, and Dante gives evidence of the same. And yet there were far less shades of colour used or even known then than now. Although, for most part, Dante uses only general terms of colour, in some places he has shown a fine discrimination of the exact shades of delicate colouring. There can be no better rendering of the tender green of young leaves than he gives in the description of the angel’s wings in the Valley of the Princes ; and the same may be said of the delicate shade of the apple-blossoms.<sup>146</sup>

This approach contrasts with that of Ruskin, who, in the third volume of *Modern Painters* (1856) had commented on the subtle shades of green found in the *Divine Comedy* which he read as evidence of the superior sensitivity of medieval artists and poets to the beauty of nature:

...the Greek sense of color seems to have been so comparatively dim and uncertain, that it is almost impossible to ascertain what the real idea was which they attached to any word alluding to hue: and above all, colour, though pleasant to their eyes, as to those of all human beings, seems never to have been impressive to their feelings. They liked purple, on the whole, the best; but there was no sense of cheerfulness or pleasantness in one colour, and gloom in another, such as the mediævals had. [...] Now, without going out of the terrestrial paradise, in which Dante last left us, we shall be able at once to compare with this Greek incertitude the precision of the mediæval eye for colour. Some three arrowflights further up into the wood we come to a tall tree, which is at first barren, but, after some little time, visibly opens into

---

<sup>142</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Purgatory XXIX, ll.121-9, 328.

<sup>143</sup> See Grieve, *The Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 17-18.

<sup>144</sup> Bentley, ‘Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Painter Paintings’, 59.

<sup>145</sup> McLean, ‘Dante’s Sense of Color’, 102.

<sup>146</sup> Kuhns, *The Treatment of Nature in Dante’s ‘Divina Commedia’*, 178-9.

flowers, of a colour ‘less than that of roses, but more than that of violets.’ It certainly would not be possible, in words, to come nearer to the *definition* of the exact hue which Dante meant—that of the apple-blossom.<sup>147</sup>

For the Victorian critic, green was the most representative of Dante’s vision of nature, which he believed to have been far more truthful than that of the ancient Hellenes. On the poet’s description of the grass in Hell and Purgatory, implicitly contrasted here with Sappho’s or Homer’s ambiguous *chloros*, Ruskin explains:

§ 49. Now, almost in the opening of the Purgatory, as there at the entrance of the Inferno, we find a company of great ones resting in a grassy place. But the idea of the grass now is very different. The word now used is not ‘enamel,’ but ‘herb,’ and instead of being merely green, it is covered with flowers of many colours. With the usual mediæval accuracy, Dante insists on telling us precisely what these colours were, and how bright; which he does by naming the actual pigments used in illumination,—‘Gold, and fine silver, and cochineal, and white lead, and Indian wood, serene and lucid, and fresh emerald, just broken, would have been excelled, as less is by greater, by the flowers and grass of the place.’ It is evident that the ‘emerald’ here means the emerald green of the illuminators; for a fresh emerald is no brighter than one which is not fresh, and Dante was not one to throw away his words thus. Observe, then, we have here the idea of the growth, life, and variegation of the ‘green herb,’ as opposed to the smalto of the Inferno; but the colours of the variegation are illustrated and defined by the reference to actual pigments; and, observe, because the other colours are rather bright, the blue ground (Indian wood, indigo?) is sober; lucid, but serene; and presently two angels enter, who are dressed in green drapery, but of a paler green than the grass, which Dante marks, by telling us that it was ‘the green of leaves just budded.’

In all this, I wish the reader to observe two things: first, the general carefulness of the poet in defining colour, distinguishing it precisely as a painter would (opposed to the Greek carelessness about it); and, secondly, his regarding the grass for its greenness and variegation, rather than, as a Greek would have done, for its depth and freshness.<sup>148</sup>

In this passage, Ruskin connects Dante’s colour symbolism with the poet’s interest in the technique of medieval illuminators. According to Claudia Boscolo, Dante indeed derived much of his colour expertise from the art of illumination and figurative painting, finding himself at a crossroads between ‘on the one hand, a late 13th century idea of colours such as is found in miniatures, with no interest in the refraction of light, and where nature is somewhat stylised and brightness is the result of the concurrence of bright colours, and, on the other, a later conception influenced by Giotto’s experiments on perspective and the alternation of shade and

---

<sup>147</sup> Ruskin, CW, 5:281.

<sup>148</sup> Ruskin, CW, 5:285-6.

brightness.<sup>149</sup> This is also suggested by the following passage from Purgatory XI which ends with a comparison of the fickle reputation of artists to the changing colours of grass:

‘O,’ I said to him, ‘are you not Oderisi,  
The pride of Gubbio, and the pride of that art  
Which in Paris is called illuminating?’  
‘Brother,’ he said, ‘the sheets coloured by Franco  
The Bolognese, are more brilliant than mine :  
The honour is now all his, and mine is less.  
Certainly I should not have been so polite  
While I was alive, because of my great desire  
To excel in this, my heart was engrossed in it.  
[...]  
O empty glory of human endeavour !  
How little time the green remains on top,  
Unless the age that follows is a dull one !  
Cimabue thought he held the field  
In painting, and now the cry is for Giotto,  
So that the other’s fame is now obscured.  
[...]  
Your renown is like the colour of grass  
Which comes and goes, and he discolours it  
Who causes it to spring fresh from the ground.’<sup>150</sup>

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dante’s own poetic reputation had blossomed anew with the rediscovery of the *Vita Nuova* which revealed a more youthful, greener poet. But the colour green was *originally* central to Dante’s *Weltanschauung*, whether from a material and artistic perspective or from a more symbolic and spiritual one. The terms ‘verde’ and ‘smeraldo’ are used most extensively in Purgatory where the foliage and verdure are described as green (verde, xxiii, 1; xxix, 35; xxxiii, 110). In his 1889 study of Dante’s colours, which he celebrates for their ‘wonderful variety’, L.M. Mc Lean notes that ‘celestial falcons’ have ‘verdant (verde) wings’ (viii, 106), and angels with ‘verdant pinions’ are robed in green (verde, viii, 28, 29). Beatrice’s eyes are of a deep green (smeraldo, xxxi, 116) matching her ‘green (verde) mantle’ (xxx, 32).<sup>151</sup> This hue, so intimately connected with the ethereal body of Beatrice, however disappears once Dante reaches Paradise as Hope is no longer a motivating force for the poet whose spiritual goal is fulfilled.<sup>152</sup> It nonetheless features in the grass at the feet of Beatrice in Westlake’s allegory of Religion.

---

<sup>149</sup> Boscolo, ‘Dante as late Gothic’, 26-7.

<sup>150</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Purgatory XI, ll.76-9, ll.91-96, and ll.115-117, 245-6.

<sup>151</sup> McLean, ‘Dante’s Sense of Color’, 102.

<sup>152</sup> Austin, ‘Heavenly Gold; A study of the use of color in Dante’, 46.

By dressing the Florentine poet in green, like Rossetti in *Dante and Beatrice meeting in Purgatory* which first belonged to Boyce (FIG), Poynter and Burges therefore closely followed the chromatic symbolism explored in both the *Divine Comedy* and in the *Vita Nuova*. But by the late 1850s Dante's green was becoming an increasingly controversial colour for more political reasons. This period was a turning point in the nation's struggle for unification. Embodying the hope of emancipation from foreign domination, which Dante himself had rebelled against, the colour came to symbolise the romantic aspirations of the *Risorgimento*. This political movement began in 1848 when revolts against the Austrian Empire broke out in Milan and Venice. Although these riots were crushed, the Italian nationalist spirit was given new impetus in the late 1850s thanks to the support that Napoleon III offered the Sardinian Prime minister Count Cavour against Austrian oppression. Following the Austrian defeat at the battles of Magenta and Solferino in 1859, after which French chemists named two shades of bright aniline red, Lombardy was annexed to Sardinia. This was a key step towards the unification of the country which was attained when King Victor Emmanuel II of Sardinia was proclaimed King of Italy in 1861. Having frequently travelled to Italy during these pivotal years, Burges and Poynter would have been fully aware of the political situation. The *Risorgimento* also received high media coverage in Britain, as the country welcomed exiles such as Giuseppe Mazzini, Swinburne's Republican hero.<sup>153</sup> In 1861 the new nation chose the colours of its flag: green, white and red. Although this tricolore flag had already been in use since the end of the 18th century in the Northern regions under Napoleonic domination, it rose to new prominence with the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy. Inspired by the French banner, it nonetheless differed from it by the unusual use of green—*sinople* in heraldic language—which Pastoureau notes is a comparatively rare colour in national flags. This may have been an allusion to liberty and hope which the Romantics had often associated with this particular hue.<sup>154</sup> But more importantly, the new flag reflected the sacred trichromy found in the works of Dante whose exile took on a new symbolic meaning in the light of the rebirth of an Italian nation, personified as the green-eyed Beatrice.<sup>155</sup>

The discovery in 1840 of the Bargello portrait of the poet had prepared the politicized interpretation of the green of the new, 'trans-historical Dante'.<sup>156</sup> The fresco was a chromatic revelation for Seymour Kirkup, albeit a short-lived one. A year after the unveiling of the

---

<sup>153</sup> Swinburne composed an 'Ode to Mazzini' in 1857.

<sup>154</sup> Pastoureau, *Vert*, 176.

<sup>155</sup> The trichromatic description of Beatrice in Purgatory, XXX, 31-33 was often quoted in analyses of the symbolism of the Italian flag. See in particular Fiorini, 'Le origini del tricolore italiano', 246.

<sup>156</sup> Straub, 'Dante's Beatrice and Victorian Gender Ideology', 206.

portrait, on 14 September 1841, Kirkup sent three images to Gabriele Rossetti, including a drawing in chalk on light brown paper ‘Drawn by SK and traced with talc on the original fresco by Giotto...before it was retouched’; a small sketch in watercolours, showing the colours of Dante’s dress and a lithography by Marini who restored the painting.<sup>157</sup>

By 1841 a very controversial restoration was indeed underway, to the great dismay of Kirkup who believed that some of the colours, and in particular ‘the forbidden green of the nether garment’, in the original portrait had been changed or erased at the request of the government for what Kirkup interpreted as ideologically-charged reasons.<sup>158</sup> In 1857, he was still very vocal about this, as shown by this letter to Dr Barlow published in the *Athenaeum* of July 4th:

After a year they employed Marini to fill it [NB : the hole] and paint a new eye, which he did too small, and too near the nose, and then touched up the rest of the face to match it, to the great loss of likeness and colour. He likewise changed the form and colour of the capuccio ; and as Dante was dressed in red, green and white, the colours of Beatrice in the Purgatorio and of the giovane Italia of present times, the green was changed to chocolate-colour ; and so it remains, till some one shall be allowed to take off this mealy tempera paint, by applying a wet cloth. The original fresco seemed as hard as an enamel, and the colour like Guido and as good.<sup>159</sup>

For Kirkup ‘the vest of the original was green’ as shown in the watercolour version he sent to Gabriele Rossetti which certainly circulated among his family. In 1859 the Arundel Society published a tinted engraving after Giotto’s portrait based on the watercolour sketch to which Burges may have had access (FIG).<sup>160</sup> In the space between the folds of Dante’s collar a green undergarment is visible and in his left hand he holds a branch with leaves and three fruits, possibly the pomegranates which Marini erased during his polemical restoration.

The chromatic composition of Poynter’s panel strikingly echoes these contemporary debates about the Florentine poet’s politicised body. The dominant colours are both those of the theological virtues embodied by Beatrice as well as those of the new Italian flag and nation. As in Rossetti’s *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante* which was directly inspired by the Bargello fresco, the poet is wearing a green garment and an orange hat, red undergarments and pointed slippers. The page he is pointing to is white so as to complete this chromatic trinity. The same colours are found in the decorative elements of the scene, whether in the marquetry of the cabinet, the red vase with the red pomegranate or the green bay tree blossoming with white flowers to symbolize the immortal glory of the poet ‘laureate’. The maiolica vase on the right-

---

<sup>157</sup> Bentley, ‘Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Painter Paintings’, 55.

<sup>158</sup> Quoted in Holbrook, *Portraits of Dante*, 98

<sup>159</sup> Holbrook, *Portraits of Dante*, 83.

<sup>160</sup> Bentley, ‘Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Painter Paintings’, 56.



hand side is also decorated with red and green motifs against a lustrous off-white background. Finally, the open door of the cabinet reveals a red book. But the colour that stands out most clearly is the green which Tea Ghigo has identified as emerald green, the same pigment used to depict Sappho's subversive desiring body. Could this have been intended as a secret, poetic and material pun on the 'the emerald green of the illuminators' discussed by Ruskin or on the figure of Hope allegorized in its 'emerald' dress in *Purgatory*?<sup>161</sup> Or was this Burges's and Holiday's way of retrieving the 'forbidden green' of the 'new' national hero whom Gabriele Rossetti and Kirkup had so fervently extolled?

Many years later, Holiday would in any case explore Dante's green body anew in his own *Dante and Beatrice* (1883) illustrating another passage from the *Vita Nuova* (FIG). Drawing on the same trichromatic palette as the Dante's panel, Holiday's Beatrice, dressed in white and accompanied by two female friends in blue and red, snubs the poet whom she believes has been flirting with another woman. Dante wears a similar green garment, red cap and slippers such as are found in Poynter's panel and in the flag of a post 1861 unified Italy.<sup>162</sup>

---

<sup>161</sup> Ruskin, CW, 5:285-6 and Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Purgatory XXIX, ll.125, 328

<sup>162</sup> Isba, *Gladstone and Dante*, 39.

### Chapter 3: Excavating colour

‘Of all the dreams of archaeologists there is  
none more frequent than that of endeavouring  
to transport oneself into the domestic life of any given period.’  
William Burges, ‘The Japanese Court in the International Exhibition’ (1862)

Thirteenth-century French Gothic was to remain Burges’s favoured artistic and historical period throughout his life and career. And yet, he shared the archeologist’s dream of reanimating the past ‘to transport oneself into the domestic life of any given period’ whether Assyrian, Egyptian, Pompeian or even Japanese, in order to ‘spend a day thoroughly with the ancients.’<sup>1</sup> Burges’s passion for excavating the past fuelled his artistic imagination and coloured the designs of his painted furniture from the late 1850s which Benjamin Webb described ‘too much of an archaeological conceit’.<sup>2</sup> A ‘learned archeologist’, as both Stacy Marks and Pullan called him, the architect played a key role in encouraging artists like Poynter to embrace the rich material culture of by-gone ages.<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to most of his contemporaries, Burges’s archeological interests were less focused on the grandeur of Graeco-Roman monuments—which play a minimal role in his work—than on the everyday objects that were found in what was then still perceived at the time as ‘primitive’ Egypt or ‘decadent’ Pompeii. Set against the immaculate standard of the Parthenon Marbles, the preserved colours of Egyptian sacrophagi and Pompeian frescoes offered a more vibrant experience of the past. Poynter’s and Smallfield’s panels on the Great Bookcase are a perfect illustration of this displacement of the classical heritage in favour of the domestic wares of other, less celebrated, ‘Pagans’ (FIGS).

Despite this more familiar domesticity, the figures intended to function as allegories of Pagan architecture and Pagan painting are not clearly identified or identifiable. On the one hand, Poynter’s panel on Pagan architecture depicts a woman whose name—Rhodopis—would probably have been known only to classicists or Egyptologists. Smallfield’s panel on Pagan painting, on the other hand, is the only one which does not include an inscription naming its subject. The caption to the RIBA drawing simply reads ‘The origin of Painting. The lover traces the outlines of the shadow of his mistress.’ The image has subsequently been described as a

---

<sup>1</sup> Burges, ‘The Japanese court in the International Exhibition’, 241.

<sup>2</sup> Webb quoted in Moser, *Painting Antiquity*, 101.

<sup>3</sup> Stacy Marks, *Pen and Pencil*, vol.1, 219. Pullan, ‘The Works of the Late William Burges’ (17 April 1882) quoted in Lawrence and Wilson, *The Cathedral of Saint Finn Barr at Cork*, 55.

representation of the Greek Apelles whom Pliny celebrated as one of the most famous painters in Antiquity, although no source mentions him painting the outline of his mistress.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter I will question this interpretation, arguing that the author of the *Natural History* was nonetheless a key source for this panel depicting the mythical origins of painting in a uniquely detailed Pompeian setting.

The relative anonymity of the two allegorical figures indeed contrasts with the painstaking precision with which Poynter and Smallfield represented the domestic objects included in the panels, which were all copied after specific artefacts from the British Museum's Egyptian collections and from the Museo Borbonico in Naples. Shifting the emphasis away from the image of the creator towards the more material context in which the allegories are set, I will show how Poynter's and Smallfield's panels conflate past and present, erudite and popular, private and public, high and low art to shed new light on the colours of Pagan antiquities.

## **I Colour contexts: Staging the Egyptian and Pompeian pasts**

### **1) Burges, the 'learned archeologist'**

Poynter's and Smallfield's panels actually tell us more about mid-19<sup>th</sup> century archeology than they do about Pagan architecture or painting. The 1850s were a key moment in the history of European archeology. Up until this period, as noted by Kenneth Hudson, the terms 'antiquarian' and 'archeologist' were often used very loosely—including by Burges himself—to describe the fascination for the past.<sup>5</sup> But in the second half of the century, archeology progressively emerged as a science in its own right. Burges embraced this turn by reading extensively on the subject. His library holdings reveal the breadth of his archeological interests which reflected the evolution of the discipline across Europe, starting with the romantic, antiquarian musings of D'Hancarville in *Les Antiquités étrusques, grecques et romaines tirées du cabinet de M. Hamilton* (1767) or with luxury publications such as Piroli and Piranesi Freres's six volumes of *Antiquités d'Herculaneum* (1804) which had dominated archeological scholarship in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> The architect also followed closely the later, more scientifically detailed work of German archeologists like Heinrich Schliemann who excavated the mythical sites of Troy (1875) and Mycenae (1878) and of Hermann von Rohden whose *Terracotten von*

---

<sup>4</sup> Following Pullan, Mordaunt Crook identifies Smallfield's panel as a representation of 'Apelles painting the first portrait.' Crook, *Burges*, 321.

<sup>5</sup> Hudson, *A Social History of Archeology*, 3-4. Burges uses the terms 'archeologist' and 'antiquarian' interchangeably in his essay on Japan at the International Exhibition.

<sup>6</sup> Lyons and Reed 'The Visible and the Visual', 147. Burges, LS 1918, 4.

*Pompei* (1880) may have been one of the last archeological reports Burges was given to read.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, alongside numerous issues of archeological periodicals (including 38 volumes of *The Archeological Journal* and 27 volumes of *Les Annales Archéologiques*), Burges's library included a series of popular handbooks, such as William Gell and Gandy's *Pompeiana* (3 vol. 1852) which he may have used as a guidebook on his first trip to Pompeii and Herculaneum in 1854.<sup>8</sup> In the early decades of the century, Gell had played the *cicerone* for Walter Scott and for John Gardner Wilkinson whom he encouraged to embrace a career as archeologist. A pioneering Egyptologist, Wilkinson addressed a wider readership than his predecessors. With the help of Owen Jones who produced bold chromolithographic plates for *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* (1837), Wilkinson unveiled the striking colours of the Egyptian past for all his readers who, like Burges, did not travel as far as Egypt.<sup>9</sup> Prior to the dissemination of this cheaper colouring technique, most archeological texts translated the past in black and white engravings 'confined to the rarified world of aristocrats and antiquarians.'<sup>10</sup> Following the success of *Manners and Customs*, Wilkinson published in 1847 a more accessible *Handbook for Travellers in Egypt* and in 1854 a 2-volume *Popular Account of the Ancient Egyptians* which featured in Burges's library.<sup>11</sup>

But Burges's archeological passion was not purely text-based. The two bookcase panels reveal an even greater familiarity with the antique collections of the British Museum and other European institutions, like the Museo Borbonico in Naples. As opposed to the large romantic landscapes of archeological ruins favoured in the picturesque paintings of the first half of the 19th century by travellers to Egypt and Rome such as David Roberts, Poynter's and Smallfield's panels depict indoor scenes cluttered with domestic artefacts revealing Burges's awareness of new developments in the field of archeology.<sup>12</sup>

The example of Pompeii is particularly relevant of how smaller finds were then becoming the focus of increasing archeological interest. Virginia Zimmerman has noted that the 'City of the Dead' (as Walter Scott called it) was then not known for its monuments but rather for its 'ticket stubs, hair combs, and sandals, all traces of individual experiences, objects of little value or importance in their own time and notable in the 19th century only because of their striking familiarity.'<sup>13</sup> Burges's close acquaintance with these everyday objects from Pompeii is

---

<sup>7</sup> Burges, LS 1918, 4 and 14.

<sup>8</sup> Burges, LS 1918, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Moser, *Designing Antiquity*, 40-43.

<sup>10</sup> Lyons and Reed, 'The Visible and the Visual', 145.

<sup>11</sup> Burges, LS 1918, 11. Thompson, *Wonderful Things: A History of Egyptology*, vol. 3, 260.

<sup>12</sup> Burges met David Roberts in 1853 (see Abstract of diaries).

<sup>13</sup> Zimmerman, *Excavating Victorians*, 98.

suggested by his discussion of glass in Antiquity, referencing both antique sources (Pliny) and the most recent excavations in the ancient city, compared to ‘A Roman Margate’:

...plate-glass in very considerable pieces has been found, and the article must have been in very considerable use, as anybody may see, at Pompeii, where there is a piece remaining in situ closing the window of a porter's room in one of the houses: we must, moreover, remember that Pompeii was by no means a very important place, being a sort of Roman Margate. Pliny also tells us that in his time glass drinking- vessels superseded those of silver and gold.<sup>14</sup>

Drawing on Edward Trollope’s *Illustrations of Ancient Art* (1854) which precisely aimed to ‘throw light upon the domestic life and manners of the Romans’, Burges and Smallfield reproduced many of these domestic artefacts, such as the two glass bottles in a pottery carrying case, the elaborate disc-legged seat, the woman’s snake bracelet and the brazier (FIGS).<sup>15</sup> He would also have seen these items—as well as the perfume vase on the seat, the tripod and the incense burner—during his visit to Pompeii and Naples (FIGS).<sup>16</sup> Contrary to Fra Angelico’s brush and paints or to Sappho’s lyre, these artefacts, excavated from various houses, baths, theatres in Pompeii and Herculaneum, appear decontextualized: they are not shown being used or even related to the actual subject of the panel, which suggests that Burges primarily wished to emphasize their decorative dimension.

A similar domestic atmosphere is noticeable in the Rhodopis panel in which the cluttered objects are made to function as traces as much as the sketch of the pyramid. Roughly delineated and downsized, Rhodopis’s Pyramid recedes in favour of more colourful artefacts among which Stephanie Moser has identified the lizard necklace, the decorated jar stand, the cosmetic box and the glass vase, all from the British Museum (FIGS).<sup>17</sup> As evidenced by a sketch dating from the late 1850s, Albert Moore was also looking at these very objects at the time, which may suggest that Burges had considered him for the Rhodopis panel (FIG).

In *Wondrous Curiosities*, Stephanie Moser has retraced how the display of the Egyptian collections in the British Museum from the ‘colossal monstrosities’ of the early years of the 19th century to more intimate artefacts drastically changed the perception of Ancient Egypt.<sup>18</sup> A turning-point was reached in 1854 when the extended Smirke gallery presented these more accessible Egyptian antiquities as significant historical documents, in keeping with the growing

---

<sup>14</sup> Burges, *Art applied to Industry*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Trollope, *Illustrations of ancient art*, v. Burges, LS 1918, 18.

<sup>16</sup> The small pot on the seat is reproduced in Thomas Dyer’s *Pompeii* where it is described as a perfume vase like those found in the baths of Pompeii and Stabiae (184).

<sup>17</sup> Moser, *Painting Antiquity*, 100-2. I would like to thank Stephanie Moser for sharing with me her insights about Poyner’s panel before the publication of her book.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Moser, *Wondrous Curiosities*, 227.

awareness of their archeological importance. Some of these objects were presented in Wilkinson's *Popular Account of the Ancient Egyptians* which shed light on the everyday lives of the Ancient Egyptians. The book was certainly Burges's and Poynter's primary source for the depiction of the following 'visual signifiers of ancient Egypt': the basket filled with gold rings, the duck ornament, the snake bracelet, and the jug with the head of a bird (FIGS).<sup>19</sup> Rhodopis' headdress and the costume of the Egyptian priest also strongly resemble examples included in Thomas Hope's *Costume of the ancients* (1812) (FIGS).<sup>20</sup>

This enthusiasm for the colours of the Egyptian past also translated into the daring polychromatic design of the Egyptian displays of some European institutions, such as the Neues Museum in Berlin. A much darker colour scheme was however used for the new Smirke galleries in the British Museum. For the thrill of 'gaiety and festive brilliance' visitors had to turn to the more colourful Egyptian and Pompeian courts at Sydenham.<sup>21</sup>

## 2) The colours of Sydenham

Up until the 1850s, designers and architects had paid little attention to the polychrome ornamentation and decoration that archaeologists were bringing to light. This changed with Owen Jones who played a key role in the reevaluation of the decorative arts of the past. Working hand in hand with artists, designers as well as archeologists and historians and egyptologists like Joseph Bonomi and Wilkinson, Jones promoted 'the agency of ornament and colour' both in his *Grammar of Ornament* (1856) and in the Fine Arts Courts of the Crystal Palace which opened at Sydenham in 1854.<sup>22</sup> As noted by Moser, Jones particularly wished to elevate the status of ornament which he viewed as central to Egyptian artistic practice and sought to liberate 'from the constraints of Western art criticism.'<sup>23</sup> In many ways, Burges shared the same aspirations. Although the Abstract of diaries only references 'a visit to Sydenham' in 1868, it is most probable that he saw the new Crystal Palace exhibits before that date and would have at least read about the Fine Arts Courts in periodicals like the *Builder* to which he was himself a regular contributor. A former research assistant for Digby Wyatt, Burges was indeed familiar with the work of Jones as he owned a copy of his 1842 *Alhambra* and of the 1868 edition of the *Grammar*, both lavishly illustrated. It is most certain, however, that Burges consulted the

---

<sup>19</sup> Moser, *Painting Antiquity*, 99.

<sup>20</sup> Burges, LS 1918, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Hawkins quoted in Moser, *Wondrous Curiosities*, 195.

<sup>22</sup> Moser, *Designing Antiquity*, 247.

<sup>23</sup> Moser, *Designing Antiquity*, 251.

*Grammar* as soon as it was published as he was asked to lecture on ornament at Kensington in 1858.<sup>24</sup>

The Sydenham Courts, which Jones recreated with Digby Wyatt, functioned as ‘period rooms’ enabling visitors to experience the Egyptian, Alhambra, Roman, Renaissance, Pompeian, and Grecian pasts in radically new ways. Breaking away from the more austere museal spaces which documented these periods, the Fine Arts Courts brought the colourful lives of the ancients closer to the general public. This was particularly true of the Egyptian and Pompeian sections in which the walls, artefacts and monuments on display were faithfully painted in accordance with the work of contemporary archeologists who had often retrieved them in their almost original state of freshness.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to the more coherent Pompeian House directly inspired by one specific building after paintings traced on site by Giuseppe Abbate, the Egyptian Court was intended as an imaginative recreation of a selection of artefacts and monuments (FIG).<sup>26</sup> Rather than the more obvious pyramids and obelisks, it anachronistically displayed casts of the red granite Prudhoe Lions in the British Museum, a model of the temple of Abu Simbel, and the column hall of Karnak alongside a reconstruction of the portico of the temple of Philae. Some of these brightly painted casts were surrounded with various natural or exotic props such as palm trees which gave visitors the illusion of travelling back in time as well as space (FIG). Jones’s Egypt was alive, that is to say severed from the funerary rituals with which the popular imagination still strongly associated the world of the ancient Pharaohs. Similarly, there is no mummy or sarcophagus in Poynter’s Rhodopis panel.

Highlighting the archeological accuracy of the Sydenham displays, Wilkinson published in 1857 a handbook entitled *The Time of the Pharaohs; Being a Companion to the Crystal Palace Egyptian Collections*. The following year, he composed an essay *On Colour* which did not focus exclusively on Egypt, as he may have been responding to the polychromatic scheme of the Fine Arts Courts as a whole. In this key text, Wilkinson discusses antique sources as well as the works of modern chromophiles, including Chevreul, Jones, Hittorf, and Semper. But it is Ruskin whom Wilkinson singles out as the true authority on the colours of the past, whatever the period under consideration:

There is an inconsistency in our estimation of colour: we admire and use it in some places, while we affect to be above its employment in others. Our taste is artificial,

---

<sup>24</sup> Burges, Abstract of diaries, 1858.

<sup>25</sup> Jones and Bonomi, *Description of the Egyptian Court*, 27. Burges also owned a copy of Bonomi’s 1852 volume on Nineveh.

<sup>26</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the reconstitution, see Hales and Earle, “‘A copy – or rather a translation ... with numerous sparkling emendations’”. Re-building the Pompeian Court of the Crystal Palace’: 179-208.

and it is, therefore, undecided and ill-defined. When our cathedrals were built they were ornamented with colour throughout; they were not considered finished without it; every tomb afterwards put into them had its painted devices and mouldings; and the glass window was part of the whole coloured decoration. Colour was with all people in old times a necessary accessory to architecture; and it was equally held to be so in England. ‘The builders of those cathedrals,’ says Mr. Ruskin, ‘laid upon them the brightest colours they could obtain, and there is not, as far as I can learn, in Europe any monument of a truly noble school which has not been either painted all over, or originally touched with paint, mosaic, and gilding in its prominent parts. Thus far Egyptians, Greeks, Goths, Arabs, and mediaeval Christians all agree; none of them when in their right senses ever think of doing without paint.’<sup>27</sup>

While researching for his essay, Wilkinson started a correspondence with Ruskin whose praise of the sacredness of colour in *Stones of Venice* and in the recently published *Elements of Drawing* (1857) the Egyptologist may have wished to echo.<sup>28</sup> Although Ruskin disagreed with some of Wilkinson’s conclusions, their letters reveal how central colour had become in archeological debates by the mid-century.<sup>29</sup>

Jones’s and Digby Wyatt’s Fine Art courts therefore constituted a key event in the history of the reception of the colours of the past in Victorian England, which Poynter’s and Smallfield’s panels reflect in many ways. The decorative scheme adopted in the Rhodopis panel notably reveals the influence of *The Grammar of Ornament* in the use of the lotus motif which Jones was the first to discuss both as a cultural symbol and decorative pattern. The fan also seems to be directly copied from the chromolithographed plates of the *Grammar* (FIG).

But however well-documented, the bold colour scheme promoted by Jones at Sydenham and in his *Grammar* was much criticized. Poynter himself surprisingly wished ‘the see the whole edition (of the *Grammar*) at the bottom of the sea.’ His comments on the colour scheme of the Fine Arts Courts are particularly scathing:

Those who have not seen the original Pompeian paintings, [...], have probably conceived a very false idea of antique decoration, for, with the exception of some ill-coloured prints, the only other guide within reach that I know of is the Pompeian court at the Crystal Palace, done, I believe, under the direction of Mr. Owen Jones. Mr Owen Jones appears to have thought that in decoration one blue is as good as another and one red as good as another; and he was evidently quite satisfied to have produced the coarse and offensive result we see in his Pompeian court, instead of the harmonious effect which is the constant characteristic of ancient decorative art; in which the harmonies, though frequently vigorous in their contrasts of colour, are always splendid in their vigour.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Wilkinson, *On Colour*, 24.

<sup>28</sup> Wilkinson used a quotation from *The Elements of Drawing* as an epigraph to his essay.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, *Sir Gardner Wilkinson and His Circle*, 187-189.

<sup>30</sup> Poynter, *Lectures on art*, 84.



Contrary to the polychromy of the Pompeian Court which was comparatively spared, the colourful Egyptian displays were often described as primitive in comparison with the pristine whiteness of some classical statues in the adjoining rooms.<sup>31</sup> Even Jones's controversial recolouring of the Parthenon frieze appeared as less daring as the colours of the Egyptian Court.<sup>32</sup> The literary and popular press was, however, more enthusiastic. In her selection of reviews on Sydenham, Moser quotes the writer Andrew Wynter waxing lyrical about the 'vast tunnel of rainbows' and 'gorgeous colouring of the old Egyptian artists' which offered such a contrast to the 'dull gray of foggy England'.<sup>33</sup> Colour was evidently one of the reasons of the mass appeal of the Egyptian and Pompeian courts, as noted by Alexis Lee Goodin:

By eschewing the aesthetic of natural stone, Jones deliberately moved beyond the connoisseur's expectations, and perhaps also the snobbery and exclusion associated with the aesthete's class. The application of color, then, could perhaps be seen as part of Sydenham's project to reach out to a broad spectrum of society. Vibrant color might catch the eye of the uninitiated, and spark interest in subjects that previously had been the province of the studied, leisure class.<sup>34</sup>

This popular chromophilia is reflected in the *Chambers's Journal* report on Sydenham which praised 'the most brilliant hues' of the Egyptian Court, only matched by the 'exquisite wall painting' and mosaics used to recreate a Pompeian house: 'Each of these courts is a book – a book bound in Gold and Colour. We can read the history of the past in its form and construction, its sculptures, its decorations, its inscriptions and emblems, its mosaics and fountains.'<sup>35</sup> Similarly 'bound in Gold and colour', Burges's Great Bookcase explores the creative potential of ancient polychromy pasts by weaving new narratives about the Egyptian and Pompeian pasts.

### 3) Archeological fictions

Poynter's and Smallfield's panels draw on colourful artefacts to reconstruct the fragments of the past into a 'vibrant [...] narrative', in keeping with the reliance of Victorian archeologists on literary sources, whether antique or modern.<sup>36</sup> For Burges too, literature was central to the archaeologist's 'dream':

---

<sup>31</sup> On the Victorian reception of the colours of the Pompeian Court, see Hales, 'Re-casting Antiquity in the Crystal Palace', 111-112.

<sup>32</sup> In the first issue of *Chamber's Journal* reporting on the opening of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham, the 'blaze of colours' used in Greek court is described as 'much less intense as in the Assyrian and Egyptian courts'. 'The Glories of Sydenham Palace', 323.

<sup>33</sup> Moser, *Designing Antiquity*, 169.

<sup>34</sup> Goodin, "Egypt" in England, 130.

<sup>35</sup> 'The Glories of Sydenham Palace', 323.

<sup>36</sup> Zimmerman, *Excavating Victorians*, 114

Of all the dreams of archaeologists there is none more frequent than that of endeavouring to transport oneself into the domestic life of any given period. In some cases it is not a very difficult thing to do, for the materials exist and are easily attainable. Thus, with regard to Roman life, we have the many hints given us by such authors as Apuleius and Petronius Arbiter, we have the costume from statues and gems, and lastly, there are the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, where we can stand at the very counters where the garum was sold, tread the very pavements, look at the very pictures on the walls, and, in fact, spend a day thoroughly with the ancients.<sup>37</sup>

Alongside the material remains found at Pompeii and Herculaneum, Burges here quotes two literary sources—Apuleius and Petronius—as a means to ‘transport oneself’ back to ancient Rome.<sup>38</sup> As Burges was certainly aware, Apuleius and Petronius had been primary sources for Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), in which the portrayal of the Egyptian villain, the priest Arbaces draws on the depiction of the surviving cult of Isis as corrupt in the *Golden Ass*.<sup>39</sup> Like many Victorians, Burges was familiar with *The Last Days of Pompeii*: he owned a copy of the 1850 edition of the best-seller which was still used at the time as a guidebook through the ruins of the ancient city.<sup>40</sup> Burges’s nostalgic chromophilia and creative revival of past styles and narratives were often shaped by such literary sources.

Revealing the every day life of ancient families from all sections of society, the archeological site of Pompeii appeared to Bulwer-Lytton and Burges as the perfect setting for ‘dreams’ and fictional reconstructions. But Egyptian mummies with their perfectly preserved bodies/colours equally enabled such fantastical resurrections. Théophile Gautier—whose works Burges’s friend Swinburne was one of the first to popularize in England—dramatised this anachronistic encounter with archeological artefacts from the Egyptian or Pompeian pasts in several of his short stories and novels, such as ‘Le Pied de la Momie’ and ‘Une Nuit de Cléopâtre’ (1840), ‘Arria Marcella’ (1852), and *le Roman de la Momie* (1856), which were published when the popularity of the short-lived genre of the archeological textbook in fictional form was at its peak across Europe.<sup>41</sup>

The aura of these objects which popular fiction replaced in their original colourful context, challenged the hegemony of the Graeco-Roman heritage, which the classical and primarily philological tradition had set so high. For the novelist, excavating colour was key to reviving

---

<sup>37</sup> Burges, ‘The Japanese Court’, 241.

<sup>38</sup> Burges owned a French edition of the *Golden Ass*. LS 1918, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Harrison, ‘Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii*: Re-creating the city’, 86-8.

<sup>40</sup> Burges, LS 1918, 18.

<sup>41</sup> Harrison, ‘Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii*’, 82. In his ‘Memorial verses on the death of Theophile Gautier’, Swinburne invokes the ‘Egyptian-wise’ heroine of Gautier’s ‘Nuit de Cléopâtre’ with her ‘closer, red, warm snake’s mouth’ (see *SP*, vol.3, 64).

the past even if this meant displacing the authority of historians in favour of a more literary encounter with the coloured artefact. Zimmerman cites the example of William M. Thackeray's *Newcomes* (1855) in which Pliny's first-hand account of Pompeii is deemed of lesser value than Bulwer-Lytton's imaginary recreation.<sup>42</sup> Burges may have read this novel as he owned several by this author, whom he had met in 1853:

The young man had read Sir Bulwer Lytton's delightful story, which has become the history of Pompeii, before they came thither, and Pliny's description, and the Guide-Book. Admiring the wonderful ingenuity with which the English writer had illustrated the place by his text, as if the houses were so many pictures to which he had appended a story, Clive, the wag, who was always indulging his vein for caricature, was proposing that that they should take the same place, names, people, and make a burlesque story: 'What would be a better figure,' says he, 'than Pliny's mother, whom the historian describes as exceedingly corpulent, and walking away from the catastrophe with slaves holding cushions behind her, to shield her plump person from the cinders! Yes, old Mrs Pliny shall be my heroine!' says Clive. A picture of her on a dark grey paper and touched up with red at the extremities, exists in Clive's album to the present day.<sup>43</sup>

Here, Bulwer-Lytton's 'delightful story' is celebrated as the official 'history of Pompeii', implicitly turning the *Natural History* into a fiction which Clive Newcome anachronistically aims to revive ('old Mrs Pliny shall be my heroine!'). The blurring of the line between past and present and between fact and fiction reaches a climax in the final sentence in which Clive's fictitious caricature of the said Mrs Pliny 'touched up with red' is said to still 'exist'.

In the 1850s, *The Last Days of Pompeii* was still considered an authoritative text on the ancient city. Bulwer-Lytton strategically presented his own story as archeologically accurate by resorting to numerous footnotes referring to Gell's *Pompeiana* which had already depicted Pompeii 'with well-informed familiarity.'<sup>44</sup> The novelist, who had visited the ancient city with Gell, based his description of Glaucus' dwellings on that of the House of the Tragic Poet in the *Pompeiana* which he, in turn, compared to the abode of 'a single man in Mayfair', more familiar to his Victorian readers:

But the house of Glaucus was at once one of the smallest, and yet one of the most adorned and finished of all the private mansions of Pompeii: it would be a model at this day for the house of 'a single man in Mayfair'—the envy and despair of the coelibian purchasers of buhl and marquetry.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> On Thackeray, see Zimmerman, *Excavating Victorians*, 109.

<sup>43</sup> Thackeray, *The Newcomes*, 12-3.

<sup>44</sup> Lyons and Reed, 'The Visible and the Visual,' 145.

<sup>45</sup> Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 29.

With ‘Bulwer’s admirable romance’ in mind, the Fine Arts Courts at Sydenham transported Pompeii to modern London.<sup>46</sup> There, the Pompeian House crafted ‘the perfect narrative’ of the ancient city, inviting modern visitors to fancy themselves travelling back in time (FIG).<sup>47</sup>

However literary-based, the experience of the past at Sydenham was evidently more visual than textual. This fuelled the imagination of a new generation of archeological genre painters in the 1860s and 1870s, notably Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Poynter who, as Moser has compellingly argued, were both aligned in the timing of their Egyptian and Pompeian depictions.<sup>48</sup> Alma-Tadema’s first Roman canvas, *Catullus at Lesbia’s* (1865) was for instance painted the same year as Poynter’s *Faithful unto Death* (1865) which was directly inspired by an anecdote found in Gell and Bulwer-Lytton.

The parallel between the two artists (who met in Antwerp in 1859) is even more striking in the case of Egyptian subjects. Although Alma-Tadema only travelled to Egypt in 1902, Egyptian art played a crucial role throughout his career starting with his now lost dying *Cleopatra* (1857-9) which depicts the reclining Egyptian queen wearing a headdress and a pectoral, as in the Rhodopis panel which Moser sees as one of Poynter’s first incursions into the Egyptian past.<sup>49</sup> For both artists Egypt was the origin of everything, of art itself, as Alma-Tadema explained to his biographer, the German Egyptologist and novelist Georg Ebers, author of a historical romance on Rhodopis, *An Egyptian Princess* (1864): ‘The first thing the child learns of ancient times leads him into the court of Pharaohs, to Goshen in Egypt, and when we go back to the source of the art and science of the other nations of antiquity how often we reach your Egypt.’<sup>50</sup> More importantly, Poynter and Alma-Tadema shared a similar interest in combining narrative and material culture which they achieved by ‘elevating domestic wares to centre stage’ in particular artefacts which they copied from specialized publications and from museum collections.<sup>51</sup> In the 1860s, Alma-Tadema was even using the same archeological sources as Burges and Poynter for his own fictional reconstitutions. His *Pastimes in Egypt, 3000 years ago* (1863) was even singled out by Gautier at the Paris Salon of 1864 for its ‘scrupulous fidelity’ in depicting the artefacts which were central to the everyday life of the ancient Egyptians (FIG).<sup>52</sup> Instead of being relegated to the background, these minor objects were given

---

<sup>46</sup> Scharf, *The Pompeian Court in the Crystal Palace*, 23.

<sup>47</sup> Zimmerman, *Excavating Victorians*, 126.

<sup>48</sup> Moser, *Painting Antiquity*, 96

<sup>49</sup> Moser, *Painting Antiquity*, 72-3.

<sup>50</sup> Thompson, *Wonderful Things*, 254.

<sup>51</sup> Moser, *Painting Antiquity*, 92.

<sup>52</sup> ‘M. Alma Tadema a fait revivre les Egyptiens de la 17<sup>e</sup> dynastie avec (une) fidélité scrupuleuse’ Gautier quoted in Warmenbol, *Le lotus et l’oignon, Egyptologie et égyptomanie au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle*, vol. 1, 287. I am extremely grateful to Sylvie Donnat for drawing my attention to this detail.

special prominence because of their pictorial, and also, I would argue, chromatic qualities, just as in the panels depicting the Pagan origins of architecture and painting on the Bookcase. Like Jones and Burges, the two painters embraced the aesthetic potential of ancient colour, whether Egyptian or Pompeian. Alma-Tadema's motto inscribed on the entrance to his studio was, after all, 'as the sun colours flowers, so art colours life', which echoes Jones's 1862 inscription on the polychrome niche of Gibson's *Tinted Venus: Nec Vita nec Sanitas Nec Pulchritudo Nec Sine Colore Juventus* ('Without colour there is neither life nor health, neither beauty nor youth').<sup>53</sup>

During his first trip to London in 1862, Alma-Tadema indeed visited both the International Exhibition and the Crystal Palace at Sydenham. Although there is no evidence that Burges had met Alma-Tadema at that stage, the two men became friends in the 1870s. After Burges helped him restore Townshend House, damaged by a gas explosion, Alma-Tadema thanked him with the gift of his painting of a *Roman Architect* in 1874 (FIG).<sup>54</sup> A diary entry for 1879 also states that they visited Oxford and Blenheim together.

Despite their archeological accuracy, Alma-Tadema's and Poynter's pictorial reconstructions offered an essentially fictional image of the past thanks to the assemblage of various material props, presented *in situ*, as the original excavators would have found them, rather than as in a museum.<sup>55</sup> This imaginative, unclassical recontextualising of ancient fragments is well exemplified in Alma-Tadema's Pompeian paintings from this period:

Alma-Tadema's compositional procedures systematically transformed the functions and contexts of individual artefacts by providing them with new roles in the assemblages invented by the artist. The 'authentic' artefacts were thus recombined into a whole scene that was pure fiction.<sup>56</sup>

Some of these objects even circulated from one picture to another, creating an internal, archeological coherence within his pictorial work. For instance, the two wine amphorae bearing the inscriptions 'POPIDIO' and 'HERC...' (FIG) reappear in several of Alma-Tadema's paintings including *The Wine Shop* (FIG 1869) and *The Vintage Festival* (FIG 1870/1).<sup>57</sup> It is most probable that the painter first saw these two objects in the wine shop excavated near the House of the Dioscuri when he visited Pompeii during his honeymoon in 1863, just a few years after Burges. From the time of this first visit, Alma-Tadema started collecting commercial photographs of Pompeian artefacts as well as commissioning his own which provided him with

---

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Prettejohn and Trippi (eds.), *Lawrence Alma-Tadema: at home in antiquity*, 73.

<sup>54</sup> Moser, *Painting Antiquity*, 410.

<sup>55</sup> Zimmerman, *Excavating Victorians*, 108.

<sup>56</sup> Prettejohn, 'Antiquity fragmented and reconstructed', 38.

<sup>57</sup> These two amphorae are reproduced in Dyer's *Pompeii. Its history, buildings, and antiquities*, 416.

a continual source of archeological inspiration throughout his career.<sup>58</sup> For instance, in his photographic collection we find the elaborate disc-legged state seat which he included in *Catullus at Lesbia's* (1865 FIG). But maybe Alma-Tadema first noticed both the amphorae and the *bisellia* in Smallfield's panel where they are used as props conjuring up the image of a fictional Pompeii. As we have seen, Burges and Smallfield certainly copied the seat from Trollope's *Illustrations of ancient art* where it is described as being 'of beautiful workmanship, in bronze inlaid with silver and copper'.<sup>59</sup> Burges's Great Bookcase may have therefore nourished not only Poynter's, but also Alma-Tadema's desire to explore new ways of staging Antiquity. In the two Pagan panels, just as in Poynter's and Alma-Tadema's later works, historical reference certainly recedes in favour of a domesticization of the past whose vibrant colours make these archeological narratives readable by all.

## I. Rhodopis the 'Rosy-cheeked': The lure of the east ?

### 1) Poynter and Egypt

As we have seen, Poynter was one of Burges's closest collaborators on the Bookcase as well as for several other projects during this key period. Burges sponsored the artistic career of Poynter by securing his first major commissions and by fostering his interest in Ancient Egypt which, as for Alma-Tadema, would later become the trademark of his archeological genre paintings. Although Poynter never travelled to Egypt, he remained fascinated with its 'history and customs' throughout his career.<sup>60</sup> One of his earliest ventures into Egyptian subjects was the Yatman casket which is also of particular relevance for the Rhodopis panel (1856 FIG). The style of this casket illustrating the legendary origins of old and precious stones is highly eclectic as the decorative scheme, painted by Poynter on inset leather panels, depicts Cleopatra alongside Prester John, Aramaspian and the Jackdaw of Rheims, anachronistically conflating fictional and historical figures. Mordaunt Crook explains that Burges drew his inspiration from a wide range of references ranging from Marco Polo to Pliny and Herodotus.<sup>61</sup> Cleopatra, crowned with a stylized headdress, is presented in a reclining position, alongside a black attendant wearing a 'shendyt' and holding a fan, as Mark Antony climbs into her bed. Like Poynter's Rhodopis, she wears a semi-transparent dress and highly ornate jewellery.<sup>62</sup> Her couch is similarly decorated with various lotus motifs and a painted column can be seen in the

---

<sup>58</sup> Barrow, *Lawrence Alma-Tadema*, 30.

<sup>59</sup> Trollope, *Illustrations of ancient art*, 48.

<sup>60</sup> Poynter quoted in Thompson, *Wonderful Things*, 255.

<sup>61</sup> Crook, *Burges*, 295-6.

<sup>62</sup> See Moser, *Painting Antiquity*, 97.

background. She holds a cup in which she is about to dissolve a pearl, as in the story told by Pliny to denounce the queen's extravagance.<sup>63</sup>

The 1850s and 1860s were particularly formative years in Poynter's career, in both painting as well as the decorative arts. During this period, he was commissioned by the South Kensington Museum to contribute designs for the mosaics of Phidias and Apelles in the South Court and for a series of tile decorations in the Grill Room. One of these roundel tiles painted in 1868 represents Rhodopis alongside other heroines from classical mythology and ancient history, such as Helen, Medea, and Sappho (FIG). The Rhodopis figure is depicted in a passive reclining position, narcissistically admiring her jewels and wearing a dappled fawn skin which reveals her Dionysian sensuality. Other artefacts are depicted in the foreground but the scene is an exterior one: decorated columns and even a Pyramid can be seen in the background. Here Rhodopis appears as the personification of Egyptian exoticism and eroticism with architectural elements providing only a backdrop to the scene. The image plays on different levels – decorative objects on the one hand and grand architecture on the other – whereas in the Bookcase panel, the Pyramid is reduced to a prospective sketch decorated with purely ornamental hieroglyphs. Contrary to the iconography of the other tiles which Poynter often recycled from earlier works (like his Sappho directly inspired by his *Siren* of 1864) Poynter's later representation of Rhodopis is clearly very different from the panel he painted for Burges's bookcase.<sup>64</sup>

But Egypt did not only feature prominently in Poynter's decorative work, it soon became a key theme in his pictorial production. Poynter's fascination for Egypt may have been sparked by his mentor, the Swiss artist Charles Gleyre (1806–74), who had traveled to Egypt in 1834–36 and under whose supervision Poynter trained in Paris from 1856 to 1858. But Burges also played a key role in encouraging him to embrace the colours of Egypt which the painter would continue to explore throughout his career, whether from a Biblical, orientalist or archeological perspective. Conflating erudite depictions and popular expectations, Poynter addressed all the facets of Victorian Egyptomania in a variety of media and formats. In 1862, his watercolour *Egyptian Water-carriers* attracted the attention of the Dalziel brothers who commissioned Poynter the following year to contribute 12 of the 62 pictures in their *Bible Gallery*. These engravings feature numerous Egyptian ornaments and in *Moses Slaying the Egyptian*, Moses wears the same lizard necklace as Rhodopis (FIG).<sup>65</sup> In *Pharaoh honours Joseph* we find the

---

<sup>63</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 9.119-221.

<sup>64</sup> On Poynter's recycling of motifs and figures, see Inglis, *The decorative works of Sir Edward Poynter and their critical reception*, 121.

<sup>65</sup> Moser, *Painting Antiquity*, 111.

same peacock fan as the one held by one of the attendants in the Rhodopis panel (FIG).<sup>66</sup> The fan was probably copied from Jones, who later chromolithographed the story of Joseph – one of the most colourful episodes in the Bible, otherwise rather scarce in chromatic references (FIG).

During this key period, Poynter started working on a grand painting entitled *Israel in Egypt* based on his 1862 watercolour *Work*, which launched his career as an archeological painter (FIG).<sup>67</sup> For this large canvas, Poynter returned to Biblical Egypt and yet the narrative elements appear as clearly secondary to archeological accuracy, which increasingly challenged Christian readings of the Egyptian heritage.<sup>68</sup> Despite the eclectic and anachronistic arrangement of monuments (the temples of Thebes and Philae, the Great Pyramid at Giza) which can be compared to the eclectic ensemble displayed at Sydenham, the level of detail in the decorative and polychromatic scheme testifies to Poynter's attempt to recreate the grandeur of Ancient Egypt. For *The Illustrated London News*, Poynter gave 'every evidence of having fully profited by recent Egyptological research ... a typical example of the successful application of the modern principle of wedding archaeology to art.'<sup>69</sup> While Rhodopis is *not* a Biblical figure, Poynter's panel for Burges's Great Bookcase similarly assort Egyptian artefacts from different periods, albeit on a much smaller scale. This 'intense interest' in the rich material culture of ancient Egypt persisted throughout Poynter's life and career as shown by active involvement in the *Society for the Preservation of the Monuments of Ancient Egypt* (SPMAE) which was founded in 1888 shortly after the discovery of the Fayyum portraits at Hawara.<sup>70</sup> Emulating the venture initiated by his friend William Morris in 1877 for *The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings*, the SPMAE, which functioned until 1910, received the support of Henry Wallis, Lord Leighton, E. Burne-Jones, G.F. Watts, W. Holman Hunt, Henry Holiday and Alma-Tadema.

However, in the Rhodopis panel, there are no such 'ancient buildings' to be seen. Although it depicts the origins of architecture, the focus is more on the personification of Egypt as the fantasized, colourful site of the first monumental edifices, rather than on the Pyramid itself, here reduced to a simple sketch. The scene itself takes place indoors with a focus on the female figure reclining on a decorated couch, surrounded by numerous artefacts. The position of

---

<sup>66</sup> Peacock feathers were introduced in the later Ptolemaic period. See Jackson, *Peacock*, 179.

<sup>67</sup> For a more detailed analysis of *Israel in Egypt*, see Moser, *Painting Antiquity*, 154-164.

<sup>68</sup> During this period, the Pyramids were also very much the focus of attention in esoteric circles, such as the Rosicrucians and the Free-Masons, which Burges (like Bulwer-Lytton) later joined.

<sup>69</sup> *The Illustrated London News*, 478.

<sup>70</sup> Poynter quoted in Thompson, *Wonderful Things*, 255.



Rhodopis with her index finger creatively pointing at the outline of the Pyramid, partly recalls more traditional pictorial allegories representing a feminine figure holding up an architectural design (FIG). This provides an interesting contrast to the New Jerusalem panel. The two images evidently work as pendants in terms of gender (St John vs Rhodopis), composition (vertical vs horizontal) and colour (Byzantine gold vs Egyptian blue). In both instances the act of inscribing plays a crucial role, but in the Solomon panel the coloured gems have already been symbolically translated into the twelve coloured foundation stones whereas Rhodopis' pyramid is still an abstract sketch, decorated with hieroglyphs and lion figures partly evocative of the Prudhoe lions in the British Museum. Whereas Solomon's panel suggests a more rhetorical and medieval understanding of allegory as revelation, Poynter's panel draws on the iconography of visual allegories where architecture could express its meaning *without* a material edifice.<sup>71</sup> And yet, in the case of Poynter's panel, materiality is not absent: it is displaced onto a wealth of decorative, coloured artefacts in the foreground.

Moreover, in traditional allegories the figure embodying architecture (or any other art), is anonymous, unidentifiable. Maureen Quilligan analyses the paradoxical 'female agency' of allegory in the following terms: 'personification is a trope by which abstractions, figured as masculine in Western philosophy, must take on the material agency of embodied nature, often imagined as feminine in the same philosophical tradition; the rhetorical figure of personification thus requires a violent appropriation of female materiality by male abstraction for the philosophical abstraction to gain narrative agency.' In a word, allegories are always personified as female because women are 'the material site of meaning' even 'when they can have no access to that meaning.'<sup>72</sup> Except that in Poynter's panel, the allegory has a name: Rhodopis, the builder of Pyramids.

## 2) Rhodopis: the 'Lady of the Pyramid'

Why Rhodopis? Why choose a lesser known, 6th century BC figure to symbolise Egyptian architecture and its iconic Pyramids instead of a more easily recognizable Pharaoh for instance? I believe that this may be due to the literary aura of Rhodopis who, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century was discussed by poets and historians alike, starting with Thomas Moore:

Fair Rhodope, as story tells—  
The bright unearthly nymph, who dwells

---

<sup>71</sup> See Machosky, *Thinking Allegory Otherwise*, 5.

<sup>72</sup> Quilligan, 'Allegory and female agency', 164 and 167.

'Mid sunless gold and jewels hid,  
The lady of the Pyramid.'<sup>73</sup>

'As story tells': largely forgotten today, Rhodopis was considered in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century both a historical and fictional figure. In many ways, she was a contested 'Lady', whose actual connection with the Pyramids was often called into question, including by the source who first suggested it, Herodotus. The Greek historian is explicitly mentioned in the caption to the RIBA drawing for Poynter's panel: 'Rhodopis was a celebrated courtesan. She was originally the fellow slave of Aesop. She made so much money in Egypt that she is said to have built one of the Pyramids. See Herodotus, *Euterpe*, 134-135.' As Handley-Read notes, it is quite ironic that the possibility of Rhodopis buiding a pyramid 'has been denied by the very source which Burges refers us':<sup>74</sup>

Some Greeks say that it was built by Rhodopis, the courtesan, but they are in error; indeed it is clear to me that when they say they do not know who Rhodopis was, else they would never have credited her with the building of a pyramid whereon what I may call an uncountable sum of talents must have been expended. And it is a further proof of their error that Rhodopis flourished in the reign of Amasis, not of Mycerinus, and thus very many years after these kings who built the pyramids. She was a Thracian by birth, slave to Iadmon, son of Hephaestopolis, a Samian, and fellow-slave of Aesopus the story-writer. For he also was owned by Iadmon; of which the chiefest proof is that when the Delphians, obeying an oracle, issued many proclamations inviting whosoever would to claim the penalty for the killing of Aesopus, none would undertake it but only another Iadmon, grandson of the first. Thus was Aesopus too shown to be the slave of Iadmon.

Rhodopis was brought to Egypt by Xanthes of Samos, and on her coming was for a great sum of money freed for the practice of her calling by Charaxus of Mytilene, son of Scamandronymus and brother of Sappho the poetess. Thus Rhodopis was set free and abode in Egypt, where, her charms becoming well known, she grew wealthy enough for a lady of her profession, but not for the building of such a pyramid. Seeing that to this day anyone who wishes may know what was the tenth part of her possessions, she cannot be credited with great wealth. For Rhodopis desired to leave a memorial of herself in Greece, by having something made which no one else had contrived and dedicated in a temple and presenting this at Delphi to preserve her memory; so she spent the tenth part of her substance on the making of a great number of iron ox-spits, as many as the tithe would pay for, and sent them to Delphi; these lie in a heap to this day, behind the altar set up by the Chians and in front of the shrine itself. It seems that the courtesans of Naucratis ever have the art of pleasing, for the woman of whom this story is told became so famous that all Greeks knew the name of Rhodopis, and in later days one Archidice was the theme of song throughout Greece, albeit less spoken of than the other. Charaxus, after

---

<sup>73</sup> Moore, *The Poetical works*, 676. These lines were translated by Théophile Gautier in 1865. Burges was certainly an admirer of Moore's poetry as he owned the two volumes of his *Anacreon* (1804). LS 1918, 21.

<sup>74</sup> Handley-Read, 'Notes on Burges's Painted Furniture', n66, 503.

giving Rhodopis her freedom, returned to Mytilene and was bitterly attacked by Sappho in one of her poems.<sup>75</sup>

This passage deserves to be quoted in full as Rhodopis is here mentioned alongside her fellow-slave Aesop as well as Sappho's brother Charaxus which connects Poynter's panel both to the illustrations of fables on the Bookcase and to Holiday's Sappho. In Aristophanes' *Birds*, also illustrated on the Bookcase, the birds are said to be ignorant because they have never read Aesop. As noted by Matthew Winterbottom, Burges relished such interwoven, erudite allusions.<sup>76</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Herodotus's *Histories* still shaped the Western reception of ancient Egypt. Another interesting point emphasized by the Greek historian is that Rhodopis was of 'Thracian birth', that is to say, not an Egyptian. She even appears to have been partly a Greek invention, an idea further explored by Diodorus, Strabo and even Pliny who repeats the connection with Aesop, all of which would have been known to Burges.<sup>77</sup>

In the second book of the *Histories*, from which the passage on Rhodopis is taken, Herodotus names two other female figures, Nitocris and Cheops's daughter, as being closely associated with the building of pyramids.<sup>78</sup> Cheop's daughter was prostituted against her will by her perverse father. She apparently asked to be paid in stones and with these stones she erected a pyramid described as the central one among a group of three, possibly Giza although the site is not mentioned by the historian. Nitocris, on the other hand, was a Babylonian, who in order to avenge the murder of her brother killed by Egyptians, organised a banquet for the murderers in a subterranean room which she flooded with the waters of the Nile thanks to a secret conduct. Architecture was therefore instrumental in Nitocris's revenge, although no reference is made to the Pyramids. However, later authors, such as Manetho, claimed that a most beautiful woman named Nitocris with blond hair and pink cheeks (*fluvia rubris genis* – which is also the meaning of the Greek word 'rhodopis') built the third pyramid.<sup>79</sup> The name Nitocris may have been more familiar to the Victorians than that of Rhodopis, as she starred in an Egyptian drama entitled *Nitocris: or the Ethiope's Revenge*, performed in 1855 at the Drury Lane Theatre in London in 1855.<sup>80</sup> A few years later she personified Egyptian architecture on 'the Frieze of

---

<sup>75</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, II, 134-135.

<sup>76</sup> Winterbottom, 'Not Acceptable to Present Taste', 22.

<sup>77</sup> Strabo, *Geography* 17. 1, 33. Pliny, *Natural History*, 36.17.

<sup>78</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, II, 100 and 126.

<sup>79</sup> Manetho, *Aegyptica*, fr. 20 and 21, quoted in Coche-Zivie, 'Nitocris, Rhodopis et la troisième pyramide de Giza', 117-8.

<sup>80</sup> 'A Blow up in the Egyptian drama', *The Albion, A Journal of News, politics and Literature*, 3 November 1855.

Parnassus' of the Albert Memorial, among 169 life-size full-length sculptures of individual composers, architects, poets, painters, and sculptors from history.

And yet, it remains unclear which pyramid Rhodopis, Nitocris or Cheop's daughter could have built. W.M. Flinders Petrie later assumed that it was one of the pyramids of Saqqara but this explanation has been rejected by Christiane Coche-Zivie in one of the only studies specifically devoted to Rhodopis, on the grounds that the connection with Mycérinus refers to the IVth Dynasty and therefore more probably to the Pyramids of Giza. This second interpretation was also favoured in the mid 19th century.

Coche-Zivie notes that Rhodopis, Nitocris and Cheops's daughter were often confused in antique sources and in the later historiography on the subject where the female agency was undermined as either preposterous (no woman could have amassed enough wealth to build a pyramid) or because it was achieved by immoral means (prostitution). This evidently reveals a reluctance to envisage the possibility that power may be detained by a woman.<sup>81</sup> Even Wilkinson echoed Herodotus by questioning the possibility of a courtesan building a Pyramid.<sup>82</sup> In antiquity, Rhodopis's architectural achievements were further called into question by legendary anecdotes which were progressively added to her story. One of them was her description as a proto-Cinderella figure. This version of Rhodopis' 'fabulous story' is found in Strabo:

It is called 'Tomb of the Courtesan,' having been built by her lovers — the courtesan whom Sappho the Melic poetess calls Doricha, the beloved of Sappho's brother Charaxus, who was engaged in transporting Lesbian wine to Naucratis for sale, but others give her the name Rhodopis. They tell the fabulous story that, when she was bathing, an eagle snatched one of her sandals from her maid and carried it to Memphis; and while the king was administering justice in the open air, the eagle, when it arrived above his head, flung the sandal into his lap; and the king, stirred both by the beautiful shape of the sandal and by the strangeness of the occurrence, sent men in all directions into the country in quest of the woman who wore the sandal; and when she was found in the city of Naucratis, she was brought up to Memphis, became the wife of the king, and when she died was honoured with the above-mentioned tomb.<sup>83</sup>

For Graham Anderson, this legendary anecdote provided a basis for several motifs later found in the Cinderella versions by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm: the lost shoe, the supernatural intervention, the rise from rags to riches.<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> Coche-Zivie, 'Nitocris', 115.

<sup>82</sup> Wilkinson, *The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians*, vol.1, 129.

<sup>83</sup> Strabo, *Geography* 17. 1. 33.

<sup>84</sup> Anderson, *Fairytales in the Ancient World*, 27.

In the mid-19th century, these stories – whether fictional or historically attested – became entangled. They were all compiled in the notes to George Rawlinson’s 1858 translation of Herodotus’s *Histories* which may have been consulted by Burges and Poynter.<sup>85</sup>

Preference for one version of Rhodopis’ story over the other often reveals the author’s take on either women or Egypt. Ebers for instance rewrites the story of his heroine Rhodopis by totally downplaying her past as a courtesan in favour of her grander achievements. A footnote even explains that a *hetaere* was not a prostitute but a woman of influence.<sup>86</sup> For Ebers, Rhodopis was a worthy historical figure whom even Sappho grew to love, despite her scathing verse about her.

Ruskin, on the other hand, was attracted to the idea of Rhodopis/Nitocris as an Egyptian ‘Cinderella’ from whose story he erases any sexual dimension:

queen Nitocris, — the Cinderella, and ‘the greatest heroine and beauty’ of Egyptian story. The Egyptians called her ‘Neith the Victorious’ (Nitocris), and the Greeks ‘Face of the Rose’ (Rhodope). Chaucer’s beautiful conception of Cleopatra in the ‘Legend of Good Women,’ is much more founded on the traditions of her than on those of Cleopatra; and, especially in its close, modified by Herodotus’s terrible story of the death of Nitocris, which, however, is mythologically nothing more than a part of the deep monotonous ancient dirge for the fulfilment of the earthly destiny of Beauty; ‘She cast herself into a chamber full of ashes.’

I believe this Queen is now sufficiently ascertained to have either built, or increased to double its former size, the third pyramid of Gizeh: and the passage following in the text refers to an imaginary endeavour, by the Old Lecturer and the children together, to make out the description of that pyramid in the 167th page of the second volume of Bunsen’s ‘Egypt’s Place in Universal History’ — ideal endeavour, — which ideally terminates as the Old Lecturer’s real endeavours to the same end always have terminated. There are, however, valuable notes respecting Nitocris at page 210 of the same volume: but the ‘Early Egyptian History for the Young,’ by the author of Sidney Gray, contains, in a pleasant form, as much information as young readers will usually need.<sup>87</sup>

Here Ruskin acknowledges Rhodopis as a power figure, a ‘Queen’ and makes no mention of her past as a slave or courtesan. Interestingly this passage is taken from Ruskin’s *Ethics of the Dust* (1866) which was addressed to children and girls in particular. Hence the reference to Gray’s *Early Egyptian History for the Young* (1863) which does not make any reference to prostitution either. The name ‘Rhodopis’ (translated here as ‘Face of the Rose’) may have also reminded Ruskin of the more ethereal Rose la Touche, whom he had met and fallen in love with in 1858.

---

<sup>85</sup> Rawlinson (assisted by J.G. Wilkinson), *The History of Herodotus: A New English Version*, vol. 2, 179-181.

<sup>86</sup> Ebers, *An Egyptian Princess*, vol.1, 8.

<sup>87</sup> Ruskin, CW, 18:361.

In his attempt to rehabilitate Rhodopis/Nitocris, Ruskin refers to Chaucer's 14<sup>th</sup> century poem *The Legend of Good Women* which, drawing on Ovid's *Heroides*, had depicted a fictionalized Cleopatra as a wronged woman, more sinned against than sinning. Like Ovid's or Chaucer's Cleopatra, Rhodopis/Nitocris is no femme fatale but a suffering victim. Chaucer's text, which Burges was familiar with, was then very popular with the Pre-Raphaelites. When Morris moved into the Red House with his wife Jane in 1860 he designed twelve embroidered hangings inspired by *The Legend of Good Women*. Morris and Burne-Jones explored the motif anew in a series of embroideries designed for Ruskin in 1863 which were later repeated for tiles and stained glass. And in 1868, Morris published a long narrative poem on Rhodopis. According to Florence Boos, his only known source for this tale was Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* which conflates Herodotus (Rhodopis the courtesan and former slave who married a king of Egypt) with Strabo (the Cinderella motif).<sup>88</sup> In the 'argument' to the 'Story of Rhodopis' she is described as 'lowly but exceeding beautiful' and who 'by a strange hap [...] became a queen and the world's wonder', in a word, a metonymy for the pyramid which Morris surprisingly leaves out of his tale. The heroine is no empowered woman: her passivity and melancholy—expressed as a form of *déracinement*—provide a striking contrast with happier fairy-tale versions of Cinderella. Shipped to Egypt against her will, she becomes the passive victim of a foot fetishist Pharaoh whom she has no wish to marry.<sup>89</sup> Her beauty, except that of her 'fair feet', is never precisely described, although the poem is full of details about the coloured objects (garments, jewellery etc.) adorning her body. Even her complexion retains very little of her Greek name as every single one of her blushes is said to be either 'faint' (l.310) or 'light' (l. 351).

Poynter's depiction of Rhodopis for Burges's panel bears no resemblance to Morris's later poetic portrayal of the heroine in that it is both much more colourful and eroticised. And yet, like Morris and Ruskin, Poynter conflates several antique sources, including Herodotus and Strabo. In the panel, she appears as a confident woman displaying her fortune and directly ordering the pyramid to be erected for her. No longer a slave, she is surrounded by two male attendants who bring her gifts suggesting her newly acquired wealth. Her striking profile recalls

---

<sup>88</sup> Boos, *William Morris, The Earthly Paradise*, vol.2, 227.

<sup>89</sup> On fin-de-siècle associations of Rhodopis and foot fetishism, see Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol.5, 24-5.

So grave a historian as Strabo, as well as Ælian, refers to the story of the courtesan Rhodope whose sandal was carried off by an eagle and dropped in the King of Egypt's lap as he was administering justice, so that he could not rest until he had discovered to whom this delicately small sandal belonged, and finally made her his queen. Kleinpaul, who repeats this story, has collected many European sayings and customs (including Turkish), indicating that the slipper is a very ancient symbol of a woman's sexual parts.

that of Cleopatra whom Poynter had represented wearing a similar headdress on the Yatman casket. Although the shape of her headdress looks more like a partridge, it was most certainly meant to be a vulture (representing the goddess Mut), reserved for royalty, as observed by Moser.<sup>90</sup> Her reclining posture and transparent drapery also cast her as an odalisque-like figure, reminiscent of her former courtesan status. Her red cheeks contribute to eroticising her in keeping with her Greek name, Rhodopis, which might well have been her professional nickname as a prostitute. One of her naked white feet also stands out against the darker skin of her two attendants and this could be a discreet allusion to Strabo's tale, especially as an eagle is represented just above the panel.

### 3) 'Colour'd with magnificence': Egypt as the land of colour

Although neither Cleopatra nor Rhodopis were Egyptian, ancient Egypt was frequently personified as female in the 19th century. The feminisation of Egypt has a long history – from Herodotus to the Bible – which was still very present in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his essay on Orientalism, Edward Saïd explains that this feminisation was central to the Orientalist discourse which was primarily a discourse of sexual possession. One example which Saïd finds particularly relevant is that of Gustave Flaubert who in his correspondence related his travels on the Nile with Maxime Ducamp in 1849-51 and his liaison with the dancer Kuchuk Hanem, as if his encounter with Egypt was primarily of a sexual nature.<sup>91</sup> Having read that the pyramid of Giza may have been built by a courtesan, Flaubert referred to it as 'the Pyramid of Rhodopis' conflating erotic fantasy and aesthetic fascination. Often allegorized as an odalisque in orientalist paintings (a position Wilkinson described as un-Egyptian) the East appeared to the West as a passive female figure awaiting to be consumed by the Western male.<sup>92</sup> But in Poynter's panel, the reclining Rhodopis paradoxically appears as both passive and as creatively engaged in devising her Pyramid. Her sexual potency, symbolised by her phallic, michelangelesque pointed finger, is partly undermined by the wealth of material signifiers cluttered around her. Surrounded with such sensually alluring artefacts, Rhodopis herself appears as an eroticized object. Similarly, in Gautier's fetishist short story 'Le Pied de la Momie', the fragmentation of the Oriental female body is closely associated with an urge to collect and possess beautiful antiquities. Cleopatra was frequently objectified in such manner, according to Lucy Hughes-Hallett:

---

<sup>90</sup> Moser, *Painting antiquity*, 99.

<sup>91</sup> Saïd, *Orientalism*, 186-190.

<sup>92</sup> Wilkinson, *Egyptians in the Time of the Pharaohs*, 35.

Thus surrounded with things, the 19th century Cleopatra herself is reified. She is presented as a spectacle, something to be viewed and coveted from the other side of a picture frame or proscenium arch. An object of wonder, not a person to be loved or understood, she becomes both superficial and profoundly mysterious, a surface so dazzling that one cannot think of looking beyond it. A foreigner, a sight for seeing.<sup>93</sup>

I wish to argue that the 19<sup>th</sup> century desire for the Orient which closely intertwined archeology and eroticism was also mediated through colour, as when John Keats described his ‘feel’ of Antony and Cleopatra as ‘colour’d with magnificence’ in a letter to Benjamin Haydon.<sup>94</sup> For Batchelor, linking colour with the foreign, the primitive and the feminine was a way of ‘purging colour from culture’.<sup>95</sup> We find this age-old, chromophobic idea in Charles Blanc’s *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin* (1867) where colour is not only described as the ‘feminine’ side of art, but as a characteristic of the ‘Orient’ luring Western artists ‘to Egypt, Morocco, Spain, to bring back a whole arsenal of brilliant objects ; cushions, slippers, narghilehs, turbans, burnous, caftans, mats, parasols.’<sup>96</sup>

Colour was evidently a key element in the sensual and aesthetic experience of the Orient for 19th century travelers. Fleeing the bleak industrial age where all men uniformly dressed in black, many artists and writers actively sought these alluring hues. In his discussion of the work of Poynter’s mentor, Charles Gleyre, Alain Buisine in *L’Orient Voilé* describes the East as a problematic chromatic site which needed to be relegated to a safe distance.<sup>97</sup> For Buisine, 19<sup>th</sup>-century orientalist painters therefore operated a paradoxical heightening and cancelling of colour, notably through the use of watercolour and pastel to attenuate oriental hues for the Western gaze (FIG).<sup>98</sup>

And yet, Poynter’s Egyptian paintings seem to emphasize rather than repress this passion for colour, which Wilkinson himself strongly associated with Egypt, both ancient and modern. Quoting Pliny, the Egyptologist insisted on ‘the oriental practice of harmonising colours’ which he traced back to the dyeing expertise of the Ancient Egyptians.<sup>99</sup> In a later lecture on the decorative arts, Poynter expressed his fear that the chromatic imperialism of the West, exporting aniline dyes to Eastern countries, would destroy this supposedly ancestral colour sense of the

---

<sup>93</sup> Hughes-Hallett, *Cleopatra, Histories, Dreams and Distortions*, 213.

<sup>94</sup> John Keats to Benjamin Haydon, 8 April 1818, quoted in Colvin, *Letters of John Keats to his Family and Friends*, 95.

<sup>95</sup> Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 22-23

<sup>96</sup> Charles Blanc, *The Grammar*, 146.

<sup>97</sup> Buisine, *L’Orient voilé*, 76.

<sup>98</sup> Buisine, *L’Orient voilé*, 79.

<sup>99</sup> Wilkinson, *On Colour*, 21-22.



‘Orientals’:

...wools dyed in England of harsh bright blue, magenta, and purple colours, were sent out with the idea of improving the taste of the Oriental makers, and it is now almost impossible to find any Turkey carpets that are not as crude and disagreeable as English ones. The Orientals certainly manage these harsh colours as well as it is possible: but colours that are bad to begin with cannot be made to look anything but disagreeable. The fact is that mauve, magenta, and all the new aniline dyes, are offensive colours, with a harsh metallic tint which renders them utterly unfit to be used, and impossible to harmonize in any kind of ornamental work, whether in the dyeing of silks, or the printing of muslins, chintzes, and wall-papers.<sup>100</sup>

In Poynter’s panel, the rosy-cheeked Rhodopis appears as the incarnation of Oriental colour. Not only is she surrounded by colourful artefacts directly copied from the British Museum collections, such as the cosmetic box which Wilkinson had singled out ‘for the brilliancy of the colours given to the ivory,’ her whole body is adorned with a wealth of coloured ornaments: a polychrome headdress, a lizard necklace and golden earrings.<sup>101</sup> Her semi-transparent tunic is dyed in a variety of blues, greens, and reds which the Egyptologist described as the chromatic combination most favoured by the ancient Egyptians.<sup>102</sup> Such colourful ornaments bring to mind Gautier’s depiction of the beautiful Tahoser in the *Romance of the Mummy*, first published in 1857:

Her features, of ideal delicacy, were of the purest Egyptian type, and sculptors must have often thought of her as they carved the images of Isis and Hathor. [...] Golden and rosy reflections coloured her warm pallor, in which showed her long black eyes, made to appear larger by lines of antimony, and full of a languorous, inexpressible sadness. [...] This lovely girl wore for head-dress a sort of helmet formed of a Guinea fowl, the half-closed wings of which fell upon her temples, and the pretty, small head of which came down to the centre of her brow, while the tail, marked with white spots, spread out on the back of her neck. [...] The hair of the young girl, of a brilliant black, plaited into tresses, hung in masses on either side of her smooth, round cheeks, and fell down to her shoulders. In the shadowy masses of the hair shone, like suns in a cloud, great discs of gold worn as earrings. From the head-dress hung gracefully down the back two long bands of stuff with fringed ends. A broad pectoral ornament, composed of several rows of enamels, gold and cornelian beads, and fishes and lizards of stamped gold, covered her breast from the lower part of the neck to the upper part of the bosom, which showed pink and white through the thin warp of the calasiris.<sup>103</sup>

Like Poynter’s Rhodopis, Tahoser is displayed within a setting of the ‘brightest colours.’<sup>104</sup> With her rosy cheeks and her eyes lined with antimony, her gold earrings and pectoral, she

---

<sup>100</sup> Poynter, *Ten Lectures on Art*, 30.

<sup>101</sup> Wilkinson quoted in Moser, *Painting Antiquity*, 99.

<sup>102</sup> Wilkinson, *A Popular account*, 292-3.

<sup>103</sup> Gautier, *The Romance of a Mummy*, 76-8.

<sup>104</sup> Gautier, *The Romance of a Mummy*, 45.

herself appears as a chromatic arrangement. As in Gautier's text, the colourful headdress symbolizes the power of Egyptian feminine divinities such as the colourful Isis, with whom Cleopatra strongly identified. In Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, a probable source for Burges as we have seen, this linking of Isis with colour is even more explicit: 'Her many-coloured robe was of finest linen; part was glistening white, part crocus-yellow, part glowing red and along the entire hem a woven bordure of flowers and fruit clung swaying in the breeze.'<sup>105</sup> The peacock fan held by Rhodopis might also be an allusion to the goddess as peacocks occasionally appear in Isian iconography.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, Rhodopis wears a bracelet in the form of a coiled snake, Isis's familiar creature. The female figure in Smallfield's panel has a similar bracelet as many of these ornaments were found among the ruins of Pompeii, in particular in the House of the Tragic Poet.<sup>107</sup> All these colourful props signal the sensual and feminine allure of the Egyptian past.

In keeping with her Greek name, Rhodopis' cheeks are coloured red, as if to remind the viewer that cosmetics were another of the Egyptian arts.<sup>108</sup> Cleopatra's 'dangerous beauty' was similarly 'heightened by cosmetics' according to Lucan.<sup>109</sup> The red blush, lip salve and black khol all highlight the whiteness of Rhodopis' complexion which contrasts with the darker skin of the male figures surrounding her. This further suggests the archeological accuracy of the panel as ancient Egyptian artists often contrasted swarthy men and white women, a gender distinction marked by the use of different types of ochres (yellow for women, red for men). But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the emphasis on the darker shades of male skin became increasingly understood in racial, if not racist terms. In his *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* (1787), Constantin-François Volney quoted Herodotus in claiming that the Ancient Egyptians were black.<sup>110</sup> This idea, found in Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* and Lucian's *Dialogues*, would later be taken up by the chromophobe Charles Blanc in his *Voyage de la Haute Égypte* (1876).<sup>111</sup>

However ideologically-charged, these Egyptian colours became a great source of inspiration for Victorian artists. The colourful magic of the Orient—whether antique or modern—was certainly key the High Victorian Dream, and to Burges's own decorative style.<sup>112</sup> Among the

---

<sup>105</sup> Apuleius quoted in Hughes-Hallett, *Cleopatra*, 81.

<sup>106</sup> Regula, *The Mysteries of Isis*, 53.

<sup>107</sup> Trollope, *Illustrations of Ancient Art*, 50.

<sup>108</sup> Walter and Cardinali, *L'Art-chimie*, 61.

<sup>109</sup> Lucan quoted in Jones, *Cleopatra*, 40.

<sup>110</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*, 74-5.

<sup>111</sup> Bloch, 'De L'origine des Egyptiens', 394 and Moussa, 'Les pharaons au musée : le regard des voyageurs français en Égypte à la fin du XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle', 103.

<sup>112</sup> Crook, *Burges*, 47-8.

limited palette unearthed by archeologists, one colour particularly stood out: blue, as observed by Poynter himself:

Moreover, we know that other colours—blue certainly—were used in the decoration of temples long before the time of Apelles, or indeed of Polygnotus. It is hardly necessary to mention that the Egyptians used a great variety of colours a thousand years or more before the commencement of Greek art.<sup>113</sup>

Blue not only features prominently in the background of the Rhodopis panel, it is the colour of the lotus flower depicted in the vase. Jones had been one of the first to highlight the importance of this blue flower in Egyptian art which appears as a key ornamental motif on the courtesan's couch (FIG). Not only were the seeds and roots grilled and the flowers used in perfumes, stylized lotus motifs were included everywhere, from tomb to column. The flower was closely connected with Egyptian creation myths, an apt symbol for Poynter's panel on the origin of architecture:

The Blue lotus does not have true stems; the leaves are on long petioles (leaf stalks) that arise directly from the rhizome. The flowers open in early morning and close completely to pass the hours of night. Because of the diurnal cycle of this flower, closing completely at night to re-awaken in the morning, the blue lotus figures prominently in the texts of the ancient Egyptian creation myths.<sup>114</sup>

For Wilkinson, blue, whether used for textiles (indigo) or artworks, was a particularly sacred colour to the ancient Egyptians:

The blue, which is very brilliant, consists of fine particles of blue glass, and may be considered equivalent to our smalt; it seems to be the same that Vitruvius describes, which he supposes to have been first made at Alexandria; and it also agrees with the artificial kyanus of Theophrastus, invented in Egypt, which he says was laid on thicker than the native (or lapis lazuli). The thickness of the blue on the ceilings in Belzoni's tomb confirms his remark.<sup>115</sup>

Egyptian blue, as it was then already called, was the first synthetic pigment invented around 2500 BC, identified as such by Vitruvius. It consists of a calcium copper (tetra)silicate compound testifying to the chemical skills of the ancient Egyptians, which Wilkinson also underlined: 'We may, therefore, suppose some general notions of chemistry, or at least of chemical agency, were known to the Egyptians; and the beautiful colours they obtained from copper, the composition of various metals, and the knowledge of the effects produced on

---

<sup>113</sup> Poynter in *Lectures on art*, 71.

<sup>114</sup> Barakat and Aziz, *Guide to Plants in Ancient Egypt*, 188.

<sup>115</sup> Wilkinson, *A Popular account*, 292-3. On the use of indigo in ancient Egypt, see Balfour-Paul, *Indigo, Egyptian Mummies to Blue Jeans*, 13-4.

different substances by the salts of the earth, tend to confirm this opinion.’<sup>116</sup> The invention of this pigment was motivated by the need to manufacture a blue colour that was more readily available than the extremely costly lapis lazuli which it was meant to imitate. As noted by François Delamare, it is precisely because blue pigments are so difficult to find in nature, that synthetic substitutes were sought after as ‘civilisation markers.’<sup>117</sup> For the ancient Egyptians, any shade of blue was thus endowed with magical and protective qualities.<sup>118</sup> In Pharaonic texts the name for this colour combines lapis lazuli and a term underlining its artificial origin *hsbd iryt*. In Greek this is translated as *kuanos* and as *caeruleum* in Vitruvius. Pliny, on the other hand, describes *Aegyptium* blue as the best.<sup>119</sup> The first recorded modern use of the colour name ‘Egyptian blue’ was in 1809 when the French chemist Jean-Antoine Chaptal first identified its presence at Pompeii. A few years later, in 1814, Sir Humphry Davy witnessed the excavation at Pompeii of ‘a small pot containing a pale blue colour’ which he identified as ‘a mixture of carbonate of lime with the Alexandrian frit’ of the same kind noted by Chaptal.<sup>120</sup> The earliest usages of the colour seem to date back to the 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (c.2613-2494) when it was applied to painted sculptures and sarcophagi. It was then extensively used in Minoan art as well as in Greece, Pompeii and Rome, because it offered the possibility of a whole palette of nuances, depending on how the pigment was ground.<sup>121</sup> Its use however declined in the late Roman period when the recipe was lost until it was rediscovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>122</sup>

Combining fantasized Orientalist imagery with archeological accuracy, Poynter’s Rhodopis therefore reflects the growing fascination with the colours of the Egyptian past which by the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century had captured the imagination of writers, painters, archeologists and chemists alike.

### III. Traces of Pompeii

#### 1) Frederick Smallfield and the Pompeian origins of painting

Ancient Egypt could equally have been the subject of the panel on the Pagan origins of painting given the host of painted artefacts archeologists were then uncovering. But rather than focusing on polychromatic decoration, Burges and Smallfield chose to associate painting with the art of

---

<sup>116</sup> Wilkinson, *A Popular Account*, 84. On the chemical composition and history of Egyptian blue, see *The Pigment Compendium*, 153-4.

<sup>117</sup> Delamare, ‘Le bleu égyptien, essai de bibliographie critique’, 144.

<sup>118</sup> On the magical properties of Egyptian blue, see Davies, *Colour and painting in ancient Egypt*, xiv and Pastoureaux, *Bleu, Histoire d’une couleur*, 23.

<sup>119</sup> *Pigment Compendium*, 154.

<sup>120</sup> Davy, *The Collected Works of Sir Humphry Davy*, vol.6, 142

<sup>121</sup> Grand-Clément, *La Fabrique des couleurs*, 161.

<sup>122</sup> Walter, *L’art-chimie*, 58.

portrayal, evidently a better pendant to the Angelico portrait of the Virgin. However, contrary to the Christian origins of painting, the ‘Pagan’ portraitist is given no name. This omission may well have been deliberate on Burges’s part, as no signed painting from antiquity had survived the onslaught of time.<sup>123</sup>

If Rhodopis lived in the 6th century BC—a period which may still have been considered ‘archaic’ if not ‘primitive’ by most Victorians—a much later Antiquity is depicted in Smallfield’s panel. As we have seen, the clothes and the jewellery of the two figures and all the artefacts included in the image were carefully copied from objects in the Museo Borbonico in Naples, which clearly identifies the scene as a Pompeian one. As in the Rhodopis panel, these functional objects operate as archeological citations with the paradoxical aim of suggesting both erudition and familiar domesticity.

When Smallfield embarked on this project, he was, like Poynter, already a close collaborator of Burges. Trained at the Royal Academy Schools in the 1840s, that is to say at the same time as the future Pre-Raphaelite Brothers, he is now better known for his collaborations with architects than with these painters, whose style nonetheless inspired his oils and watercolours. Burges and Smallfield may have met as early as 1852-3 when they both worked with Digby Wyatt on *The Industrial Arts of the 19th century*, for which Smallfield designed plates chromolithographed by Francis Bedford. A few years later, the artist painted the exterior panels for a medievalising polychrome wardrobe designed by Burges allegorizing various fabrics and textiles. These were shown at the 1859 architectural exhibition which launched the short-lived craze for painted furniture. The wardrobe (which is still in Tower House) was later illustrated with quotations from Chaucer and Tennyson (FIG).<sup>124</sup>

The late 1850s-early 1860s certainly marked the acme of Smallfield and Burges’s friendship and collaboration. In 1861, the two men travelled together to the continent and spent six weeks in Florence and Switzerland. That year, Burges noted in his diary that ‘Smallfield did rooms, Gayhurst’ at Buckingham, referring to the miniature floral panels designed by the painter for this ‘Gothicizing Renaissance’ décor.<sup>125</sup> With the support of Burges, Smallfield soon emerged as a key artist in the decorative arts, particularly stained glass. In 1862, along with Poynter he produced cartoons for the grisaille glass window for Murray’s memorial at St Andrews, Well St in London. This fruitful collaboration continued throughout the 1860s as Smallfield painted

---

<sup>123</sup> See Poynter, ‘Some remarks on ancient decorative art’, 67: ‘there is not, as far as I know, any instance of an antique painting signed by the name of a known artist.’

<sup>124</sup> Crook, *Burges*, 327.

<sup>125</sup> Crook, *Burges*, 144.

a series of miniatures of the works of creation for Worcester Chapel (1864), and Burges's Crocker Dresser Table in 1867. A year later, the artist took part in Burges's grand Cardiff castle project by polychroming the two statues of the Clock Tower as well as its Byzantine Gothic Dome, which shows that he shared Burges's passion for colour.

Experimenting with a wide range of media, Smallfield even tried his hand at etching for his contribution to a volume entitled *Passages from Modern English Poets* which was illustrated in 1862 by the Junior Etching Club, including James McNeill Whistler, Charles Rossiter and Henry Stacy Marks. Combining vivid colour and monochrome outlining, the Pagan origins of painting was therefore an ideal subject for Smallfield. The image represents a young couple, most probably lovers, as the man fondly paints the profile of his beloved (identified as his 'mistress' in the caption to the RIBA drawing) on a piece of wood evoking the now lost paintings on wood panels of ancient Greek artists (FIG).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century still very little was known about Greek painting. The main source on the subject was (and still is) the 35<sup>th</sup> book of Pliny's *Natural History* which lists the names of the most famous 'Pagan' painters whose works are now only known to us by his ekphrases. Pliny particularly extolled Apelles' skillful use of a limited palette of four colours.<sup>126</sup> His descriptions of the Greek artist's paintings later became a great source of inspiration for Renaissance artists wishing to inscribe their own pictorial production within the great Hellenic lineage. In the Victorian age Apelles, Zeuxis or Polygnotus were still considered models of artistic excellence, albeit *in absentia*. Between 1862 and 1864 Poynter was even commissioned to depict Apelles for the so-called Kensington Valhalla, a series of life-size portraits of famous artists and craftsmen fitted into the arcade niches on the upper level of the South Court of the South Kensington Museum. (FIG).

And yet it seems difficult to identify the painter represented in Smallfield's panel with the Greek artist as no source mentions his painting a profile of the silhouette of a woman. Except if the image was intended to merge two anecdotes related by Pliny: Apelles' portrayal of Alexander's mistress Campaspe and his sketch of Pharaoh's jester on a wall.<sup>127</sup> Apelles was indeed considered by the author of the *Natural History* as a master of delineation, who let no day pass by 'without exercising himself by tracing some outline or other.'<sup>128</sup>

I wish to argue, however, that it is not because of these anecdotes that the *Natural History* provides the subtext to the allegory of Pagan painting on the Bookcase. As in the Rhodopis

---

<sup>126</sup> On Apelles's tetrachromy, see Gage's 'A Locus Classicus of Colour Theory: The Fortune of Apelles': 1-26.

<sup>127</sup> Poynter refers to some of these anecdotes in his *Lectures on art*, 69.

<sup>128</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.36.

panel, the source for Smallfield's image is more mythical than historical. Rather than the work of a specific Pagan painter, Burges here references Pliny's mythical genealogy for the art of painting, in particular the story of the Corinthian maid. This more implicit allusion contrasts with the highly detailed and identifiable archeological artefacts included in the scene, which anachronistically conjure up the ancient city of Pompeii where Pliny himself lived and tragically died in 79 AD.

## 2) The art of shading: pictorial genealogies

Burges owned a 17th translation of Pliny the Younger's letters relating the death of his uncle in the Vesuvius eruption.<sup>129</sup> In these letters, Pliny is depicted as a great scholar and an authority on a wide range of topics, which did not prevent him from frequently mingling fact and legend. One of the myths Pliny invents in his *Natural History* is that of the origin of painting. This story is in fact told twice, first as the origin of painting and then as the origin of sculpture:

We have no certain knowledge as to the commencement of the art of painting, nor does this enquiry fall under our consideration. The Egyptians assert that it was invented among themselves, six thousand years before it passed into Greece; a vain boast, it is very evident. As to the Greeks, some say that it was invented at Sicyon, others at Corinth; but they all agree that it originated in tracing lines round the human shadow. The first stage of the art, they say, was this, the second stage being the employment of single colours; a process known as 'monochromaton,' after it had become more complicated, and which is still in use at the present day.<sup>130</sup>

In this first version, the original artist has neither name nor gender. Pliny here separates Greek art from its potential Egyptian sources, which he shunned as too primitive.<sup>131</sup> Taking up the reference to Corinth, Pliny again leaves Egypt aside in the second mention of this story, better known as that of the Corinthian maid:

On painting we have now said enough, and more than enough; but it will be only proper to append some accounts of the plastic art. Butades, a potter of Sicyon, was the first who invented, at Corinth, the art of modelling portraits in the earth which he used in his trade. It was through his daughter that he made the discovery; who, being deeply in love with a young man about to depart on a long journey, traced the profile of his face, as thrown upon the wall by the light of the lamp. Upon seeing this, her father filled in the outline, by compressing clay upon the surface, and so made a face in relief, which he then hardened by fire along with other articles of pottery.<sup>132</sup>

---

<sup>129</sup> Burges, LS 1918, 14.

<sup>130</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.5.

<sup>131</sup> Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow*, 12.

<sup>132</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 35. 43.

Here the first painter is an anonymous woman, and the first sculptor Butades, her father, generally eclipsed in pictorial receptions of the story. According to Victor Stoichita, Pliny resorted to myth to interpret a historical fact in order to place black figure vase painting within a fantasized pictorial genealogy starting with a simple shadow and culminating in the great works of Apelles.<sup>133</sup>

Similarly in Smallfield's panel the sketch, or trace, lies at the centre of the composition 'along with other articles of pottery'. And yet, the image departs from Pliny in many ways: the artist is male and the scene a daylight one as opposed to the erotic chiaroscuro often found in pictorial adaptations of this tale, for instance in Joseph Wright of Derby's *Corinthian Maid* (1784). In the panel, no shadow can be seen despite the caption to the RIBA drawing indicating that the artist is painting the 'shadow' of his mistress. Moreover, the scene does not take place in archaic Corinth but in Pliny's own day and age, when painting had reached a far more advanced stage. Many houses at Pompeii were decorated with copies of great paintings by Apelles, Zeuxis or Timanthes which in the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries offered a unique glimpse into ancient art of painting—including portraits—which had been thought lost and gone. Thanks to the Pompeian reference, Smallfield and Burges succeeded in conflating in one syncretic image the different stages of the evolution of the art of painting, from line, to monochrome and then fresco.

This conception of painting as originally an art of shading can also be found in Plato, whose cave allegory has been compared to the story of the Corinthian maid. Plato considered painting as a form of *skiagraphia* or shadow writing (which has sometimes been translated as chiaroscuro) so as to underline its mimetic and hence deceptive nature.<sup>134</sup> Echoing the Greek philosopher, John Heinrich Füssli coined the Greek term 'skiagramms' to describe the first Pagan paintings in his 1801 Lectures to the Royal Academy:

If ever legend deserves our belief, the amorous tale of the Corinthian maid, who traced the shade of her departing lover by the secret lamp, appeals to our sympathy, to grant it. [...]

The first essays of the art were skiagrams, simple outlines of a shade, similar to those which have been introduced to vulgar use by the students and parasites of physiognomy, under the name of silhouettes, without any other addition of character or feature but what the profile of the object thus delineated could afford.<sup>135</sup>

---

<sup>133</sup> Stoichita, *A Short History*, 14.

<sup>134</sup> Stoichita, *A Short History*, 20 et sq. On painting as *skiagraphia*, see Keuls, 'Skiagraphia once again', *American Journal of Archeology*: 1-16.

<sup>135</sup> Wornum, *Lectures on Painting by the Royal Academicians Barry, Opie, Fuseli*, 350.



This passage was repeated in a contemporary edition of Hamilton's collection of vases, of which Burges owned a copy.<sup>136</sup> Füssli here translates *skiagramm* as silhouette, a term increasingly associated with a then highly popular form of portrayal: 'shades' or 'profiles' which were either painted or cut from a black card as a cheaper alternative to miniature. Often considered a minor form of art, these 'shades' were nonetheless described by the Swiss physiognomist Johann Caspar Lavater—a close friend of Füssli—as 'little gold but the purest' (FIG).<sup>137</sup>

As shades flourished in France and Britain in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Pliny's myth of the Corinthian maid was frequently invoked as its fantasized origin. A modernized interpretation of this story can for instance be found in J.C. Schenau's *Les origines de la peinture ou les portraits à la Mode* (1750) showing a fashionable 18<sup>th</sup> century lady having her shade outlined by a male artist (FIG). In early 20<sup>th</sup>-century studies of the art of silhouetting, these mythical origins were still often alluded to, as were the excavations at Pompeii for having supposedly launched the craze for this type of portraiture.<sup>138</sup> The choice of a Pompeian setting is therefore particularly significant in Smallfield's panel which merges past and present, history and myth as well as a plurality of art forms, from vase painting to Victorian silhouetting.

Shading was still popular with the Victorians. Even Ruskin had his silhouette outlined although he did not particularly approve of the result.<sup>139</sup> After the death in 1861 of Auguste Edouart, one of the last renowned silhouette artists, the art of shading rapidly declined. And yet silhouettes were still being taken at Crystal Palace in 1913, three years before it burnt down and was itself reduced to ashes.<sup>140</sup>

As noted by Catherine Maxwell, these profiles are unsettling depictions because of their strong link to death.<sup>141</sup> A 'story of the surrogate image,' the shadow myth indeed articulates Eros and Thanatos, presence and absence.<sup>142</sup> In Pliny, as well as in subsequent versions of the myth of the Corinthian maid, the creative impulse is presented as motivated by love, a means to compensate for the imminent disappearance of the lover. The function of the outline is mimetic rather than decorative, as the maid desires to keep a likeness of her lover. This sentimental dimension of the tale explains its popularity, comparable to that of Pygmalion with which it

---

<sup>136</sup> Rosenblum, 'The Origin of Painting', 287.

<sup>137</sup> Coke, *The Art of Silhouette*, 34.

<sup>138</sup> Jackson, *The History of Silhouettes*, 101 and 13.

<sup>139</sup> Ruskin quoted in Coke, *The Art of Silhouette*, 34.

<sup>140</sup> Coke, *The Art of Silhouette*, 218.

<sup>141</sup> Maxwell, *Second Sight*, 219.

<sup>142</sup> Stoichita, *A Short History*, 19.

was often associated in the works of the early Romantics.<sup>143</sup> While nowhere in this panel is the departing of the loved one suggested, the clearly identifiable Pompeian setting brings to mind the idea of impending destruction, echoing Arbaces' premonition in *The Last Days of Pompeii*:

...hast thou never wished to put aside the veil of futurity, and to behold on the shores of Fate the shadowy images of things to be? For it is not the past alone that has its ghosts: each event to come has also its spectrum—its shade; when the hour arrives, life enters it, the shadow becomes corporeal, and walks the world.<sup>144</sup>

In the novel, all the 'shadowy' remains found in 'the city of the Dead' are brought back to life and become 'corporeal' again. In the closing pages of *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Bulwer-Lytton identifies the fragmented skeletons found at Pompeii with many of the characters in his story, from 'the trace of the fated Julia' 'in the impression of a female neck and bosom' to the skull of Arbaces 'of so striking a conformation' which the author explains has 'excited the constant speculation of every itinerant believer in the theories of Spurzheim who has gazed upon that ruined palace of the mind.'<sup>145</sup> Just as Lavater had used silhouettes in his *Essay on Physiognomy* (of which Burges owned an original edition), the shades of Pompeii—of its ruins and its inhabitants—lent themselves to the speculations of Victorian phrenologists.<sup>146</sup>

While working on the bookcase, Burges may have also become aware that the archeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli was working on a pioneering technique to make plaster casts of the bodily remains found at Pompeii and Herculaneum from the voids traced in the ash.<sup>147</sup> This further increased the fascination for the departed shades of Pompeii whose material presence could thus be felt and seen anew. As Zimmerman has observed, Victorian archeologists, just like Bulwer-Lytton himself, created a wealth of narratives from these material and immaterial traces, simultaneously making the past 'legible' and 'erod[ing] temporal boundaries.'<sup>148</sup>

Smallfield's panel therefore weaves a double, intersecting narrative about both painting and Pompeii through the re-membering of its fragmentary remains. Alongside the pots and amphorae copied from surviving artefacts, two details in the picture further convey the Pompeian paradox of preservation and destruction symbolized by the central shadow: the salamander (or lizard) on the tree and the loaf of bread on the tripod. While many Pompeian wall-paintings represent lizards and salamanders, I believe that Burges included this reptile for

---

<sup>143</sup> Rosenblum, 'The Origin of Painting: A Problem in the Iconography of Romantic Classicism', 286.

<sup>144</sup> Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 173-4.

<sup>145</sup> Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 495-6.

<sup>146</sup> Burges, *Library Holdings* 1882, 8. On the skull of Arbaces and the development of phrenology, see Goldhill, 'A Writer's Things: Edward Bulwer Lytton and the Archaeological Gaze', 99 et sq.

<sup>147</sup> Roberts, *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, 16.

<sup>148</sup> Zimmerman, *Excavating Victorians*, 8.

more symbolic, if not occult, reasons. Mentioned in both Pliny and in medieval bestiaries, salamanders were believed to have a strong affinity with fire, which St Augustine, in *The City of God*, connects explicitly with the eruption of Vesuvius as an example of creatures capable of surviving destruction:

If, therefore, the salamander lives in fire, as naturalists have recorded, and if certain famous mountains of Sicily have been continually on fire from the remotest antiquity until now, and yet remain entire, these are sufficiently convincing examples that everything which burns is not consumed.<sup>149</sup>

A similar unidentified reptile is associated with the hag of Vesuvius in *The Last Days of Pompeii*.

Bread, on the other hand, was the everyday preoccupation in the ancient city. Paul Roberts notes that there were no fewer than 31 bakeries in Pompeii at the time of the eruption. In 1862, the year the Bookcase was completed, a Pompeian oven containing 80 perfectly preserved carbonised loaves was opened in the bakery of Modestus (FIG).<sup>150</sup> While he may not have seen any of these loaves, Burges had certainly read in Pliny about the eating habits of the Pompeians, as shown by the depiction in the panel of a pink flamingo, whose tongues were apparently considered a delicacy in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.<sup>151</sup> Burges and Smallfield may also have drawn their inspiration from the various wall paintings representing loaves of bread, as in the House of Julia Felix (excavated in 1755). Burges's 1858 'Polychromy Album' indeed includes a colourful reproduction of a fresco (inscribed 'Brought at Naples – Pompei [sic]') which shows a still life with one of these loaves alongside other Pompeian specialties (FIG).<sup>152</sup>

As much as archeological artefacts, these frescoes, which Raoul-Rochette described in 1828 as 'shadows' of Hellenic perfection were a great source of inspiration for 19<sup>th</sup>-century painters in search for the lost origins of Greek art.<sup>153</sup> Raoul-Rochette gives the example of Timanthes's *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* described in Pliny and of which a copy was found at Pompeii, in the House of the Tragic Poet.<sup>154</sup> In *A Collector of Pictures in the Time of Augustus* (1867), Alma-Tadema copied this Pompeian version to recreate the Greek original which first century AD amateurs could still have admired (FIG).

---

<sup>149</sup> St Augustine quoted in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 454.

<sup>150</sup> Roberts, *Last Supper in Pompeii*, 74.

<sup>151</sup> Quoting the Roman gourmet Marcus Gavius Apicius, Pliny notes that flamingo's tongue was of superb flavour. See *Natural History* 10:133. On the Roman tendency to such 'conspicuous consumption' see Beerden, 'Moderation, refined luxury, or extravagance?': 505-520.

<sup>152</sup> I am very grateful to Paul Roberts for helping me identify this wall painting.

<sup>153</sup> Raoul-Rochette, *Pompéi, Choix d'édifices inédits*, vol.1, 19.

<sup>154</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 35:36.

Contrary to Alma-Tadema, Smallfield's panel is not a copy of a specific fresco. Instead, the image paradoxically allegorizes both the monochromatic origins of painting and the colourful wealth of the Pompeian past as it was progressively unearthed throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and fictionally recreated by Bulwer-Lytton.

### 3) From Pliny to Bulwer-Lytton: The Last Dyes of Pompeii

In contrast with the shade placed at the centre of the panel, the two figures depicted by Smallfield amongst a collection of archeological artefacts shed light on the everyday life of the Pompeians. Pompeii was a colourful setting in more ways than one, a thriving city where the arts of dyeing, painting and self-painting were perfectly mastered. This emphasis on colour as a means of reviving the past, can be found in Bulwer-Lytton's novel describing the ancient city as 'gaudy yet harmonious.'<sup>155</sup> Colour here functions as a trace, a hinge between the past and the present:

Nearly Seventeen Centuries had rolled away when the City of Pompeii was disinterred from its silent tomb, all vivid with undimmed hues; its walls fresh as if painted yesterday—not a hue faded on the rich mosaic of its floors—in its forum the half-finished columns as left by the workman's hand—in its gardens the sacrificial tripod—in its halls the chest of treasure—in its baths the strigil—in its theatres the counter of admission—in its saloons the furniture and the lamp—in its triclinia the fragments of the last feast—in its cubicula the perfumes and the rouge of faded beauty—and everywhere the bones and skeletons of those who once moved the springs of that minute yet gorgeous machine of luxury and of life!<sup>156</sup>

One of the key places which Bulwer-Lytton restored to its original colours was the House of the Tragic Poet, discovered in 1824. As soon as the House was excavated, it became extremely popular not only with archeologists and historians but with writers, artists and the general public. Many paintings were found in this house which revealed the refined aesthetic taste of its owner as opposed to the primitive graffiti and obscene representations discovered in shadier areas of the city. Fostered by Bulwer-Lytton's integration of this setting in *The Last Days of Pompeii*, its popularity persisted well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the Pompeian Court at Sydenham which, as we saw, was directly modelled after Gell as well as Bulwer-Lytton's descriptions of the House, visitors could enjoy refreshments and identify with fashionable Pompeians, including in their use of cosmetics. A 'Pompeian hair dye' and a 'Balma Pompeiana' were even on sale in the Crystal Palace.<sup>157</sup> Rather than the 'City of the Dead', Pompeii appeared to the

---

<sup>155</sup> Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 12.

<sup>156</sup> Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 494.

<sup>157</sup> Hales, 'Re-casting Antiquity in the Crystal Palace', 116.

Victorians as a colourful world which Bulwer-Lytton's novel had successfully brought back to life.

The late 1850s also marked the acme of Bulwer-Lytton's literary reputation. Not only was his work discussed by Swinburne and Ruskin, the 1859 Encyclopaedia Britannica even claimed that Bulwer-Lytton is 'now unquestionably the greatest living novelist.' Margaret Oliphant also considered him as 'the first novelist of his time,' before Charles Dickens and W. M. Thackeray.<sup>158</sup>

Alongside Pliny's *Natural History*, *The Last Days of Pompeii* was a key source for Smallfield's panel. Bulwer-Lytton himself had relied extensively on Pliny, mentioning him (and his nephew) no fewer than four times in the novel both as an authority and as a minor character in the story:

The reader will now have a tolerable notion of the Pompeian houses, which resembled in some respects the Grecian, but mostly the Roman fashion of domestic architecture. In almost every house there is some difference in detail from the rest, but the principal outline is the same in all. In all you find the hall, the tablinum, and the peristyle, communicating with each other; in all you find the walls richly painted; and all the evidence of a people fond of the refining elegancies of life. The purity of the taste of the Pompeians in decoration is, however, questionable: they were fond of the gaudiest colors, of fantastic designs; they often painted the lower half of their columns a bright red, leaving the rest uncolored; and where the garden was small, its wall was frequently tinted to deceive the eye as to its extent, imitating trees, birds, temples, etc., in perspective—a meretricious delusion which the graceful pedantry of Pliny himself adopted, with a complacent pride in its ingenuity.<sup>159</sup>

As an architect and decorator, Burges would have been particularly sensitive to a passage like this one emphasizing the 'gaudiest colours' among which the Pompeians lived. The setting depicted in Smallfield's panel resembles these peristyle gardens evoked by Bulwer-Lytton and which Roberts has aptly described as an 'internalized outside space' where dining and drinking often took place.<sup>160</sup> A huge quantity of pottery vessels were found in these green areas where small trees and tended shrubs were sometimes included for decorative purposes as shown by the numerous garden frescoes adorning the more opulent villas.

While the panel does not seem to illustrate a specific episode in Bulwer-Lytton's story, the male figure resembles the description the novelist gives in the opening chapter of his Greek hero, Glaucus:

The owner himself was of that slender and beautiful symmetry from which the sculptors of Athens drew their models; his Grecian origin betrayed itself in his light

---

<sup>158</sup> Oliphant, 'Bulwer,' quoted in Goldhill, 'A Writer's Things', 93.

<sup>159</sup> Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 29

<sup>160</sup> Paul Roberts, *Life and Death*, 150.

but clustering locks, and the perfect harmony of his features. He wore no toga, which in the time of the emperors had indeed ceased to be the general distinction of the Romans, and was especially ridiculed by the pretenders to fashion; but his tunic glowed in the richest hues of the Tyrian dye, and the fibulae, or buckles, by which it was fastened, sparkled with emeralds: around his neck was a chain of gold, which in the middle of his breast twisted itself into the form of a serpent's head, from the mouth of which hung pendent a large signet ring of elaborate and most exquisite workmanship; the sleeves of the tunic were loose, and fringed at the hand with gold: and across the waist a girdle wrought in arabesque designs, and of the same material as the fringe, served in lieu of pockets for the receptacle of the handkerchief and the purse, the stilus and the tablets.<sup>161</sup>

Like Glaucus, the portraitist in Smallfield's panel wears no toga but an elaborately dyed tunic with a costly purple border. He is probably in his own house as he wears typically indoor sandals. Moreover, his hair is akin to 'light but clustering locks', as in Alma-Tadema's painting of *Glaucus and Nydia* (1867) (FIG).

The female figure is, however, less easily identifiable. She is dressed like a woman from the elite with a gold necklace, pearl earrings and an elaborately dyed *stola*, which rules out the slave girl Nydia as a potential model. Dyes were indeed a sign of luxury in antiquity and in particular purple which was extracted at high cost from the murex shell. In the novel, Glaucus and the aedile Pansa have 'napkins edged with a purple fringe' which were considered as a particularly vain form of ornamentation by Juvenal, whose *Satyricon* both Burges and Bulwer-Lytton knew well.<sup>162</sup> Similar moral comments on chromatic excesses can be found Pliny who distrusted gaudy dyes and bad painters importing expensive pigments from exotic countries.<sup>163</sup> If the woman is not Nydia, she could be the vain Julia, the beautiful daughter of Diomed. As with Glaucus, the depiction of Julia is inseparable from its setting. Each key character in the novel seems indeed to have a special relation to his/her house, possibly because all of Bulwer-Lytton's imagined protagonists were based on bodily remains found in specific places. Matching, as it were, the 'vivid and various colourings' of the walls of her dressing-room, Julia's whole body is adorned with cosmetics and jewellery, for example pearl earrings (or 'crotalia') which Pliny notes were extremely fashionable in his own time:<sup>164</sup>

On the table, before which she sat, was a small and circular mirror of the most polished steel: round which, in precise order, were ranged the cosmetics and the unguents—the perfumes and the paints—the jewels and combs—the ribands and the gold pins, which were destined to add to the natural attractions of beauty the

---

<sup>161</sup> Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 11.

<sup>162</sup> Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 32. Harrison, 'Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*,' 85.

<sup>163</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.30.

<sup>164</sup> As Pliny notes in his *Natural History* 11.50.136: 'women spend more money on their ears in pearl earrings than on any other part of their person'. On Roman and Pompeian jewellery, see Croom, *Roman clothing and fashion* (2000) and Roberts, *Life and Death*, 137-139.

assistance of art and the capricious allurements of fashion. Through the dimness of the room glowed brightly the vivid and various colourings of the wall, in all the dazzling frescoes of Pompeian taste. [...]

Her tunic, of a deep amber, which well set off her dark hair and somewhat embrowned complexion, swept in ample folds to her feet, which were cased in slippers, fastened round the slender ankle by white thongs; while a profusion of pearls were embroidered in the slipper itself, which was of purple, and turned slightly upward, as do the Turkish slippers at this day. [...]

To another slave, hitherto idle, was now consigned the charge of arranging the jewels—the ear-rings of pearl (two to each ear)—the massive bracelets of gold—the chain formed of rings of the same metal, to which a talisman cut in crystals was attached—the graceful buckle on the left shoulder, in which was set an exquisite cameo of Psyche—the girdle of purple riband, richly wrought with threads of gold, and clasped by interlacing serpents—and lastly, the various rings, fitted to every joint of the white and slender fingers. The toilet was now arranged according to the last mode of Rome.<sup>165</sup>

Despite the numerous similarities between this passage and the woman represented on the panel (the amber tunic, the ear-rings of pearl, the interlacing serpents...), the mention of the painter's 'mistress' in the RIBA drawing suggests a more plausible identification with Ione, Glaucus' beloved in the novel. In comparison with Julia, descriptions of Ione are rather scarce in the story. Her beauty is simply referred to as 'nymph-like' although we can gather from Glaucus' comments that she has pale skin and dark hair like the woman in the panel.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, Ione is said to 'sing like Sappho' which connects her to the other dark-haired beauty on the Bookcase symbolizing the Pagan origins of Poetry.<sup>167</sup>

However colourful, Bulwer-Lytton's Pompeii was indissociable from its dark fate which the novelist related in apocalyptic tones. Moreover, the display of its remains, whose colours had been preserved by lack of exposure to light, threatened to destroy the city anew. Just as the unearthing of Egyptian sarcophagi accelerated their fading, the colours of Pompeii seemed doomed to return their shadowy state:<sup>168</sup>

His retreat in Pompeii—alas! the colors are faded now, the walls stripped of their paintings!—its main beauty, its elaborate finish of grace and ornament, is gone; yet when first given once more to the day, what eulogies, what wonder, did its minute and glowing decorations create—its paintings—its mosaics!<sup>169</sup>

Poynter later described Pompeian colour as ephemeral, quoting the example of a small painting found at Herculaneum:

---

<sup>165</sup> Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 239-241.

<sup>166</sup> Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 44 and 197.

<sup>167</sup> Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 42.

<sup>168</sup> Green 'Colour transformations of ancient Egyptian pigments', 43.

<sup>169</sup> Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 25.

The painting no longer exists; nothing but a faint image is now to be seen; as is, alas! too frequently the case with the paintings from Pompeii, which were fresh and brilliant when first discovered.<sup>170</sup>

The painter was therefore particularly aware of the shifting temporality of colour. And yet, twenty years earlier his own *Rhodopis*, like Smallfield's panel, revealed a pioneering use of such fading archeological remains to recreate long-lasting colourful fictions of the antique past.

---

<sup>170</sup> Poynter, *Lectures on art*, 67.



## Chapter 4: Coloured bodies: the life and death of sculpture

‘The only difficulty is about the flesh.’  
William Burges, ‘What was done by the Greeks’ (1862)

When the French novelist and *Inspecteur Général des Monuments Historiques*, Prosper Mérimée visited the Fine Art Courts at Sydenham in 1854, he was impressed by the generalised Polychromy adopted by Owen Jones and Matthew Digby Wyatt. As a strong defender and preserver of the colourful frescoes of Saint Savin, and heir to the chromophile Ludovic Vitet, he applauded the experiment, noting however that it did much detriment to the sculpture gallery situated between the Greek and Egyptian courts:

Undoubtedly polychrome architecture causes harm to statues. We involuntarily avert our eyes from them. They seem like ghosts standing among the living. [...] Because of their colour, or rather their lack of it, plaster casts are unpleasant to look at. The matt white, contrasting with the luminous hues of the architecture, offends the eye, as an albino would amongst other men. We feel that something is missing from these statues. [...] If I am not mistaken, this impression was shared by most of the visitors to the Crystal Palace, and I believe that the feeling was all the stronger because they had no preconceptions. I am not of course suggesting that the opinion of the ignorant should prevail (over any other), but I believe it deserves to be quoted for two reasons: first of all because it is almost entirely free from the prejudices that come with the habitual contemplation of monochrome statues which is the main obstacle to paint applied to sculpture; secondly because those who reject polychrome architecture and sculpture on the grounds that it is the dream of some pedantic lovers of antiquity, cannot ignore the effect colour has on honest citizens who cannot be suspected of harbouring archeological passions.<sup>1</sup>

Mérimée’s argumentation is a surprising one. Instead of siding with the authorities on classical sculpture, he endorses the response of the ‘ignorant’ visitors supposedly more admiring of Jones’s attempts at reviving the original polychromy of the Parthenon Frieze or of Egyptian temples than of the spectre-like white statues favoured by Neo-classicist *connoisseurs*.

Mérimée may have had in mind Baudelaire’s 1846 essay ‘Pourquoi la sculpture est ennuyeuse’. In this text, Baudelaire describes sculpture as a ‘Caribbean’ primitive art form, in opposition to painting which he envisaged as a more ‘civilized art form of modern life’.<sup>2</sup> But rather than using polychromy as a sign of this primitive nature (as Lady Eastlake or Richard Westmacott would

---

<sup>1</sup> Mérimée, ‘Architecture et sculpture peintes au château de Sydenham’, 1. My translation.

<sup>2</sup> Østermark-Johansen, ‘Between the Medusean and the Pygmalian’, 27.

later do), colour becomes a hinge between the arts, saving the too ‘isolated’ art of sculpture.<sup>3</sup>

To the Romantic poet, therefore, ‘painted sculptures’:

... are the flesh and body of the monument [...] the pure and simple colours, arranged in a particular chromatic way blend harmoniously with the rest and complement the poetic effect of the whole œuvre.<sup>4</sup>

As Burges preciously kept Mérimée’s article in his 1858 ‘Polychromy’ album, he certainly shared the French author’s support to the daring decoration of the Fine Art Courts which made the white plaster casts of Venus of Milo and other sculptural masterpieces of Antiquity literally pale in comparison with the dazzling Egyptian and Hellenic sculptured reliefs surrounding them. The dream of reviving the flesh and blood of the pagan art of sculpture through colour had become a much-debated topic in the 1850s on both sides of the Channel, for painters, poets and sculptors alike. These discussions reached a new peak in 1862 when John Gibson’s *Tinted Venus* was exhibited alongside the two equally coloured statues of ‘Pandora’ and ‘Cupid Tormenting the Soul’ within a niche designed by Owen Jones. On this polychrome temple was inscribed the following plea in favour of sculptural colouring: *Formas Rerum Obscuras Illustrat Confusus Distinguit Omnes Ornat Colorum Diversitas Sauvis* (‘The Gentle variety of colours clarifies the doubtful form of things, distinguishes the confused and decorates everything’) and *Nec Vita nec Sanitas Nec Pulchritudo Nec Sine Colore Juventus* (‘Without colour there is neither life nor health, neither beauty nor youth’) (FIG).

In this chapter I will analyse the two panels of the Bookcase devoted to Pagan and Christian sculpture in the light of these heated moral and aesthetic debates so as to explore how colour (or its absence) is ‘fundamentally involved in the making of culture from the human body.’<sup>5</sup>

In both panels, love is the force driving the creative act, with on the one hand King Edward I ordering a funeral effigy of his queen Eleanor of Castile from the goldsmith Torel (by Albert Moore) and on the other, Venus giving life to Pygmalion’s beloved statue (by Simeon Solomon) (FIGS). And yet the two images are of a very different nature: the first panel is based on historical evidence and the actual gilt-bronze effigy of Eleanor of Castile in Westminster Abbey whereas Solomon’s Pygmalion illustrates the fictitious eponymous tale in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Like the two panels devoted to architecture, these two allegories of sculpture nonetheless function as pendants, first in terms of colour, as the bright hues of the Pagan panel markedly differ from the predominantly bronze-like and subdued earthy tones of the Christian

---

<sup>3</sup> Baudelaire, *Curiosités Esthétiques* 185.

<sup>4</sup> Baudelaire, *Curiosités Esthétiques*, 186. My translation.

<sup>5</sup> Taussig, *What color is the sacred*, 8.

image. The recumbent Eleonor equally contrasts with the standing statue of Pygmalion. In both instances, however, the male creator is depicted at work on a female statue, assisted in this task by a second creator figure mentioned in the gothic inscriptions: the patron of Torel, King Edward I on the one hand and the goddess of love on the other. The artist is therefore not the only supposed ‘originator’ of Pagan or Christian sculpture, which indirectly posits sculpture as a collaborative art form.

Moreover, as opposed to the Rhodopis and Pompeian panels, the settings of Moore’s and Solomon’s images are surprisingly bare. Apart from the artists’ tools—compass and chisel for Torel; chisel, hammer, bowl of water and sponge for Pygmalion—, no object other than the statue is depicted. The artwork has already materialised into human form whereas Rhodopis’s pyramid and the beloved’s portrait remain at sketch stage in the other two Pagan images.

This does not mean that the sculpture panels have no archaeological dimension. On the contrary these two images reveal Burges’s intense involvement in contemporary debates about sculptural polychromy, whether antique, medieval or modern, debates which had direct implications on whether sculpture was considered or not a ‘dead’ art in the industrial age.

## **I *Circumlitio*?**

### **1) The textual and material sources of sculptural polychromy**

In his essay on the painted statues of Sydenham, Mérimée contrasts chromophobic neo-classical prejudice with the ‘archaeological passions’ of chromophiles such as Owen Jones in England, J.I. Hittorff in France and Gottfried Semper in Germany.<sup>6</sup> But far from being limited to archaeological circles, the colour of statues had become by the mid-nineteenth century a much wide-ranging and ideologically-charged issue.

Sculptural polychromy, which was generalised in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, started to decline in the Renaissance, reaching a colourless peak in the eighteenth century. In his *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764), Winckelmann himself claimed that: ‘Colour contributes to beauty, but it is not beauty itself, though it generally enhances beauty and its forms. Since white is the color that reflects the most rays of light, and thus is most easily perceived, a beautiful body will be all the more beautiful the whiter it is.’<sup>7</sup> Colour, a feature of modern art, and of

---

<sup>6</sup> Hittorff is also mentioned in Mérimée’s essay. Mérimée, ‘Architecture et sculpture peintes au château de Sydenham’, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, 195.

painting in particular, was then believed to jar with the ideal of repose and grandeur conveyed by the impeccable marmoreal bodies of antique sculpture.<sup>8</sup>

The rediscovery of sculptural polychromy started with the first excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum in 1748 which Winckelmann witnessed. Although Pompeii used to be a Greek colony, the findings which unveiled vividly coloured wall paintings, were more often than not interpreted as the sign of Roman decadence rather than as evidence of a controversial Hellenic chromophilia. As excavations intensified in the first half of the nineteenth century, colour became increasingly emulated by artists, in particular painters. Further confirmation of the ancients' taste for colour had come with the publication in 1762 of the painter James Stuart' and the architect Nicholas Revett's account of the archaeological remains at Athens.<sup>9</sup> This was followed in 1814 by the *Jupiter Olympien* of Quatremère de Quincy who first coined the term 'polychrome' in reference to ancient statues.<sup>10</sup> That same year, E. D. Clarke used the scaffoldings left by Lord Elgin on the Acropolis to observe what was left of the statues of the Parthenon which he claimed to have been 'originally painted and gilded ; and however contrary the practice may seem to our notions of taste, a custom of painting statues, and of gilding the hair of images representing celestial beings, has continued.'<sup>11</sup>

A follower of Quatremère de Quincy, C.R. Cockerell published in 1819 an article on the archaeological fragments which he had uncovered in Aegina: 'the colours served as the means of distinguishing the several parts, and heightening the effect by a delicate variety of tones, so as to relieve what might otherwise be inanimate and monotonous.'<sup>12</sup> For Cockerell, colour was central to the Hellenic conception of sculpture.

A passionate archaeologist-architect himself, Burges was well acquainted with these volumes which are all listed in his library holdings. Unlike Winckelmann, his was a first-hand experience of Greek sculpture and architecture, which he had admired *in situ*:

Some four years since it was my good fortune to see the Acropolis at Athens with my bodily eyes; and never did I find a greater difference between studying from prints and from the building itself, for those prints I had hitherto seen were either

---

<sup>8</sup> On the identification of painting with colour and modernity, see Lichtenstein, *La Tache aveugle, Essai sur les relations de la peinture et de la sculpture à l'âge moderne*, 161.

<sup>9</sup> Revett and Stuart, *The Antiquities of Athens, Measured and Delineated*, (1762) published with the support of the 'Society of Dilettanti'. This book featured in Burges's library (LS 1882, 14).

<sup>10</sup> Burges's owned Quatremère's *Dissertation du Temple de Minerve* (1825) (LS 1918, 22). On Quatremère and the rediscovery of ancient polychromy, see Grand-Clément, 'Couleur et esthétique classique au XIXème siècle,' 146-7.

<sup>11</sup> Clarke, *Travels in Various Countries of Europe, Asia and Africa* (1816) quoted in Billot, 'Recherches aux XVIIIème et XIXème siècles sur la polychromie de l'architecture grecque', 68-9.

<sup>12</sup> C. R. Cockerell, 'On the Aegina Marbles', *Journal of Science and the Arts*, 6 (1819), 341. Cockerell also contributed to the supplementary volume to Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens*, of which Burges owned a copy. See also LS 1882, 13.

in painfully thin lines or so elaborately shaded that the beautiful gold-coloured columns of the Parthenon looked as if they had been put up the chimney and well blackened.<sup>13</sup>

Because black and white prints conveyed a false colourless image of Greek sculptural reliefs, new means of unveiling the original colours of archeological remains became necessary. Burges thus embraced chromolithography which the new generation of chromophiles like J.I. Hittorff and Owen Jones actively promoted. His reference to the ‘blackened’ columns may also be an allusion to the controversial cleaning of the British Museum marbles which the coal heating used in the Elgin Room had considerably darkened. An anonymous letter was even sent to the *Times* in 1858 complaining: ‘Sir, they are scrubbing the Elgin Marbles! Will their next act be to fill up their abrasions and have them nearly mended? Now, Sir, I am no worshipper of dirt, but I do say that the tone given by time to antique sculpture [...] is absolutely essential to the harmony of its effect.’<sup>14</sup> Burges seems to have been very sensitive to the fate of the traces of polychromy still visible on the marbles:

In the Elgin Marbles, in the British Museum, there were but few remains of colour; possibly owing to the circumstance that the blocks had been boiled down in soap-grease in order to take casts from them ; but they were marks of holes in them where bronze bits and ornaments had been inserted. [...] There was reason to believe that the ancient Greeks used colour as well as gold in the ornamentation of their statues.<sup>15</sup>

For the Franco-German architect Hittorff ancient polychromy should be actively preserved, reconstructed and even imitated by contemporary artists. Although his ground-breaking chromolithographed work, *L'architecture polychrome chez les Grecs* was only published in 1851, Hittorff's reputation as a staunch chromophile had been established since the 1830s (FIG). In 1836 he was invited by the RIBA to discuss the presence of colour on the Parthenon marbles. In the following decades, key figures brought their support to Hittorff's theory of a generalised use of polychromy in Greek sculpture, notably Owen Jones who reproduced a vividly coloured Parthenon frieze for the Greek Court at Sydenham (FIG). Despite Mérimée's positive ‘impressions’, the experiment was not well received by connoisseurs and the general

---

<sup>13</sup> Burges, ‘What was done by the Greeks’, 426.

<sup>14</sup> Jenkins, *Cleaning and Controversy*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> See the *Builder*'s report on Burges's 1862 lecture on ‘Pagan Art’, 368.

public alike. As Kate Nichols shrewdly remarks, the fact that no specific photograph of the painted frieze survives is a sure sign that this was *not* a souvenir that was much sought after.<sup>16</sup> Jones even had to vindicate his chromatic choices in a text entitled *An Apology for the Colouring of the Greek Court* for which he received the supportive contributions of Semper who had just spent four years in London working on *The Four Elements of Architecture*, of the classical and Shakespearean scholar W. Watkiss Lloyd (a former collaborator of Cockerell's) and of the philosopher G.H. Lewes.<sup>17</sup> An extract from the 1836 committee report on the Elgin Marbles to which Hittorff had taken part was also added to the *Apology*. While most of the *Apology* focused on 'material evidence' of ancient polychromy, Watkiss Lloyd and Lewes discussed classical textual sources regarding ancient colouring practices. Prior to the advent of archaeology and anthropology as sciences in their own right, the Greek heritage had indeed been primarily understood from a philological perspective. Jones therefore knew that the battle for colour also had to be fought on textual grounds.

But the problem was the paucity of sources which chromophobes like the British Museum Keeper Richard Westmacott Junior interpreted as a sign that colour was of no interest to the ancient Greeks. Hittorff claimed the exact opposite:

I explained the silence of Winckelmann and his followers as to the use of colouring in ancient architecture by the fact that there was almost no information about this in the works of antique authors. And I believed this was the case because the application of polychromy was generalized. By no means exceptional, it did not, therefore, deserve any specific attention.<sup>18</sup>

One source did however become the focus of debated translations and exegesis: a passage from Pliny's *Natural History* evoking the painter Nicias's mysterious '*circumlitio*' in his collaboration with the sculptor Praxiteles:

And there is a passage in Pliny which is decisive, as soon as we understand the allusion. Speaking of Nicias (lib. xxxv. cap. 11), he says, that Praxiteles, when asked which of his marble works best satisfied him, replied, 'Those which Nicias has had under his hands.' 'So much,' adds Pliny, "'did he prize the finishing of Nicias'—*tantum circumlitioni ejus tribuebat*."

The meaning of this passage hangs on the word *circumlitio*. Winckelmann follows the mass of commentators in understanding this as referring to some mode of polishing the statues; but Quatremère de Quincy, in his magnificent work 'Le Jupiter Olympien,' satisfactorily shows this to be untenable, not only because no sculptor could think of preferring such of his statues as had been better polished,

---

<sup>16</sup> Nichols, *Greece and Rome at the Crystal Palace*, 76.

<sup>17</sup> On Semper and colour, see Kalinowski et al., *Gottfried Semper, habiter la couleur* (2017).

<sup>18</sup> Hittorff, *Restitution du temple d'Empédocle à Sélinonte*, 13-14. My translation.

but also because Nicias being a painter, not a sculptor, his services must have been those of a painter. [...]

Even Winckelmann ('Geschichte der Kunst,' buch I. kap. 2), after noting how the ancients were accustomed to dress their statues, adds, 'This gave rise to the painting of those parts of the marble statues which represented the clothes, as may be seen in the Diana found at Herculanaeum in 1760. The hair is blonde; the draperies white, with a triple border, one of gold, the other of purple, with festoons of flowers, the third plain purple.'

There are still traces visible of gilding in the hair of statues. Even the Venus de' Medici has such. And the bored ears speak plainly of earrings.<sup>19</sup>

This passage from Lewes's 1854 essay on the 'historical evidence' of ancient polychromy brings Winckelmann back into the discussion—not as an advocate of neoclassical whiteness, but as a pioneer commentator of Pompeian colour. A similar reference to Winckelmann can be found in John Gibson's defense of his *Tinted Venus*.<sup>20</sup>

The display of Gibson's statue at the 1862 Exhibition certainly gave a new impetus to Victorian debates about Pliny's *circumlitio* (FIG). That year, Burges offered his own interpretation of the passage:

The only difficulty is about the flesh. There is an obscure passage in Pliny in which mention is made of the *circumlitio* of Nicias who, it appears, was employed upon the statues of Phidias. This, by some people, has been supposed to mean simple polishing ; by others a polishing with wax, after colour had been rubbed in ; but most probably it simply refers to his skill in executing the pupils of the eyes, the eyebrows, the thin line which marked the eyelid, the lips, and indeed, the delicate painting which was generally demanded in works of this kind. It is by no means improbable that a delicate transparent varnish was put over all the carnations, so as to give the appearance of life, and yet not to destroy the grain of the marble.<sup>21</sup>

Contrary to Lewes who discussed Nicias's *circumlitio* in purely aesthetic terms, Burges emphasized the life-like effect achieved by colour, in keeping with the polychrome experimentations of Gibson and Jones, which Burges's confusion of Praxiteles with Phidias here indirectly brings to mind.

By 1862 the public display of the tinted statue in Jones's 'Pompeian red' niche, had given a moral turn to debates about sculptural polychromy. W.M. Rossetti, who had repeated the Nicias anecdote in his own essay on the Fine Art Courts Sydenham, rose twice to the defense of Gibson's Venus: 'we are not aware' he claimed, 'that the colouring of Mr. Gibson's Venus

---

<sup>19</sup> Lewes, 'Historical Evidence', in *Apology*, 31-32.

<sup>20</sup> Gibson quoted in Eastlake, *Life of John Gibson*, 210. On the overlooked chromophilia of Winckelmann, see Primavesi, 'Artemis, Her Shrine, and Her Smile', 27-77.

<sup>21</sup> Burges, 'What was done by the Greeks', 426.

entailed the slightest difficulty in judging of the fineness of its material.’<sup>22</sup> Rossetti particularly objected ‘to the dragging-in of morals, head and shoulder into the discussion’ by the likes of Westmacott who denied the material and textual evidence of *circumlitio* as involving extensive colouring.<sup>23</sup> Since its first display in Rome, Gibson’s translation of antique colour into contemporary artistic practice was still causing outrage amongst neoclassical circles. The reasons for this rejection were both moral and aesthetic: first because the flesh-like colouring of statues was thought to arouse the basest desires among the viewers and secondly because colour made the sculptured form stray from ideal beauty and resemble a morbid wax-figure. In both instances it was the dangerously realistic effect of the application of colour on sculptural bodies which was called into question.

## 2) Gibson and the colours of desire

Both chromophiles and chromophobes agreed that colour had a very different effect whether it was applied onto architectural elements or onto a sculptural body. In architecture, colour was used primarily as a structural device, whereas polychromy *animated* statues. The Christian or Pagan context was of equal importance: contrary to the ‘safe’ polychromy of fully clothed medieval statues, the colouring of the nude bodies of Greek gods and goddesses appeared as dangerously alluring.

In a lecture delivered at the Royal Academy during his tenure as Professor of Sculpture, the sculptor Henry Weekes—father to Burges’s friend the painter Frederick Weekes—asserted that ‘the absence of colour in a statue is, in short, one of the peculiarities that remove it so entirely from common Nature that the most vulgarly constituted mind may contemplate it without its causing any feeling of a sensuous kind.’<sup>24</sup> This was also the core of Westmacott’s argumentation against polychromy described as a ‘meretricious accessory’ as well as ‘means of corruption.’<sup>25</sup>

Secondary but dangerous: this paradoxical combining of devaluation and overvaluation is often found in the gendered rhetoric of the chromophobe.<sup>26</sup> ‘Meretricious’, derived from the Latin *meretrix* signifying ‘harlot, prostitute’, implicitly likens colour to a form of make-up, the

---

<sup>22</sup> Rossetti, *Fine Art, Chiefly Contemporary*, 66 and 70.

<sup>23</sup> Rossetti, *Fine Art, Chiefly Contemporary*, 69. See Westmacott, ‘On polychromy in sculpture, or colouring statues’, 230: ‘Now here is not one single expression that can be twisted into meaning painting, or colour; and certainly the passage cannot by any ingenuity be made to mean such painting or tinting with different colours as painting-sculptors are advocating. The great probability is that it refers to a most careful perfection of surface.’

<sup>24</sup> Henry Weekes quoted in Hatt, ‘Transparent forms’, 186.

<sup>25</sup> Westmacott, ‘On polychromy in sculpture, or colouring statues’, 231.

<sup>26</sup> Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 23.



alluring *pharmaka* used by women of loose morals. In the *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid was already encouraging women to fake their blushing via such deceptive means like Venus applying *rouge* to the cheeks of Pygmalion's sculpture in Solomon's panel.<sup>27</sup> The adjective 'meretricious' was also applied by a critic from the *Athenaeum* to Gibson's Venus, although the statue was only 'tinted', a term most certainly used by Gibson to make the 'delicate' colouring of his sculpture more acceptable.<sup>28</sup> But for the *Art Journal*, Gibson had crossed the line between high and low art:

We consider the adjunct of colour [...] as a departure from the original high purpose of sculpture, which never aimed at more than an abstract type of the subject represented in form and expression ; its end being to idealise rather than to realise.<sup>29</sup>

Realistic colour, as opposed to abstract form, turned sculptural bodies into fleshly, sensual creatures. Colour points to what Jean Baudrillard calls '*le corps réalisé*', no longer staged and artfully displayed but offered to sensual, if not sexual consumption.<sup>30</sup> No wonder Gibson himself succumbed to the charm of his Venus:

When all my labour was complete I often sat down quietly and alone before my work, meditating upon it and consulting my own simple feelings. I endeavoured to keep myself free from self-delusion as to the effect of the colouring. I said to myself 'Here is a little nearer approach to life — it is therefore more impressive — yes — yes indeed she seems an ethereal being with her blue eyes fixed upon me!' At moments I forgot that I was gazing at my own production ; there I sat before her, long and often. How was I ever to part with her !<sup>31</sup>

Here the shift to the present tense and the chaotic punctuation suggest a sensual disorder blurring the boundary between reality and art, as in the myth of Pygmalion, which Lady Eastlake explicitly referred to in her 1870 edition of the *Life* of the sculptor.<sup>32</sup> But Gibson himself certainly had the Ovidian text in mind as he explained having 'tinted the flesh like warm ivory', i.e. the material from which Pygmalion made his statue, which, due to its animal provenance, is both particularly soft and akin to flesh.<sup>33</sup> The parallel went quite far as Gibson refused to part with his statue for over four years:

I retained the Venus in my studio for four years after she was completed—a proceeding on my part which put Mrs. Preston's patience to a severe trial. I received several angry letters from that amiable lady. At last she asked me, point blank,

---

<sup>27</sup> Ovid, 'make yourself blush by ars', quoted in Richlin, *Arguments with silence*, 172.

<sup>28</sup> See Hatt in *Sculpture Victorious*, 186.

<sup>29</sup> *Art Journal*, 'Tinted Sculpture' (July 1862), quoted in Smith, *The Victorian Nude*, 121.

<sup>30</sup> Baudrillard, *Mots de Passe*, 33-34.

<sup>31</sup> Eastlake, *Life of John Gibson*, 211-2.

<sup>32</sup> On 'Gibson as Pygmalion', see Eastlake, *Life of John Gibson*, 211.

<sup>33</sup> Eastlake, *Life of John Gibson*, 211.

whether I did not think I was using her very ill. I immediately confessed my sin and replied, ‘There is no doubt that I am using you abominably ill — yes — but the truth is I cannot screw up my courage to send away my Goddess. It is almost as difficult for me to part with her as it would be for Mr. Preston to part with you.’<sup>34</sup>

Having fallen prey to the ‘idolatry’ which chromophobes often connected with the primitive love of polychromy, Gibson considered his statue as his wife.<sup>35</sup> This ‘sinful’ agalmatophilia he himself connected with his ‘depraved’ love of colour, thereby strangely confirming Westmacott’s accusations of ‘corruption’ against ‘Polychromists.’<sup>36</sup>

Because of its connection with the ‘erotic’ and the ‘sensual’, colour evidently played an important role as ‘middle terms in the system-defining what can or cannot be seen, differentiating allowable and illicit representations of the female body, and categorizing respectable and non-respectable forms of cultural consumption.’<sup>37</sup> In a word, ‘colour sexualize[s] the nude’ in two paradoxical ways: by uncovering the flesh and/or by covering the body with a form of make-up.<sup>38</sup>

### 3) Waxworks: The illusion of life

According to Pliny, Nicias had used the wax-based technique of encaustic to ‘finish’ Praxiteles’ statues. For chromophiles this meant that colour was preserved and made more luminous by the application of wax.<sup>39</sup> Gibson himself followed the ancient technique of applying paint mixed with hot wax to achieve his flesh-like results. Some, however, complained that this was most probably ‘tobacco juice’, i.e. a modern, vulgar means at odds with the impeccable perfection of antique sculpture.<sup>40</sup> For chromophobes, *circumlitio* simply implied a form of ‘rubbing’ which had nothing to do with colour but was simply used to highlight the natural luminosity of the stone.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Eastlake, *Life of John Gibson*, 213.

<sup>35</sup> On polychromy and idolatry, see Hatt, *Sculpture Victorious*, 187. Gibson’s anecdote also recalls Mérimée’s own tale ‘La Venus d’Ille’ (1835).

<sup>36</sup> ‘My eyes have now become so depraved that I cannot bear to see a statue without colouring.’ Eastlake *Life of John Gibson*, 128.

<sup>37</sup> Nead, ‘The Female Nude’, 375.

<sup>38</sup> Hatt, ‘Transparent forms’, 186.

<sup>39</sup> Lewes, ‘Historical Evidence’, 32: ‘Nicias was an *encaustic painter*, and hence it seems clear that his *circumlitio*—his mode of finishing the statues, so highly prized by Praxiteles—must have been the application of encaustic painting to those parts which the sculptor wished to have ornamented.’

<sup>40</sup> See J. Beavington Atkinson’s description of Gibson’s Venus in 1865: ‘Her heavy English limbs, stained, as was currently reported—whether in jest or not, we cannot say—with tobacco juice, to suggest the rosy-tinted Aphrodite... a work of unmitigated vulgarity’, in ‘Miss Hosmer’s statue of Zenobia’, 50. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who must have seen the statue in Rome, has one character of *The Marble Faun* describe ‘Mr. Gibson’s coloured Venuses’ as ‘stained with tobacco-juice.’ Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun*, 96.

<sup>41</sup> Westmacott, ‘On polychromy in sculpture, or colouring statues’, 230.

Classicists and archeologists analyzing ancient colouring practices have since confirmed that the application of wax was central to the Greek *ganôsis* (to render luminous) and *kosmesis* (to put in order, to ornament) as means of *perfecting* the polychromy of statues and sculptured reliefs. This technique is notably attested on the *kore* of the Parthenon. The first step of *kosmèsis agalmatôn* intended for the divine statues of Hera and Artemis involved rubbing the painted statue with oil and wax before perfuming the marble. The second step of the *kosmèsis* consisted in ornamenting the statues with jewellery and clothes.<sup>42</sup> This is very close to what Ovid describes in the tale of Pygmalion whose translation by John Dryden was still widely consulted throughout the nineteenth century:

With flatt'ry now he seeks her mind to move,  
 And now with gifts (the pow'rful bribes of love),  
 He furnishes her closet first; and fills  
 The crowded shelves with rarities of shells;  
 Adds orient pearls, which from the conchs he drew,  
 And all the sparkling stones of various hue:  
 And parrots, imitating human tongue,  
 And singing-birds in silver cages hung:  
 And ev'ry fragrant flow'r, and od'rous green,  
 Were sorted well, with lumps of amber laid between:  
 Rich fashionable robes her person deck,  
 Pendants her ears, and pearls adorn her neck:  
 Her taper'd fingers too with rings are grac'd,  
 And an embroider'd zone surrounds her slender waste.  
 Thus like a queen array'd, so richly dress'd,  
 Beauteous she shew'd, but naked shew'd the best.<sup>43</sup>

In Ovid's tale, the Greek sculptor therefore decorates his statue as a contemporary devotee would have done with an *agalma* of a goddess. Similarly, Solomon's panel clothes the sculpture with a coloured 'embroider'd zone', a possible reference to the traces of polychromy which were often better preserved in the folds of antique draperies. Ovid also mentions flesh-like 'pliant wax' (*cera*, l.285) as the statue comes to life:

The pleasing task he fails not to renew;  
 Soft, and more soft at ev'ry touch it grew;  
 Like pliant wax, when chasing hands reduce  
 The former mass to form, and frame for use.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> For a full description of this process, see Grand-Clément, *La fabrique des couleurs*, 277.

<sup>43</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X, l.390-405, 255.

<sup>44</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X, l.438-41, 256.

Like ivory, wax uncannily resembles human flesh. But for the Victorians, wax statues more often conjured up images of death than of life. While corrupting fleshliness was the argument most often hurled at advocates of colouring statues, the comparison with morbid wax models was a recurrent other.<sup>45</sup> George Scharf nonetheless tried to distinguish Gibson's 'perfectly transparent' statue from the 'great wax dolls with real silk or velvet, real lace, and real glittering trinkets' which he acknowledged as objectionable, possibly in reference to Madame Tussaud's waxworks which were at the time considered as the popular 'low' version of a sculpture gallery.<sup>46</sup> These wax figures bore the taint of a vulgar form of 'realism', a '*réalisme horrible*' even, given how Marie Tussaud started her trade: by taking wax portraits taken from bloody decapitated heads during the French Revolution (FIG).<sup>47</sup>

Prior to her revolutionary portraits, Tussaud had been trained by the Swiss doctor Philippe Curtius who used wax modelling as a means to study anatomy. Several ceroplasticians were then operating throughout Europe, notably at the Royal Museum of Physics and Natural History in Florence, (known as 'La Specola') under the directorship of the naturalist-anatomist Felice Fontana. Although the wax figures produced at La Specola were primarily for medical and didactic purposes, they were also intended to be aesthetically pleasing. For instance, Fontana employed artists like Clemente Susini to model anatomical 'Venuses' (FIG). These were half way between antique sculptures and recumbent medical effigies which could be *sadistically* opened up as noted by Georges Didi-Huberman.<sup>48</sup> Moore's panel strangely fuses the two aesthetic traditions by having Torel, chisel in hand, inspect—or dissect?—his modello of Queen Eleanor. These 'Florentine' Venuses travelled across Europe, including to London. Throughout the nineteenth century, the line between sculpture and the craft of ceroplastics remained tenuous. John Towne's dermatological models were even displayed in the fine art section of the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1855.<sup>49</sup>

The blurring of life and dead had always been 'the very stuff of ideal sculpture's narrative and iconographic repertoires.'<sup>50</sup> But Mme Tussaud's collection included plaster casts intended to emphasize the greater life-likeness of her own wax figures. It even had its own 'Hall of Kings,' like at Westminster Abbey, where stone and bronze statues fully clothed wax effigies from the 17<sup>th</sup> century had long cohabited (FIG). Despite being more colourful and life-like, these wax

---

<sup>45</sup> Papet, 'La sculpture polychrome en France 1850-1910', 25-26.

<sup>46</sup> Scharf quoted in Hatt, 'Transparent forms', 191.

<sup>47</sup> Yarrington, 'Under the Spell of Madame Tussaud', 85.

<sup>48</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Ouvrir Venus*, 101-4.

<sup>49</sup> Alberti, 'Wax Bodies: Art and Anatomy in Victorian Medical Museums', 14.

<sup>50</sup> Hatt, 'Transparent forms', 192.

figures appeared to visitors like the poet Edith Cooper as morbid ‘cop[ies] of some corruptible face’.<sup>51</sup> In his handbook to the Medieval Court at Sydenham, Digby Wyatt briefly alludes to these ‘waxwork figures of unenviable notoriety’ shockingly housed in the same sacred sanctuary as the precious gilt-bronze effigies of Eleanor and Henry III, although, ironically, both statues were originally based on a wax modello.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Lady Eastlake thought that ‘the colouring’ of the Anglo-Saxon effigies presented at Sydenham created ‘a coarseness of illusion’ which even ‘Madame Tussaud would disdain’ and which she believed to be ‘derogatory alike to Stothard and Phidias’.<sup>53</sup>

In the guidebook to Mme Tussaud’s waxworks, the Pygmalion myth appears as a recurrent sub-text. First as a humorous warning the visitor passing the figure of the ageing coquette Madame Sappé: ‘we have read of a young man having become enamoured of a statue ; we caution young gentlemen to beware the same does not happen to them, while gazing on the charms of the interesting Madame Sappé.’<sup>54</sup> But also, more indirectly with three quotations to Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale* –based on Ovid’s story–including the passage in V,3 when the ‘dead likeness’ of Hermione comes back to life: ‘the very life seems warm upon her lips’.<sup>55</sup> Owen Jones, who admired the play, even had a selection of passages lavishly illustrated with chromolithographic plates in 1866 (FIG).<sup>56</sup> In the original background to the panel, which infrared viewing has revealed, a curtain similarly *staged* the metamorphosis of Pygmalion’s statue (FIG).

## II ‘See Ovid’: the metamorphoses of the Pagan body

In the RIBA drawing for Solomon Pygmalion panel, Burges’s debt to Ovid is explicitly acknowledged (FIG): ‘Pygmalion was a sculptor who fell in love with a statue he had made. At his prayer Venus changed the statue into a woman (See Ovid.)’

Contrary to the Vasari panel where the mention ‘see Vasari’ was an invitation to go back to the text of the *Vitae* rather than to Vasari’s own pictorial production, here ‘see Ovid’ references both the text of the *Metamorphoses* and its rich pictorial afterlife. The story of Pygmalion is indeed one of Ovid’s most ‘scopic’ tale, a source of inspiration for countless poems, statues and

---

<sup>51</sup> Cooper quoted in Maxwell ‘Michael Field, death, and the effigy,’ 31. On these funeral effigies, see in particular Mortimer, ‘The History of the Collection’, 21-28.

<sup>52</sup> Digby Wyatt, *Handbook to the Medieval Court at Sydenham*, 33. On Torel’s use of a wax modello and of the *cire perdue* technique, see Burges, ‘Tombs’, 149 and 154.

<sup>53</sup> Lady Eastlake quoted in Moser, *Designing Antiquity*, 163.

<sup>54</sup> *Biographical and descriptive sketches of the distinguished characters which compose the unrivalled exhibition of Mme Tussaud and sons* quoted in Yarrington, ‘Under the Spell of Madame Tussaud’, 88.

<sup>55</sup> Yarrington, ‘Under the Spell of Madame Tussaud’, 87.

<sup>56</sup> On this illustrated text, see Ribeyrol, ‘From Galatea to Tanagra: Victorian translations of the controversial colours of Greek sculpture’, 175-190.

paintings. Although this text is often read as a myth of the artist, Pygmalion remains surprisingly passive throughout the tale. Throughout the narrative, the sculptor appears more as a viewer than as a creator, which in turn casts the reader into a voyeur.<sup>57</sup> The moment of transformation itself is even described at greater length than the actual making of the statue. Similarly, in Solomon's panel, Venus takes over as the creator of life. Pygmalion still holds the chisel, but his back is turned to us as he watches the goddess of love paint the sculpture's face with her brush. The statue's lips are already red as in the following passage from Ovid which first signals the transformation: 'He kisses her white Lips, renews the Bliss,/ And looks, and thinks they redden at the Kiss'.<sup>58</sup> But in the extensive criticism on the tale, colour is only rarely analysed as a crucial moment and means of the statue's metamorphosis. The application of red to the cheeks seems, however, to have been Burges's invention, emphasizing the crucial collaboration of painter and sculptor in bringing the inert stone to life. In this section I wish to focus on the numerous implications of Venus' act of painting which Burges surprisingly chose to illustrate the origins of sculpture. I will first discuss Burges's interest in colour as a means of 'transition' not only from stone to flesh, but also from Pagan to Christian as he drew on medieval precedents to construct his own interpretation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Then I will compare the panel with other poetic and pictorial readings of the tale from the 1860s where fleshly colour is given pride of place and finally I will show how Solomon's artfully blushing statue can be interpreted as a plea in favour of 'art hid with art', thanks to a complex interweaving of pictorial and sculptural references.<sup>59</sup>

### 1) A 'transition' from Pagan to Christian

Like many of his contemporaries, Burges was familiar with his 'Latin classics' although no work by Ovid is explicitly listed in his library holdings—possibly because this was too obvious a source.<sup>60</sup> While Burges could certainly read Ovid in Latin, which, like Rossetti he studied at King's College School, his interpretation of Ovid's text was primarily mediated, as was often the case at the time.<sup>61</sup> Just like Ovid's own version was compiled from earlier tales, the Pygmalion story was constantly refashioned over time.<sup>62</sup> Burges himself acknowledged the *Metamorphoses* as a palimpsest, coloured, in particular, by its Christian commentaries. The

---

<sup>57</sup> See Elsner, 'Re-viewing Pygmalion', 165.

<sup>58</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X, ll.430-1, 256.

<sup>59</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X, l.372, 255.

<sup>60</sup> In Burges' library holdings (LS 1918, 23) features 'A box of 'Fables and Novels' contain[ing] 'Latin classics'.

<sup>61</sup> Vance, *The Victorians and Ancient Rome*, 154.

<sup>62</sup> On earlier versions of the Pygmalion story, see Joshua, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, 1-6.

period from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries was the first golden age of Ovid's reception, the nineteenth century being the second. According to Charles Martindale, Ovid 'had a more wide-ranging impact on the art and culture of the West than any other classical poet.'<sup>63</sup> This is particularly true of the Pygmalion story which was read in Christian doctrine as an allegory of the relationship between God and his Creation. But rather than using this medieval reading as a means to negotiate the tension between classical learning and Christian ideals which obsessed his fellow Victorians, Burges embraced the aesthetic potentialities of merging a Pagan story with medieval motifs:<sup>64</sup> 'I suspect that the metamorphoses of Ovid and the stories of Pliny will be found to be the key to the meaning of many of those strange animals we so often meet with in illuminations, and which appear to be there for no other purpose, and to mean nothing'.<sup>65</sup> Burges is here referring to *L'Ovide Moralisé* which he had perused at the Library of Rouen and which Helen Cooper claims to have brought 'the Christianizing Ovid to its culmination'.<sup>66</sup> The influence of this 70,000 line French octosyllabic version of the *Metamorphoses* on Burges was essentially visual, as shown by Stacy Marks's Arachne, Syrinx and the Pierides on the base of the Bookcase which are directly inspired by a highly coloured page of this manuscript (FIGS). The hybrid figures are all taken from Ovid to illustrate 'the metamorphoses relating to architecture' which Burges considered the mother of all arts, including weaving and music. Burges seemed to have been particularly drawn to the idea of transformation as creative principle—what he calls the 'transitional' in a 1861 discussion on Pagan-Christian art at the RIBA.<sup>67</sup> Rather than considering sculpture as a static, 'isolated' art form, Burges embraced hybrid, metamorphic, if not 'grotesque', forms, with colour playing a key role in the transitional process. But contrary to Ruskin's exclusively Gothic conception of the grotesque, Burges saw such transitions as a means to reconcile the Hellenic and Medieval heritage:

It is for the most part generally supposed that the authors and artists of the middle ages occupied themselves solely with Biblical and contemporaneous events to the exclusion of the history, poetry and mythology of their Pagan forefathers. If however, the literature and arts of the 12th, 13th, 14th and 15th century be carefully examined, we find that the case is quite the reverse, and that there is scarcely a single author who does not quote either his classic predecessors or make their myths and histories the subject of his own work.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Martindale, *Ovid Renewed*, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Goldhill, *The Buried Life of Things*, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Burges, 'Paganism in the Middle Ages', 214.

<sup>66</sup> Cooper, 'Chaucer and Ovid', in *Ovid Renewed*, 74.

<sup>67</sup> Burges, Discussion on Pagan-Christian art, 163.

<sup>68</sup> Burges, 'Paganism in the middle ages', 205.

But Burges was familiar with other medieval literary sources shaped by Ovid, such as Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose* which influenced *l'Ovide Moralisé*. Burges owned two modern editions of Lorris and Jean de Meung's *Roman de la Rose* and a rare fourteenth century illuminated version now in the British Library.<sup>69</sup> In this manuscript, which Burges acquired in 1874 and asked the painter Horatio Walter Lonsdale to restore, Pygmalion is depicted kneeling in front of his statue in a posture partly reminiscent of that adopted in Solomon's panel (FIG). Burges would have known the numerous medieval versions of the Ovidian myth including possibly this other fourteenth century volume now in the National Library of Wales where Pygmalion is depicted as a painter colouring the face of his statue *before* Venus brings her back to life (FIG). This surprisingly cosmetic use of colour (shunned in the Middle Ages as artful disguise akin to 'bodily prostitution') could have inspired Solomon who was also consulting medieval manuscripts at the time.<sup>70</sup> The motif of the artful blush can be found in other tales immediately preceding and following that of Pygmalion which according to Joshua is too often separated from the larger context of the narrative of the *Metamorphoses* in modern critical accounts of the myth.<sup>71</sup> In the Middle Ages, on the contrary, these stories were glossed as interconnected. In Ovid's text, the Pygmalion tale can certainly be read as a 'transition' between the tale of the Propoetides and that of Myrrha. The Propoetides became prostitutes because they refused to worship Venus. 'Unknowing how to blush' naturally, they turned to stone:

The blasphemous Propoetides deny'd  
 Worship of Venus, and her Pow'r defy'd:  
 But soon that Pow'r they felt, the first that sold  
 Their lewd Embraces to the World for Gold.  
 Unknowing how to blush, and shameless grown,  
 A small Transition changes 'em to Stone.<sup>72</sup>

A very different 'transition' takes place in the tale of Myrrha, the granddaughter of Pygmalion, who falls in love with her father (an incestuous variation on Pygmalion sleeping with his creation), and is said to constantly 'blush' with shame—which Cinyras is deceived into thinking as a sign of her 'maiden modesty'. Another possible reference to the tale of Myrrha in Solomon's panel is the 'salacious goat', Venus tutelary animal, signifying lust.<sup>73</sup> Finally,

---

<sup>69</sup> Burges, LS 1918, 11. In 1874, Burges brought from Quaritch a fourteenth-century manuscript of the *Roman de la Rose*, now in the British Library (Add MS 31840). See Burges, *Abstract of diaries*, 1874.

<sup>70</sup> Tertullian 'The alluring display of beauty is invariably joined with and appropriate to bodily prostitution', quoted in Richlin, *Arguments with silence*, 182.

<sup>71</sup> Joshua, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, 3.

<sup>72</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X, ll.350-5, 254.

<sup>73</sup> Ovid X, l.502, 258.



Burges's inclusion of a pomegranate tree, sacred to Aphrodite as a symbol of life and fertility, may evoke the last metamorphosis of Book X, that of Adonis—son of Myrrha and Cinyras—into an anemone, whose crimson colour is compared to that of the rind (*cortice*) of the pomegranate (*granum* here translated by Dryden as Punic apple):

Then on the blood sweet nectar she bestows,  
The scented blood in little bubbles rose:  
Little as rainy drops, which flutt'ring fly,  
Born by the winds, along a low'ring sky.  
Short time ensu'd, 'till where the blood was shed,  
A flow'r began to rear its purple head:  
Such, as on Punick apples is reveal'd,  
Or in the filmy rind but half conceal'd.  
Still here the Fate of lovely forms we see,  
So sudden fades the sweet Anemonie.<sup>74</sup>

Although in the late 1850s-early 1860s Solomon was still a painter of Christian subjects, Burges's aesthetic merging of Pagan and Medieval motifs may have directed his work into a new Hellenizing direction. The Aesthetic critic Walter Pater particularly commended his 1867 oil of *Bacchus* exhibited at the Royal Academy of 1868, as a tribute to 'the god of the bitterness of wine', a romantic, melancholy figure of sensual excess whose 'exile' in a Christian world he would himself later depict in the imaginary portrait of 'Denys l'Auxerrois' (1886).<sup>75</sup> Swinburne in turn compared this oil to the other watercolour version of *Bacchus* which Solomon presented at the Dudley in 1867 (FIG):

...the curled and ample hair, the pure splendour of faultless cheek and neck, the leopard-skin and thyrsus, are all of the god, and godlike... but mournful wonderful lips and eyes are coloured with mortal blood and lighted with human vision... In these pictures [the oil and watercolour] some obscure suppressed tragedy of thought and passion and fate seems latent as the vital veins under a clear skin.<sup>76</sup>

Here sculpture no longer appears here as a matter of pure surfaces but reveals a suppressed—if not 'repressed'—colourful life tainting its 'clear skin,' an apt metaphor of the Pagan past resurfacing in a Christian age. This second version was based on the sculpture of Antinous in the guise of Bacchus in the Vatican, to which Solomon added a dappled leopard skin symbolizing the vitality and changefulness of Greek colour or '*poikilia*.'<sup>77</sup> The watercolour was

<sup>74</sup> Ovid X, ll.1182-91, 274. On the association of the pomegranate with Aphrodite, see Pirenne-Delforge, *L'Aphrodite grecque*, 411-2. A French translation of this passage published in 1806 explicitly compares the colour of pomegranate with that of a crimson cheek: 'Une heure s'est à peine écoulée, il sort de ce sang une fleur nouvelle, que la pourpre colore, et qui des fruits de la grenade imite l'incarnat.'

<sup>75</sup> Pater, *Greek Studies*, 42. See also Heine's 'Gods in Exile' (1854).

<sup>76</sup> Swinburne, 'Simeon Solomon: Notes on his "Vision of Love" and Other Studies.', CW, vol.15, 451-452.

<sup>77</sup> On the Victorians and Greek *poikilia*, see Ribeyrol, *Etrangeté, Passion, Couleur* (2013).

accompanied by lines from William Morris' *Life and Death of Jason* emphasizing the metamorphic potential of erotic desire: 'By thee the unnamed smouldering fire, Within our hearts turns to desire, Sweet, amorous, half-satisfied; Through thee the doubtful years untried Seem fair to us an fortunate, In spite of death, in spite of fate.'<sup>78</sup> In his analysis of Morris's *Jason* and the *Earthly Paradise*, Pater reads the writings of the 'romantic school' as precisely marking 'a transition' both 'from the pagan to the medieval ideal' and from a 'lower to a higher degree of passion in literature.' Such 'charming anachronisms'—the 'grace of Hellenism relieved against the sorrow of the Middle Age'—enabled the poet to 'animate his subject' even if 'anything in the way of an actual revival must always be impossible.'<sup>79</sup> Solomon's Pygmalion, the artist's first foray into a Pagan subject, could have paved the way for such an aesthetic fusion of Pagan and Medieval motifs, leading to the resurgence of antique bodies in a Christian age.

## 2) Victorian Pygmalions: poetic and pictorial translations from the Greek

Ovid's Pygmalion is the only tale describing the metamorphosis of inert matter into human form.<sup>80</sup> And yet the myth, which had originally been popular with sculptors in the eighteenth century was only rarely illustrated in stone in the Victorian age, a period marked by an 'efflorescence' of sculpture.<sup>81</sup> As shown by Jean-Baptiste Regnault's neo-classical *Origin of sculpture* (1786) colour was never used to suggest flesh in eighteenth-century sculptural adaptations of the story (FIG).<sup>82</sup> The rediscovery of ancient polychromy in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, opened to new perspectives, but mainly for painters who became increasingly interested in illustrating the chromatic transition from stone to flesh. This moment was described as a form of 'translation' by G.F. Watts, who wished to emulate Phidias's 'impressions of colour' in his own depiction of *The Wife of Pygmalion, A Translation from the Greek* (1868), based on the Oxford bust in the Ashmolean Museum (FIGS). Watts indeed believed that 'in the best sculpture you feel the palpitations of colour, the elements of a picture ; you unconsciously see it painted' although this did not necessarily imply the use of colour.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Morris, *The Life and Death of Jason*, Book X, 152.

<sup>79</sup> Pater, 'Poems by William Morris', 306-7.

<sup>80</sup> See Peggy McCracken's lecture entitled 'Animate Ivory: Animality, Materiality, and Pygmalion's Statue' delivered at Oxford on 23 January 2020 and accessible online: <https://www.medievalists.net/2020/02/animate-ivory-animality-materiality-and-pygmalions-statue/> Consulted 22 September 2020.

<sup>81</sup> Hatt, Droth, Edwards, *Sculpture Victorious*, 15.

<sup>82</sup> On Pygmalion in eighteenth century sculpture, see Lichtenstein, *La Tache aveugle* (2003).

<sup>83</sup> Watts quoted in Prettejohn, *The Modernity of Ancient Sculpture*, 68.

In Watts' painting, the translation is not simply from marble to flesh and from text into image (in which case the translation would have been from 'Latin') but a reference to the intermedial and chronological shift from one medium (ancient Greek sculpture) to another (modern English painting), as noted by Swinburne:

In this 'translation' of a Greek statue into an English picture, no less than in the bust of Clytie, we see how in the hands of a great artist painting and sculpture may become as sister arts indeed, yet without invasion or confusion; how, without any forced alliance of form and colour, a picture may share the gracious grandeur of a statue, a statue may catch something of the subtle bloom proper to a picture.<sup>84</sup>

By having Venus paint the cheek of Pygmalion's statue, Burges also translates this 'subtle bloom' into pictorial form, thereby offering a new interpretation of Pliny's *circumlitio*, and of Nicias's collaboration with Praxiteles.

Like his model Baudelaire, Swinburne was particularly drawn to the correspondences between the arts, especially between poetry and painting. The Pygmalion myth seemed the ideal story to reflect on the ekphrastic potential of poetic description—hence its popularity with poets and painters alike. For Joshua, the Victorian age was the heyday of Pygmalion myth in literature, quoting as a case in point Morris's poem 'Pygmalion and the image' (from *The Earthly Paradise*, 1868) which Burne-Jones illustrated twice, first in 1868-70 and then in 1875-8. (FIGS) By choosing to divide the story into four moments, Burne-Jones emphasized the idea of metamorphosis, paradoxically turning painting into a temporal art thanks to a subtle use of subtle chromatic transitions. The two series bear some similarities to Solomon's panel, which Burne-Jones may have had in mind when he embarked on his pictorial project. For instance, both Solomon and Burne-Jones depict doves alongside Venus to suggest her celestial nature, although no such bird is mentioned in Ovid's text.<sup>85</sup> Moreover the three main protagonists look strikingly alike, anticipating Solomon's and Burne-Jones' androgynous Pagan figures from the 1860s and 1870s.

In her book on the reception of the Ovidian story in English literature, Joshua also makes a strong case connecting the revival of interest in Pygmalion in the 1860s with the so-called 'Fleshly controversy', which she claims started with Buchanan's 1863 collection of poems entitled *Undertones*. I wish to follow this interpretation by emphasizing the overlooked role played by *chromatic exhibition* in this debate which may Solomon's Pygmalion anticipated in more ways than one.

---

<sup>84</sup> Swinburne, 'Notes on Some Pictures of 1868', *CW*, vol.15, 197.

<sup>85</sup> On Aphrodite Ourania's doves, see Pirenne-Delforge, *L'Aphrodite Grecque*, 366-7.

Solomon's panel indirectly references Gibson's *Tinted Venus* which Burges most probably saw in Rome as early as 1853 or 1854. Although the Venus was only tinted, the *Athenaeum* compared the statue to a vulgar 'naked, impudent Englishwoman.'<sup>86</sup> Contrary to classical 'nudity' which John Berger described as 'a form of dress' requiring to be 'placed on display'<sup>87</sup>, the 'naked' body had to be hidden away. Such 'shameless nakedness' was also what Buchanan reproached Rossetti, Swinburne and Solomon with in his 1871 pamphlet entitled 'The Fleshly School of Poetry', quoting Swinburne's praise of Rossetti's poetry as 'consummate fleshly sculpture' as a contradiction in terms. But Buchanan had denounced the dangers of alluring Greek bodies as early as 1863 in his poem 'Pygmalion the sculptor' which I see as directly connected to the scandal triggered by Gibson's Venus the previous year. The poem is framed with 'shadows', a morally charged term which reverses the neoclassical take on the marmoreal purity of Greek statues. The first 'shadow' marks the death of the sculpture's wife which Pygmalion sinfully replaces with a stone simulacrum:

But, like a snake's moist eye, the dewy star  
Of lovers drew me; and I watch'd it grow  
Large, soft, and tremulous; and as I gazed  
In fascinated impotence of heart,  
I pray'd the lifeless silence might assume  
A palpable life, and soften into flesh,  
And be a beautiful and human joy  
To crown my love withal; and thrice the prayer  
Blacken'd across my pale face with no word.  
But thro' the woolly silver of a cloud  
The cool star dripping emerald from the baths  
Of Ocean brighten'd in upon my tower,  
And touch'd the marble forehead with a gleam  
Soft, green, and dewy; and I said "the prayer  
Is heard!"<sup>88</sup>

The section where the statue comes to life is entitled 'The Sin', echoing Westmacott's moral condemnation of sculptural polychromy as a form of 'corruption'. Following Pygmalion's evil prayer which 'blacken'd' across his face, the statue's cheeks become coloured, not with a healthy blush but with a 'green and dewy' 'gleam' ironically suggestive of decaying flesh. In the last section of the poem, the 'shadow' of the plague punishes the sculptor for having created such an evil 'snake'-like figure. For Buchanan, colour was conducive to moral darkness, a sign

---

<sup>86</sup> *The Athenaeum*, 'John Gibson, R.A.', 172.

<sup>87</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 54.

<sup>88</sup> Buchanan, 'Pygmalion the Sculptor', 177.

of degeneration which he would track a few years later in the poetry and painting of Rossetti, Swinburne and Solomon:

He [Rossetti] belongs, or is said to belong, to the so-called Pre-Raphaelite school, a school which is generally considered to exhibit much genius for colour, and great indifference to perspective. [...] Like Mr. Simeon Solomon with whom he seems to have many points in common, he is distinctively a colourist.<sup>89</sup>

In Rossetti's fleshly verse and Solomon's fleshly paintings, alluring colour is obscenely 'exhibited', exposed for its own sake. Like Gibson's tinted statue, Rossetti's colourful poems, such as 'Jenny', become 'meretricious' instruments of corruption of the young:

The fleshly school of verse-writers are, so to speak, public offenders, because they are diligently spreading the seeds of disease broadcast wherever they are read and understood. Their complaint too is catching, and carries off many young persons.<sup>90</sup>

By overtly using colour as a cosmetic and erotic 'art', Solomon's panel may well have planted the first seeds of this fleshly controversy.

### 3) 'Art hid with art'

Buchanan was evidently uneasy with the amoral artistic self-referentiality exhibited in the works of the Fleshly school. By bringing together poetry, painting, and sculpture through colour, Solomon's panel anticipated these 'art for art's sake' concerns. The image indeed plays on numerous visual references not directly connected to the Ovidian tale but which give new resonance to the Victorian reception of the *Metamorphoses*. Like Solomon's 1867 *Bacchus*, the panel merges several pictorial and sculptural citations turning the image into an allegory of the creative union of the arts.

These artistic citations centre around the figure of Venus, who partly displaces Pygmalion as the figure of the artist. Chisel and brush in hand, Pygmalion and the goddess almost seem like two versions of the same creator, as Solomon depicts them in the same chromatic scale. Venus is nonetheless given pride of place as Pygmalion passively turns his back to the viewer while the metamorphosis unfolds. Similarly, Venus becomes 'dominatrix' in Burne-Jones Pygmalion series, with the sculptor disappearing altogether in 'The Godhead Fires'.<sup>91</sup> In this painting as well as in Solomon's panel, hands play a crucial role. In Ovid's story, it is through the sense of touch that Pygmalion first realizes that the ivory is mollifying into flesh:

---

<sup>89</sup> Buchanan, 'The Fleshly School of Poetry', 336.

<sup>90</sup> Buchanan, 'The Fleshly School of Poetry', 346 and 336.

<sup>91</sup> See Arscott, 'Venus as dominatrix' in *Manifestations of Venus* (2000).

But next his hand on her hard bosom lays:  
Hard as it was, beginning to relent,  
It seem'd, the breast beneath his fingers bent;  
He felt again, his fingers made a print;  
'Twas flesh, but flesh so firm, it rose against the dint.<sup>92</sup>

In his 1778 'Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative dream', J.G. Herder had called for the reappraisal of the sense of touch in conceptions of sculpture, understood primarily as a *body*.<sup>93</sup> Painting, on the contrary, he described as a 'surface' which could only appeal to sight, through colour in particular: 'a painting is nothing other than a guise, a beautiful covering, a magical use of light to create a beautiful appearance.'<sup>94</sup>

And yet in Solomon's panel, the creative touch of Venus is primarily pictorial and chromatic. The intervention of the goddess recalls Michelangelo's Creation of Adam and Eve which Burges must have seen on one of his visits to Rome, possibly at the same time as Gibson's Venus. In this wall painting, God, depicted as a flying figure, is about to touch the sculptural body of Adam to bring him to life. As noted by Lene Østermark-Johansen, a similar 'elaborate language of hands' is found in Burne-Jones's Pygmalion series which may also reference Botticelli's *Pallas*.<sup>95</sup> Botticelli's influence on Burne-Jones is well documented and can be traced back to when the painter first copied works by the Italian artist during his trip to Pisa and Florence in 1859. Although the Victorian cult of Botticelli is generally believed to have started in the late 1860s following Swinburne's 'Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence' and Pater's 'Fragment on Sandro Botticelli', Solomon's Pygmalion may be considered as of the earliest examples of the artist's influence on British art. The panel is particularly evocative of the *Birth of Venus* which had been on display in the Uffizi since 1815 (FIG) and whose figures Solomon would later 'condense' in *Love in Autumn* which he painted in Florence in 1866 (FIG).<sup>96</sup> In the late 1850s, the Florentine painter's work was little known in England although his *Mystical Nativity* (purchased by William Young Ottley) had been shown at the 1857 Arts Treasures Exhibition in Manchester, alongside Giotto's and Angelico's. A few years earlier, in 1854, Lady Eastlake had praised Botticelli as 'worthy to stand in the Florentine genealogy, between Giotto and Michael Angelo.'<sup>97</sup> Botticelli's Christian paintings were then the primary

---

<sup>92</sup> Ovid, X, 1.433-7, 256.

<sup>93</sup> See Gaiger's introduction to Herder's *Sculpture* and in particular Gaiger's discussion of Herder's Paris fragments dating from 1769 where the German scholar claims: 'The sense of touch perceives only bodies; the sense of sight only surfaces. What then is beauty for the sense of touch? It is not colours! Nor is it light and shadow. [It is] bodies!'

<sup>94</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 51.

<sup>95</sup> Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture*, 196-7.

<sup>96</sup> Prettejohn, *Modern Painters, Old Masters*, 148.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in Lottes, 'Appropriating Botticelli', 237.

focus of attention. And yet in these works the poet and critic John Addington Symonds would soon note a ‘touch of paganism’ ‘representing the interminglement of antique and modern fancy at a moment of transition, as embodying in some of his pictures the subtlest thought and feeling of men for whom the classic myths were beginning to live once more.’<sup>98</sup> In Solomon’s panel, Botticelli’s Pagan Venuses are favoured over his celestial Madonnas. Just as Aby Warburg had believed *The Birth of Venus* and the *Primavera* to be haunted by the antique ‘Ninfa’, infrared viewing of the Pygmalion image has revealed that the original design included draped dancing figures resembling the three graces of Botticelli’s painting (FIGS).<sup>99</sup> Could Burne-Jones, who made sketches from the *Primavera* in 1859, have suggested these references to Burges and Solomon?<sup>100</sup> Or had Burges’s interest been fostered by his reading of Anna Jameson’s *Memoirs* where Botticelli is praised as ‘one of the earliest painters who treated mythological subjects on a small scale as decorations for furniture’?<sup>101</sup> An enthusiast of furniture decoration himself, Burges may have been intrigued by such a statement, although *Venus and Mars* painted at the same time as the *Birth of Venus* for a *cassone* was only acquired by the English collector Alexander Barker in 1864, before joining the National Gallery collections ten years later, once Botticelli’s reputation had been more firmly established.

Solomon’s flying Venus certainly recalls the two zephyrs who accompany the birth of the goddess, one of whom looks strikingly like her. Similarly, in Solomon’s panel (as in Burne-Jones’s own version of the story) Venus *resembles* the statue, as if it were an *agalma* of the goddess herself—which brings to mind the following lines from Morris’ poem:

Damsels and youths in wonderful attire,  
 And in their midst upon a car of gold  
 An image of the Mother of Desire,  
 Wrought by his hands in days that seemed grown old  
 Though those sweet limbs a garment did enfold,  
 Coloured like flame, enwrought with precious things,  
 Most fit to be the prize of striving kings.  
 Then he remembered that the manner was  
 That fair-clad priests the lovely Queen should take  
 Thrice in the year, and through the city pass,  
 And with sweet songs the dreaming folk awake;<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>98</sup> Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy*, vol. 3, 250-1.

<sup>99</sup> The *Primavera* was exhibited at the Uffizi until 1864, when it was moved to the Galleria dell’Accademia. On the Victorian reception of Botticelli, see *Botticelli Reimagined* (2016). On Aby Warburg’s ‘Ninfa’, see Didi-Huberman, *Ninfa Moderna* (2002).

<sup>100</sup> Prettejohn, *Modern Painters, Old Masters*, 151.

<sup>101</sup> Jameson, *Memoirs*, vol.1, 140.

<sup>102</sup> Morris, ‘Pygmalion and the Image’, 197.

Moreover, in the *Birth of Venus*, the goddess is modelled on a statue, the Venus de' Medici which, as in the Ovidian tale, the painter literally brings to life through colour. But in Solomon's image, the Venus is not *pudica*. Her tinted arms, stretched to reveal her bare white breasts, suggest another sculptural reference: the Venus de Milo, which not only displays a similar hair style and drapery covering the lower part of her body but also the same imbalanced posture. (FIG). Burges certainly saw this statue in Paris during one of his numerous trips to France but by 1859 it was already well-known across Europe. A cast of the statue was even presented at Sydenham, which contributed to its popularity beyond artistic circles (FIG). Elizabeth Prettejohn notes that part of the fascination for this statue, unearthed on the island of Melos in 1820 and purchased by the Louvre the following year, had to do with its enigmatic origin which defied historical contextualization.<sup>103</sup> Its facial type was interpreted as Praxitelean and described by Ludovic Vitet as 'an unbearable mixture of the ideal and the real, of elegance and of force, of the noble and the natural', qualities which Winckelmann's own Pygmalionesque rhetoric had so far restricted to male figures.<sup>104</sup>

The statue was identified as Venus because a fragment of a hand bearing an apple was found nearby. Like Gibson's *Tinted Venus*, this was the goddess to whom Paris had given the golden apple. For Westmacott this Venus could not have been coloured: 'Do we feel that the Theseus and Ilyssus, the Venus of Melos, the Apollo of the Belvedere, and others, show a deficiency that colour could supply?'<sup>105</sup> Swinburne, on the other hand, compared Watts' wife of Pygmalion to the Venus to suggest the union of sculpture and painting in Antiquity: 'So it seems a Greek painter must have painted women, when Greece had mortal pictures fit to match her imperishable statues. Her shapeliness and state, her sweet majesty and amorous chastity, recall the supreme Venus of Melos.'<sup>106</sup>

By fusing references to Pagan and Christian art, Solomon's Pygmalion offers a rich intertextual and intermedial reading of Ovid's story which sheds light on Burne-Jones's own pictorial version of the myth, as well as on Swinburne's and Pater's later aesthetic writings. Thanks to a complex interweaving of artistic citations, playing on the level of both 'subject-matter' and of 'visual resemblance', the panel thus anticipates the shared references that Aesthetes would

<sup>103</sup> On the Victorian reception of the Venus of Milo, see Prettejohn, *The Modernity of Ancient Sculpture*, 74 et sq.

<sup>104</sup> Prettejohn, *The Modernity of Ancient Sculpture*, 38 and 85. Winckelmann's description of the Apollo Belvedere explicitly refers to Ovid's story: 'In gazing upon this masterpiece of art, I forget all else, and I myself adopt an elevated stance, in order to be worthy of gazing upon it. My chest seems to expand with veneration and to heave like those I have seen swollen as if by the spirit of prophecy, and I feel myself transported to Delos and to the Lycian groves, places Apollo honored with his presence—for my figure seems to take on life and movement, like Pygmalion's beauty.' In Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, 334.

<sup>105</sup> Westmacott, 'On polychromy in sculpture, or colouring statues', 231.

<sup>106</sup> Swinburne, 'Notes on Some Pictures of 1868', *CW*, vol.15, 197.



further explore in the 1860s and 1870s, including Whistler's interpretation of the Venus as a 'symbol of Aestheticism' and the 'superiority of art to nature' in his 'Ten O'clock Lecture' (1885).<sup>107</sup>

### III Effaced effigies

Compared to Moore's Aesthetic experiments on colour harmonies in the late 1860s, the Torel panel, which Robyn Asleson identifies as his first extant oil painting, seems a most unusual work for the artist.<sup>108</sup> First because the subject was medieval rather than antique: the image shows the goldsmith William Torel at work on 'the beautiful bronze effigy of Queen Eleanor in Westminster Abbey' at the request of her bereaved husband, King Edward I (FIG). Like the Pre-Raphaelites and the firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. for which he would soon design tiles, wallpaper and stained glass, Moore initially followed Ruskin's injunction to rediscover the Middle-Ages. This was also the path adopted by the architect and designer William Eden Nesfield with whom Moore started collaborating in 1859, a year after Moore had moved from York to London to join the Royal Academy schools. Shortly after his return from France, Moore was approached by Burges to contribute a panel to the Great Bookcase. According to Stacy Marks, he was even one of the first contributors.<sup>109</sup>

Under the impulsion of the art-architect, both Nesfield and Moore embraced the eclectic combination of Greek and Gothic form which Burges encouraged in his lectures. The fountain designed by Nesfield and decorated with painted panels by Moore for the 1862 exhibition was even a *modèle du genre* for Burges:

The architecture and ornament are of the most severe thirteenth century type, but the figure at the top and the incised panels round the basin (drawn by Mr. Albert More [sic]) might have been taken from a Greek vase, so entirely are they imbued with classic feeling.<sup>110</sup>

By 1863 Burges and Moore had both joined the Arts Club and evolved in similar circles.<sup>111</sup> Moore's first publicly displayed oil painting *The Mother of Sisera looked out of a Window* (FIG) thus features the same Jamaican model, Fanny Eaton, as Solomon's *Mother of Moses* (1859) and *Study for a Sybil* (1860) by George Boyce's sister Joanna Boyce Wells, which

---

<sup>107</sup> Whistler quoted by Prettejohn in *The Modernity of ancient sculpture*, 85. See also Prettejohn, 'Walter Pater and Aesthetic Painting', 46.

<sup>108</sup> Asleson, *Albert Moore*, 44.

<sup>109</sup> Stacy Marks, *Pen and Pencil*, vol.1, 219-220.

<sup>110</sup> Burges, 'The Late Exhibition', 337.

<sup>111</sup> Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, 78.

suggests that these artists were part of the same community.<sup>112</sup> Although Moore's contribution to the Bookcase was to be his only collaboration with Burges, the architect's influence proved crucial in Moore's later development of an aesthetic style fusing references to Greece, India and Japan. Burges may have also been the first to draw Moore's attention to the pictorial potential of depicting sculptural women in semi-conscious reclining postures which he would explore at greater length in his later works.

### 1) Torel or the origins of British sculpture

But why Torel? Contrary to the mythical figure of Pygmalion, Torel was an artist whose life and work were carefully recorded in the historical documentation relating to the reign of King Edward I. When his beloved wife of 36 years, Eleanor of Castile, died in December 1290, the King went to unprecedented lengths to celebrate her memory. First by having crosses erected at every location where the body of his wife rested on their journey from Harby, Lincolnshire to Westminster Abbey. Of these 'Eleanor crosses' only three survive almost extant, in particular the Waltham cross with which Burges certainly grew familiar during the restoration of the Abbey nearby, while the Great Bookcase was in progress. As part of the same commemorating impulse, Edward I commissioned Torel to carve three life-size bronze effigies: two of his wife and one of his father Henry III which were completed between 1291 and 1293. The first effigy of Eleanor, now destroyed, was placed in Lincoln Cathedral, the other in Westminster Abbey on a Purbeck marble tomb chest (FIG).<sup>113</sup> But rather than placing the effigy in its final setting, the Chapel of Edward the Confessor, Moore's panel depicts Torel at work on a wax modello in a workshop in the abbey churchyard. Burges was indeed well acquainted with the history of the making of these royal tombs. His library contained countless books on the history and treasures of Westminster Abbey, a subject he was clearly fascinated, if not obsessed, with.

Burges's strong emotional and intellectual bond to the edifice dates back to his artistic training under the guidance of Edward Blore who in 1849 was replaced by George Gilbert Scott as Surveyor of Westminster Abbey. This role Scott carried out until his death in 1878 with the unfailing support of his 'talented friend' Burges.<sup>114</sup> Scott was then a leading figure of the Gothic revival as well as an early apostle of constructional polychromy.<sup>115</sup> Although Westminster

---

<sup>112</sup> On Fanny Eaton, see Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters*, 102-9.

<sup>113</sup> In his essay in the tombs of Westminster Abbey, Burges claims that there might have been a third effigy in the church of the Blackfriars, in London. Burges, 'Tombs', in *Gleanings*, 151.

<sup>114</sup> Scott, *Gleanings*, 58. Burges refers to 'my friend Mr. Scott' in *Art applied to Industry*, 110.

<sup>115</sup> On Scott and polychromy, see Whelan, 'George Gilbert Scott: A Pioneer of Constructional Polychromy?': 217-238.

Abbey had been relatively spared by the Reformation, one of the first tasks that Scott set himself was precisely ‘to remedy the effect of neglect’ of the royal tombs for the restoration of which (the) Parliament voted £4,500 in 1854.<sup>116</sup> Scott’s cleaning and conservative repair of the tombs as well as the intensive archeological research carried out by Burges for the 40-page section on ‘Tombs’ in the second edition of Scott’s *Gleanings* (1863), contributed ‘to a reappraisal of Britain’s sculptural heritage and to the formation of a national school of sculpture’ according to Martina Droth.<sup>117</sup> While Scott replaced the original iron grille protecting Eleanor’s effigy, which he praised as ‘one of the finest which remains in any country’, these funerary sculptures were made accessible to a wider audience through other means, notably in the form of plaster casts presented at Sydenham or at the South Kensington Museum (FIG).<sup>118</sup> In the official guide to the Medieval Court, Digby Wyatt and Waring devoted two full pages to the description of the laton cast of Eleanor of Castile:

On the floor of the Mediaeval Court are ranged some of the most interesting and finest monumental effigies in England. To the left, on entering from the cloister arcade, is that of Queen Eleanor, first wife of Edward I.

The tomb is of Petworth marble, covered with a slab of copper gilt, on which lies her statue cast in metal (latten or laton, a species of bronze). Each side of the tomb is divided into six compartments containing the arms, alternately placed, of England; three lions passant gardant—of Castile and Leon; first and fourth, a castle ; second and third, a lion rampant—and of Ponthieu, of which earldom she was heiress ; three bendlets with a bordure.

The statue itself, evidently a portrait, is admirably executed. The Queen is represented crowned, with unconfined flowing hair; she wears a long plain tunic, the neck exposed, and a mantle without the usual band fastening over the bosom ; her hands are bare, her feet rest on two lions, and her head on two cushions. Round the edge was placed the following inscription:— *Ici gist Alianor jadis Reyne de Engleterre, rey Edeward fiz ler . . . Puntif (Ponthieu ?), del alme deli Dieu par sa pite eyt (aie) merci. Amen.*” Here lies Eleanor, formerly Queen of England. King Edward, .... on whose soul may God in his graciousness have mercy. Amen.”<sup>119</sup>

A copper effigy designed in 1853 for the cathedral of Ely as part of a monument to Dr Mill, Benjamin’s Webb’s father-in-law, was also placed at the centre of the Medieval Court, thereby testifying to the continuing investment of bronze with specific symbolic and political meanings in the industrial age (FIG).<sup>120</sup>

---

<sup>116</sup> Droth, *Sculpture Victorious*, 164. On Scott’s conservationist approach to the tombs, see Brindle, ‘Sir George Gilbert Scott as Surveyor of Westminster Abbey, 1849-78’, 335.

<sup>117</sup> Droth, *Sculpture Victorious*, 162-3.

<sup>118</sup> Scott, *Gleanings*, 62.

<sup>119</sup> Digby Wyatt and Waring, *The Medieval Court at Sydenham*, 84-5.

<sup>120</sup> *The International 1862 exhibition*, vol.1, 94. On bronze, see Droth, *Bronze, the power of life and death*, 16.

The royal effigies were indeed the first to have been cast in bronze. In this, Edward I strove to outshine the royal necropolis of the Abbey Church of St Denis for which the French King Saint Louis had commissioned in 1265 no fewer than 16 recumbent stone effigies, originally painted in bright colours. This French influence, which Burges was particularly attentive to, is noticeable in a certain number of iconographical details such as the double cushion (clearly visible in Moore's panel) and the French inscription on the tomb.<sup>121</sup> Torel, an established goldsmith, was entrusted with the carving of the statues of Eleanor and Henry for which, Burges notes, he received the very generous payment of £113.<sup>122</sup> While he may not have been the first 'Christian' sculptor, from a Victorian perspective he was certainly one of the most important medieval artistic figures to have been reached such posterity. But Torel was also a much-vexed figure. First because little was known about his life, except for his involvement in the carving of the royal tombs. For Westmacott and Digby Wyatt, he was an Italian artist named Torrelli, which would explain the different spellings of his name (Torel, Torrel, Torell, Torelli), an idea repeated in the *Handbook to Westminster Abbey*.<sup>123</sup> But Burges was adamant that Torel was 'a London citizen' and therefore British:

The artist was one William Torel, whom there is every reason to believe was an Englishman, and not an Italian as some authors have supposed. From the original accounts, edited by the late Hudson Turner, we learn that he was a goldsmith; that he worked in the King's palace; that a large quantity of wax was employed, evidently for the cire perdue process; and, finally, that the casting took place in the adjoining churchyard. Nothing can be more beautiful than these two statues, which by the way are very large castings, only a few accessories being added afterwards, and we shall have to go back to the best period of Greek art before we find anything to put into comparison with them.<sup>124</sup>

Burges' insistence on the nationality of Torel may be linked to his involvement in the restoration of the national monument of Westminster and to his interest in the works of British sculptors, such as Gibson, Thomas Woolner or G.F. Watts, for whom he may have wished to set a glorious precedent. In this, the Great Bookcase anticipates the public celebration of artistic figures from the past found on monuments such as the Kensington Valhalla (1862-71) decorating the South court where 'Torrel' features as one of the eight *British* artists (FIG).<sup>125</sup>

---

<sup>121</sup> Burges, 'Tombs', 143.

<sup>122</sup> Burges, 'Tombs', 154. See also DNB entry on William Torel by Paul Binsky, updated 03 January 2008 and accessed July 2019.

<sup>123</sup> Digby Wyatt and Waring, *The Medieval Court*, 37-8: 'However certain the proof may be of the statue having been cast by William Torel, the similarity of whose name to Torelli we have already remarked, still, the peculiar style of the tomb itself would seem incontrovertibly to exhibit the handiwork of Italian artists.' Cunningham, *Westminster Abbey. A hand-book for visitors*, 29.

<sup>124</sup> Burges, *Art applied to Industry*, 44.

<sup>125</sup> Bryant, *Designing the V&A*, 95-6.

Unsurprisingly, Torel features as one of the sculptors of the ‘Frieze of Parnassus’ circling the base of Scott’s Albert Memorial (1864-72). By the end of the 1860s, Torel had been officially invented as a national hero, despite the scandal that tarnished the end of his career when he was banished from the King’s court after having purchased stolen rings following the robbery of the Royal Treasure in 1303. For both Burges and Scott, the goldsmith personified the golden age of Gothic sculpture, who had captured the ‘ideal’ beauty of monarchs, as Greek sculptors had done in their own day and age.<sup>126</sup> In the RIBA sketch, the effigy is described not as ‘a portrait’ but simply as Torel’s ‘idea of the beautiful’, giving pride of place to the artist’s aesthetic vision. The first secular effigies created in the thirteenth century were indeed primarily ‘idealistic’ so as to celebrate the untarnishable permanence of the official body of the monarch.<sup>127</sup> And yet in Moore’s panel, the Queen’s ideal, Madonna-like face is not visible: it only ‘sketched’ on the sheet which the sculptor has discarded. Like in the Rhodopis and Pompeian panels, this suggests that the work is in progress: the effigy still belongs to the artist who is painstakingly transforming matter into human form. At this stage, and in its bare setting, the effigy appears more like a private tribute of a bereaved husband to his wife than as a public and political tribute to a queen. This may well have been Burges’s own take on the controversial issue of restoration which, like Scott, he envisaged as a return to the actual conditions of the making of the artwork rather than as a modern ‘improvement’ of a timeworn artefact.<sup>128</sup>

## **2) Over her dead body: ‘sorrow for the lost Lenore’**

An early apostle of constructional polychromy, Scott was particularly attracted to the colours of the Gothic. His enthusiasm for the ‘decorative colouring’ of the Westminster Abbey effigies was for him a means to foster the revival of the Gothic as a national style, as shown by his model restoration of the funerary monument to Queen Philippa of Hainault displayed at the Great Exhibition in 1851 (FIG).<sup>129</sup> At the time, Ruskin was also reappraising the colours of the medieval past, including of its effigies.<sup>130</sup> The critic’s ideas about colour and the Nature of the Gothic were echoed by one of the official guides to the Medieval Court at Sydenham which displayed beautiful ‘recumbent effigies’ with the same rich hues that coloured ‘almost every

---

<sup>126</sup> This comparison with ancient Greek sculpture is found in Burges’s ‘Tombs’, 153.

<sup>127</sup> See Binksi, *Medieval Death*, 95-6.

<sup>128</sup> On Burges and restoration see Burges, ‘Tombs’, 143 and sq.

<sup>129</sup> Scott, *Gleanings*, 63.

<sup>130</sup> Ruskin himself would later copy details from the effigy of Queen Eleanor. See his ‘Study of the Form of a Shield, from the Tomb of Eleanor of Castille in Westminster Abbey’. Watercolour over graphite on wove paper (1871) Ashmolean Museum.

inch of the old cathedrals'.<sup>131</sup> The opposition between colour and colourlessness is expressed as a contrast between life and death: 'the dyed stone has long since withered and grown colourless or lies entombed, like spring flowers under the eternal snow of the Puritans' whitewash, and we are now inured to the grey monotony of decay.'<sup>132</sup>

In his own *Handbook*, Digby Wyatt formulated similar claims about 'the Polychromatic decoration' of his Medieval court in which W.M. Rossetti noted the predominance of 'reds and blues with clustered shafts with conspicuous patterns, and niches filled statues coloured in imitation of life.'<sup>133</sup> For Wyatt the thirteenth century, and in particular the reigns of Henry III and Edward I, had been the golden age of 'English polychromy'.<sup>134</sup> This idea had already been put forward by Charles Stothard in his dazzlingly illustrated volume on monumental effigies, posthumously published in 1832. The volume, of which Burges owned a copy, offered colourful reproductions of the funerary sepulchers of the kings and queens of the Middle Ages, notably the effigy of Eleanor described in the accompanying text as: 'remarkable for the beauty of its execution [...] one of the finest of the series of monuments given in this work' (FIG).<sup>135</sup> Stothard wished to give 'a body to history', a body that could partly be resurrected through colour, as shown by the warm glow of the plate representing Eleanor's almost fleshly complexion.<sup>136</sup>

In comparison to Stothard's frontal depiction of the queen, Moore's recumbent Eleanor looks very white against the wooden table and the bright clothes of Torel and her husband. The absence of colour is all the more surprising as Torel was known to be a sculptor in metal, a goldsmith who precisely worked with polychrome materials, including jewels which originally studded the crowns of both Eleanor and Henry III.<sup>137</sup> These two effigies were the first to have been cast in bronze, a material which, like ivory, was believed to be 'unusually suited to the representation of human form and flesh' due to its 'flexibility, warm colour and reflectivity'.<sup>138</sup> In his *Lectures on Art applied to Industry*, Burges even retraces the history of the use of bronze in sculpture and the various polychromatic effects achieved by its numerous alloys:

It is in this way that we may possibly explain a passage in Pliny, where he describes the bronze statue of a dying lady, which was so arranged that the life appeared to be gradually receding from the extremities of the limbs. Some writers have declared this to be impossible, but, as I said before, it might easily be accounted for by the

---

<sup>131</sup> Anon. *The Ten Chief Courts of the Sydenham Palace*, 185.

<sup>132</sup> Anon. *The Ten Chief Courts of the Sydenham Palace*, 185.

<sup>133</sup> Quoted in Piggott, *Palace of the People*, 105.

<sup>134</sup> Digby Wyatt, *The Medieval Court*, 31.

<sup>135</sup> Stothard, *Monumental effigies*, 31.

<sup>136</sup> Stothard quoted in Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, 14.

<sup>137</sup> Burges, 'Tombs', 150.

<sup>138</sup> Droth, *Bronze, the power of life and death*, 12.

employment of different alloys cast in small pieces, the junctions of the feet with the legs being hidden by anklets, of the hands with the arms by bracelets, of the head and neck by a necklace. Another curious instance mentioned by the same author is that of a statue where the sculptor wished to represent the cheeks as suffused with blushes; to effect this, we are told that he mixed iron with the bronze, and the weather, oxydizing the former, produced a red tint.<sup>139</sup>

Burges also notes that bronze better survived the onslaught on time, drawing on the example of the Westminster effigies as evidence:

The Middle Ages have left us very many noble works in bronze, or latten, as most alloys of copper were then called. The word indeed appears to have been used in just as loose a manner as the Romans employed the term *aes*. As regards effigies in metal, perhaps no church can shew a more complete and beautiful series than our own Westminster Abbey; the earliest being those representing Henry III and Queen Eleanor, and both remarkable as being ideal portraits. Unfortunately, most of the chefs-d'oeuvre of the Middle Ages were executed in stone or soft alabaster, and have suffered accordingly; and we have therefore to congratulate ourselves on the fact that the effigies under consideration were cast in bronze, and not chiselled in stone.<sup>140</sup>

And yet, Moore's image does not exploit the chromatic potentialities of bronze, which seem displaced onto the setting dominated by copper-like tones. Eleanor is indeed depicted at modello stage, prior to the application of the lost wax technique which was being revived in the nineteenth century:

Those parts to be cast in bronze were modelled in wax, which was afterwards melted out of the mould and replaced by the molten metal. In the present day a somewhat different way is adopted, a thin layer of clay replacing the wax, and as it of course cannot be melted out, the outer mould is made in separate pieces in order to effect its removal.<sup>141</sup>

In an industrial age when sculptors were increasingly accused of not making their own statues, Burges thus reasserted the artist's central place in the creative process.<sup>142</sup>

But in Moore's panel, this process does not seem to involve any colouring, as if his white effigy were meant as an achromatic pendant to the statue coming to life through colour in the Pygmalion image. Death here appears as the ultimate discolouration: there is no life in the Torel panel, no tree, no plant colours the bare setting. The only bright colours that can be found are the clothes of both King and artist, based on historical costumes like those Planché would later describe in his *Cyclopedia of Costume*. In his chapter on the thirteenth century, Planché

---

<sup>139</sup> Burges, *Art applied to Industry*, 42-3.

<sup>140</sup> Burges, *Art applied to Industry*, 44.

<sup>141</sup> Burges, *Art applied to Industry*, 43-4.

<sup>142</sup> Fraser, 'Grief Encounter', 42-3.

mentions effigies as a key source of information about medieval fashion with particular reference to the statue of Henry III who used to wear ‘velvet, damask, and a rich silk’.<sup>143</sup> During his reign, heraldic motifs appeared for the first time on clothes, which explains the royal lion embroidered on King Edward’s breast in Moore’s image. Another source for Planché was the Guillaume de Lorris’s *Roman de la Rose* (completed by Jean de Meung between 1275-80), notably the passage ‘describing Pygmalion employed in trying on his love-created Galatea all the fashions of Paris in the reign of St. Louis.’<sup>144</sup> In many illuminated versions of this text, of which Burges later acquired a copy, the medieval Pygmalion is depicted at work on a white effigy (FIG).

Such colourless effigies were also very popular with the Victorians for whom the study of tombs was a ‘favourite pasttime’ in keeping with the revival of funerary arts and rituals.<sup>145</sup> Burges would have been for instance aware that in 1861 the sculptor Baron Carlo Marochetti had started working on two white marble effigies of Victoria and Albert for the Royal Mausoleum at Frogmore shortly after the death of the Prince Consort. Queen Victoria, who was to outlive her husband for another 40 years, was to be represented as an ideal, sleeping beauty, just like Queen Eleanor (FIG).

This blurring of the line between agalmatophilia and necrophilia brings to mind the romantic theme of the death of beautiful woman which Edgar Allen Poe had celebrated as the ‘unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world’ in his *Philosophy of Composition* (1846).<sup>146</sup> Burges, who was reading Poe at the time, was certainly familiar with his most famous poem ‘The Raven’ (1845) which many prominent British poets (including E.B. Browning and Swinburne) admired:

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December;  
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.  
Eagerly I wished the morrow;—vainly I had sought to borrow  
From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore—  
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—  
Nameless *here* for evermore.<sup>147</sup>

The poem centers around the image of the raven reminding the poet of the death of his beloved ‘Lenore’, a romantic version of Edward’s queen. Bronfen’s analysis of Poe’s ‘Philosophy of

---

<sup>143</sup> Planché, *Cyclopedia of Costume*, 66. This text features in Burges’ library holdings, among others by Planché. LS 1918, 10.

<sup>144</sup> Planché, *Cyclopedia of Costume*, 66.

<sup>145</sup> Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, 13. Fraser also notes that in 1858-9 the *Art Journal* devoted a series of articles to ‘the tombs of English artists’ *Tombs of English Artists*, by F.W. Fairholt (1858, 1859).

<sup>146</sup> Poe, ‘The Philosophy of Composition’, 165.

<sup>147</sup> Poe, ‘The Raven’, ll.7-12, 43-4. Burges made a note in his diary entry of 1861 ‘Read Po’ (sic).



Composition' sheds light on the gender dynamics at work in the Moore panel which treats the feminine corpse like an artwork thus positing a 'structural analogy between mourning and art.'<sup>148</sup> As the effigy has not yet been placed on its marble tomb chest, it looks even more corpse-like. Moreover, in Poe's poem 'by implication the corpse is feminine, the survivor masculine'.<sup>149</sup> In the Torel panel this gendering is accentuated by the fact that there is not one but two masculine figures bending over Eleanor's effigy. Her slightly raised hand appears as a frail gesture in comparison with sculptor's phallic chisel, conflating 'the desire for the death of the other' with the desire 'for a dead other'.<sup>150</sup>

### 3) Necropoetics: 'Do I live, am I dead?'

But the white simplicity of Eleanor's effigy may also be read in the light of another poem which Burges more explicitly praised: Robert Browning's 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St Praxed's Church', first published in *Hood's Magazine* in 1845 under the title 'The Tomb at St. Praxed's (Rome, 15).' Burges mentions the poem twice in 1863: with a quotation in his 'Notes on Medieval mosaic' published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* and as a 'wondrous and powerful poem' in his essay on the tombs of Westminster Abbey for Scott's *Gleanings*.<sup>151</sup>

Burges's 'Notes on Medieval mosaic' is a discussion of the difference between the types of materials used to create mosaic motifs in medieval Italy and at Westminster Abbey. The text includes a plate of the mosaic patterns featuring on the altar platform of the abbey which the architect classes as the type of 'Opus Alexandrinum.' However, the tomb of Henry III made, like that of Eleanor, of Purbeck marble with slabs of purple and green antique porphyry set in the sides and inlaid with multicoloured mosaic, is of a different style which Burges terms 'opus Greanicum', i.e. mosaic made of glass. With the 'opus Alexandrinum' style, white marble with coloured 'veins' was preferably used, in particular 'cippolino' marble which the architect 'identified with the *Marmor Carystium* of the ancients; it is sometimes called onion stone, from being delicately veined with light green like an onion'. This is where the quotation from Browning's poem occurs: 'Most readers will remember "Old Gundulph with his paltry onion-stone" in Browning's wonderful poem of "St. Prassade"'.<sup>152</sup> These lines are directly connected to the material history of Westminster Abbey—which in turn sheds an interesting light on the Torel panel. Here the grand tomb itself is not visible, only the simple modello which suggests

---

<sup>148</sup> Bronfen, *Over her dead body*, 65.

<sup>149</sup> Bronfen, *Over her dead body*, 65.

<sup>150</sup> Bronfen, *Over her dead body*, 63.

<sup>151</sup> Burges, 'Tombs', 146.

<sup>152</sup> Burges, 'Notes on Medieval mosaic', 268.

a deliberate form of humility contrasting with the ornamental excesses of the Renaissance which Browning precisely stigmatized in ‘The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St Praxed’s Church’. Set in 16<sup>th</sup> century Rome, the poem relates the monologue of a dying Bishop who begs his natural sons to give him the sumptuous tomb he dreams of to excite the envy of his old enemy Gandolf, who stole his favorite niche in St. Praxed’s Church by dying before him. The Bishop wishes to outshine the tomb of his rival by ordering the most costly materials for his sepulchral monument: basalt, bronze, peach-blossom marble, lapis lazuli, jasper etc. in contrast with the commoner ‘paltry onion stone’ used for Gandolf’s own tomb. Throughout the monologue, spiritual concerns recede in favour of purely material considerations which Ruskin precisely saw as a sign of Renaissance decadence. Ruskin was indeed an avid reader of sepulchral monuments which by revealing the ‘manner of regarding death’ reflected the moral state of a culture:

But of all the evidence bearing upon this subject presented by the various arts of the fifteenth century, none is so interesting or so conclusive as that deduced from its tombs. For, exactly in proportion as the pride of life became more insolent, the fear of death became more servile; and the difference in the manner in which the men of early and later days adorned the sepulchre, confesses a still greater difference in their manner of regarding death. To those he came as the comforter and the friend, rest in his right hand, hope in his left; to these as the humiliator, the spoiler, and the avenger. And, therefore, we find the early tombs at once simple and lovely in adornment, severe and solemn in their expression; confessing the power, and accepting the peace, of death, openly and joyfully; and in all their symbols marking that the hope of resurrection lay only in Christ’s righteousness; signed always with this simple utterance of the dead, ‘I will lay me down in peace, and take my rest; for it is thou, Lord, only that makest me dwell in safety.’ But the tombs of the later ages are a ghastly struggle of mean pride and miserable terror: the one mustering the statues of the Virtues about the tomb, disguising the sarcophagus with delicate sculpture, polishing the false periods of the elaborate epitaph, and filling with strained animation the features of the portrait statue; and the other summoning underneath, out of the niche or from behind the curtain, the frowning skull, or scythed skeleton, or some other more terrible image of the enemy in whose defiance the whiteness of the sepulchre had been set to shine above the whiteness of the ashes.<sup>153</sup>

Here Ruskin contrasts the simplicity and ‘righteousness’ of medieval recumbent effigies with the heavily decorated tombs of the Renaissance signalling the ‘ghastly struggle of mean pride and miserable terror’. Anna Jameson, who was in Italy at the same time as Ruskin, makes a similar point in *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1848), a text Burges was also familiar with.<sup>154</sup>

---

<sup>153</sup> Ruskin, CW, 11:81-2.

<sup>154</sup> Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, 23.

In the fourth volume of *Modern Painters* (1856) Ruskin returned to this idea, praising Browning's poem for having depicted so powerfully the corruption of the Renaissance soul as translated into its funerary monuments:

I know no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told, as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit,—its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin. It is nearly all that I said of the central Renaissance in thirty pages of the *Stones of Venice* put into as many lines, Browning's being also the antecedent work.<sup>155</sup>

Despite the similarities Browning's lines and Ruskin's text, Bullen convincingly argues that the poem 'has none of the assertive moral certainty of Ruskin's prose'.<sup>156</sup> It is pervaded with uncertainty and 'dominated by the central indeterminate: 'Do I live, am I dead?' from which the wavering between spiritual and material, flesh and marble and Christian and Pagan are all derived.<sup>157</sup> The very form of the dramatic monologue, so central to Browning's 'necropoetics' triggered by 'the intransigent bodies of the past', contributes to this indeterminacy.<sup>158</sup> Moreover, Browning wrote his poem in a time of great religious tension in Britain, - a point overlooked by Ruskin - which culminated in 1845 with the conversion to Catholicism of the leading figure of the Oxford Movement, John Henry Newman. That same year Browning wrote to F.O. Ward that his verse was 'just the thing for the time—what with the Oxford business, and Camden Society and other embroilments.'<sup>159</sup> The poet certainly had in mind the frequent associations of Catholicism with Paganism although Pugin had been especially careful to distinguish the two. In the preface to the second edition of *Contrasts* (1841) which included a plate opposition a medieval effigy and the theatrical neoclassical grand tomb of Earl of Malmesbury in Salisbury Cathedral where the statue of the earl is depicted as inappropriately lively, Pugin thus explains (FIG):

The real origin of both the revived Pagan and Protestant principles is to be traced to the decayed state of faith throughout Europe in the fifteenth century, which led men to dislike, and ultimately forsake, the principles and architecture which originated in the *self-denying Catholic principle, and admire and adopt the luxurious styles of ancient Paganism*.<sup>160</sup>

---

<sup>155</sup> Ruskin, CW, 6:449.

<sup>156</sup> Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, 184.

<sup>157</sup> Browning, 'The Bishop', 1.13, 85.

<sup>158</sup> Fox, 'Robert Browning's Necropoetics', 464.

<sup>159</sup> For a contextual approach to Browning's poem see Hecimovich, "'Just the thing for the time": Contextualizing Religion in Browning's "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church"', 259-272.

<sup>160</sup> Pugin, *Contrasts*, iii. The italics are Pugin's.

Admiration for the ‘luxurious styles of ancient Paganism’ had reached a peak in the Renaissance which Pugin saw as incompatible with the more authentic piety of the Middle Ages: ‘We cannot imagine a St. Ambrose or St. Chrysostom setting up Bacchanalian groups and illustrations of Ovid's fables as decorations to their episcopal residences.’<sup>161</sup> And yet, this is exactly what Browning’s Bishop is dreaming of:

The bas-relief in bronze ye promised me,  
Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance  
Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so,  
The Saviour at his sermon on the mount,  
Saint Praxed in a glory, and one Pan  
Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off,  
And Moses with the tables . . .<sup>162</sup>

Browning’s depiction of a corrupt ‘Pagan’ Renaissance would have thus appealed to Protestant and Catholic readers alike.<sup>163</sup> But Burges certainly read this poem in a different light. While he loathed the excesses of the Renaissance which he, like Ruskin and Pugin, saw as a period of decadence from the glory of the Gothic past, he refused to envisage the Middle Ages in strict opposition to the Greek heritage. Nor did he believe Pagan revivals necessarily entailed corruption, as implied by Pugin’s *Contrasts*. On the contrary, he claimed that Ovid and other Latin authors were a source of creative eclecticism in the Middle Ages and should still be considered as such in the nineteenth century:

The middle ages in fact seized and appropriated the literary spoils of antiquity in the same manner as they used up the columns of the Pagan temples in the naves of the Christian churches or placed jewels, cameos, &c. in new settings to preserve them in the treasuries of the cathedrals or the chasses of the saints.<sup>164</sup>

Similarly, the ‘onion stone’ of ‘old Gandolf’ appears as a material and symbolic hinge between the medieval and antique pasts as this type of marble, mentioned in Pliny, was continuously used by the Ancient Greeks, the Romans and the sculptors of the Middle Ages.

Burges also saw the practice of painting statues as a potential link between the art of Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Burges’s enemy was not Greek art but, as he put it, ‘the pseudo Classic school’, i.e. the Neoclassical school of Christopher Wren which had led to the ‘abominations’ of St Paul’s:<sup>165</sup>

---

<sup>161</sup> Pugin, *Contrasts*, iv.

<sup>162</sup> Browning, ‘The Bishop’, l.56-62, 86.

<sup>163</sup> Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, 187.

<sup>164</sup> Burges, ‘Paganism in the Middle Ages’, 206.

<sup>165</sup> Mordaunt Crook, *Burges*, 155.

Let us, beside polychromy, employ various coloured bronzes ; let us damascene them with gold and silver ; let us take the clearest pieces of our native alabaster and treat statues made of it as the Greeks treated their marble, viz, with colour and gold. Let us even use gold, ivory, and colour together; in fact, let us do as they did in the Middle Ages: - not neglect antiquity, but press it into our service.<sup>166</sup>

The intertwining of literary and material history suggested by Burges' colourful image of the medieval appropriation of 'the literary spoils of antiquity' therefore directly challenges both Pugin' and Ruskin's reading of history through the lens of abstract, disembodied 'impersonal principles' in order to revive the 'True peach,/ Rosy and flawless' body of the sculpture of the past, whether Pagan or Christian.<sup>167</sup>

---

<sup>166</sup> Burges, 'What was done by the Greeks', 427.

<sup>167</sup> Browning, 'The Bishop', l.32-3, 85; Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, 189.

## Epilogue: reading Burges

*‘Sur chaque pierre vous voyez la nuance de l’heure  
unie à la couleur des siècles.’*

Marcel Proust, *La Bible d’Amiens* (1904)

When Burges died April, 20 1881, at the age of 53, several obituaries were published in the press, both in England and France. But the tribute of E.W. Godwin, Burges’s life-long friend, only appeared in the *Art Journal* several years later, in 1886. In this text, divided into two sections separately published in June and October, Godwin directly addresses his readers to invite them on a tour of Tower House, Burges’s medievalising home in Kensington (FIG). The essay, entitled simply ‘The Home of an English Architect’, does not, however, open with a description of the house, but with that of an object, Burges’s own elephant inkstand (FIG):

Do you desire to make an inkstand?

Take a Chinese bronze elephant incense-burner, with dumpy legs that are hardly more than feet, remove the pierced howdah-like cover, and in its place put a low circular tower of green porcelain, domes with a *cloisonné* cup reversed, and crowned with a Japanese *netzuki*. Combine these things with metal mouldings and machicolated parapets fashioned after the manner of the thirteenth century; arrange the ivory finial, the dome and tower so that each may turn on a pillar at the back, uncovering receptacles for matches, red ink, and black; mount the whole on a slab of marble and suspend chains, and rings, and seals from tusks and trappings, and you have the inkstand Burges had made for himself, which occupied the centre of his writing table all the years I knew him, and reminds me of him more than anything he ever achieved.<sup>1</sup>

Instead of adopting the grave tone of the necrologist, Godwin’s prose is humorous as he details the unending list of eclectic ingredients required to ‘make’ a uniquely Burges piece. Despite its fanciful combination of Eastern and Western influences and polychrome materials, the inkstand, which the architect used on a daily basis, is described by Godwin as a strikingly consistent artefact, a perfect reflection of the idiosyncratic tastes of its designer: ‘the things he is dealing with are Chinese and Japanese, but the whole is thirteenth century–Burgeseque’.<sup>2</sup> Although Godwin’s own avant-garde Anglo-Japanese designs diverged from Burges’s preference for the more grotesque, hybrid forms of Eastern art, the Aesthete could not but admire the ‘rich colour’ of the inkstand, ‘so false in detail’, but ‘so true in essence’.<sup>3</sup> Leaving

---

<sup>1</sup> Godwin, ‘The Home of an English Architect’, 170.

<sup>2</sup> Godwin, ‘The Home of an English Architect’, 170.

<sup>3</sup> Godwin, ‘The Home of an English Architect’, 170.

aside his friend's architectural realisations, which he deemed less 'graceful' than Nesfield's, Shaw's or Street's, Godwin compares the creativity which Burges displayed in such smaller works with that of the 'sculptor of the Sphinx and the designer of Chartres'.<sup>4</sup> This is translated visually in the black and white photographs illustrating Godwin's essay which implicitly place Burges's artefacts on the same scale as the home which housed them (FIG). Most of these photographs were taken from Pullan's collection, published the same year: Burges himself had been an enthusiast of the new medium which he pioneeringly used to record his domestic interiors.<sup>5</sup>

In the second part of the article, published shortly before his own death, Godwin travels back in time to note that Burges's early cabinets from the 1850s and 1860s show none of the 'thick-set', 'heavy' proportions of his later work, inkstand included, and yet are 'far more representative of the man'.<sup>6</sup> Godwin even sees these pieces of furniture, conceived as coherent, enclosed spaces, as 'more like a house than a modern cabinet', the true home, as it were, to Burges's imagination.<sup>7</sup> Here 'the stories told are full of meaning [...] of quaint conceits and replete with the evidence of their author's knowledge and of his sympathy with the comedy of life'.<sup>8</sup> My own reading of Burges's Great Bookcase has aimed to emphasize the key role played by colour as a unifying vantage point for these stories which were so 'full of meaning' to Burges and his friends. And these chromatic narratives, both old and new, spiritual and material, have in turn shed invaluable light on the artistic, religious and political context these artists were working in.

This strong literary vein may seem in many ways at odds with the more abstract Aesthetic harmonies favoured by Godwin or Whistler, whose own painted furniture, like 'The Butterfly Cabinet' (Harmony in Yellow and Gold) (1877-8) extolled colour for colour's sake (FIG). And yet, despite their narrative (and often humorous) functionalism, Burges's designs were much admired in aesthetic circles, notably by Mary Elizabeth Haweis, an expert on interior decoration and chromatic arrangements. For Haweis, Tower House—which she visited in 1881—was both a medievalising dream house and a truly 'beautiful', aesthetic home, on a par with Leighton's own 'Palace of Art', just a few streets away. And Burges's literary inspiration taken from 'sweet old stories, fairy tales, Greek legends, songs, merry quips and satires' alike appeared perfectly

---

<sup>4</sup> Godwin, 'The Home of an English Architect', 170.

<sup>5</sup> Roquet, *Life in Costume*, 190.

<sup>6</sup> Godwin, 'The Home of an English Architect', 301.

<sup>7</sup> Godwin, 'The Home of an English Architect', 301.

<sup>8</sup> Godwin, 'The Home of an English Architect', 304.

in line with the synesthetic union of the arts which the Aesthetes were then calling for.<sup>9</sup> Each object, each piece of furniture in this ‘Aladdin’ treasure trove was indeed an invitation to aesthetic—in the etymological sense of sensorial—pleasure, like Burges’s ‘Narcissus’ washstand, inscribed with a quotation from Chaucer, which Haweis praised as a ‘gem fit to splash at all day in poetic enjoyment’ (FIG).<sup>10</sup> But what made the aesthetic experience of Tower House so unique was its colours, as intense as those of an illuminated manuscript, in particular in the library which Haweis likened to ‘a blaze of gold and colour’ (FIG).<sup>11</sup> The chromatic correspondence between the library and the Great Bookcase, which it was specifically designed to house, further reflects Burges’s metonymic aesthetics. Just as each of the eight panels may be read as ‘a fragment of a total narrative cycle’ the fictional world depicted on the bookcase paved the way for the architect’s larger, but equally colourful, fantasies.<sup>12</sup> For instance, Burges designed for his library several other closed bookcases of counterchanging colours based on the Noyon *armoire* and similarly painted with figures ‘composing a comic alphabet’ with reference to Architecture, Painting and Sculpture in the thirteenth century – A standing for Architect with a self-portrait of Burges in front of a model of Tower House (FIG).<sup>13</sup> In this sense, Mordaunt Crook is right to point out that Burges’s style did not radically evolve during his short life: he remained throughout a master of eclectic detail, exploring over and over the same polychrome motifs already in germ in his painted furniture from the late 1850s. The bookcase nonetheless appears as a unique piece in Burges’s work and ‘in the history of painted furniture’ as a whole, a private artwork which launched the career of some of most important artists of the Victorian age like Solomon, Poynter or Moore.<sup>14</sup> Although it did not reach the same literary fame as the washstand which Evelyn Waugh fictionalized in his 1957 novel *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* as ‘a massive freak of fancy’ by a ‘man not universally honoured but of magisterial status’, the Great Bookcase deserved to be ‘honoured’ and read anew.<sup>15</sup> Throughout this book, it has emerged as a complex nexus of iconographical and intertextual references, translating into material form many of the questions explored not only by mid-nineteenth century Gothic revivalists, but also by the painters and poets of the emerging Aesthetic movement.

---

<sup>9</sup> Haweis, ‘Mr William Burges’s House,’ 15.

<sup>10</sup> Haweis, ‘Mr William Burges’s House,’ 20.

<sup>11</sup> The comparison of Tower House with ‘an illuminated MS. of a romance of the Middle Ages’ can be found in Pullan, *The House of William Burges A.R.A.*, 3. See also Haweis, ‘Mr William Burges’s House,’ 17.

<sup>12</sup> Roquet, *Life in Costume*, 154.

<sup>13</sup> Pullan, *The House of William Burges A.R.A.*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Handley-Read, ‘Notes on William Burges,’ 504.

<sup>15</sup> Waugh, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, 28.



But more importantly, this High Victorian piece of furniture, designed like a polychrome Gothic porch, is a testimony of Burges's chromophilia, his extraordinary, multifaceted passion for the 'colour of the ages' combined with 'the nuance of the hour', to quote from Marcel Proust's discussion of Ruskin's *Bible of Amiens*.<sup>16</sup> In this homage to Ruskin's 'reading' of Amiens as a Bible in stone, Proust provocatively brings together Gothic polychromy and its modern reinterpretation by Claude Monet in his impressionist cathedral series (FIG). The example of Monet is a telling one as the story of nineteenth-century colour has been, to this day, written almost solely from the angle of innovation and abstraction, as if the invention of synthetic dyes and pigments had directly led into impressionism and non-figurative painting.<sup>17</sup> But with Burges's bookcase, it is a strikingly different story which we are being told: one which favours the past, the narrative and the material and more generally colour(s) as a potent, multilayered means of weaving art with archeology, Pagan with Christian, high with low, and the fading pigments of the past with the gaudy hues of modernity.

---

<sup>16</sup> Proust, *La Bible d'Amiens*, 67. My translation. On the colours of Amiens, see Ribeyrol, '“The golden stain of time”: remembering the colours of Amiens Cathedral' (2020).

<sup>17</sup> See Roque, *Art et science de la couleur* (2009) and Kalba, *Color in the Age of Impressionism* (2017) and also Lichtenstein and Magné, *Vers la science de l'art, l'esthétique scientifique en France, 1857-1937* (2013).