

## EVELYN DE MORGAN AND THE LATE 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY ARTISTIC CIRCLE

The original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was formed in 1848, and members included Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt. They sought to present a new, fresh representation of artistic ideas, using contemporary themes (morality, for example in images of 'fallen' women), new techniques of painting (painting over a white background to make colours rich and jewel-like), literary references to medieval literature and Shakespeare, and allegorical works that depicted beautiful women who became known as Pre-Raphaelite 'stunners'.

Although the PRB lasted only a few years as a cohesive group, its influence continued into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Evelyn De Morgan, along with Edward Burne-Jones, was among the most successful of the second generation Pre-Raphaelite artists.

Evelyn De Morgan was unusual as a successful, professional woman artist. She and her husband William moved in circles with some of the most prominent figures of late 19<sup>th</sup> century artistic and literary movements, including Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, Walter Pater, John Singer-Sargent, Oscar Wilde, Frederick Leighton, G.F. Watts, Walter Crane and William Holman Hunt. Amongst her female friends were artists such as Emily Ford, Marie Spartali and Violet Paget (Vernon Lee) who noted that amongst the frequent social meetings of this group of friends, discussions would include 'fantastic, weird, curious, cigarettes, bonbons, Baudelaire'.

De Morgan's painting contributes to contemporary ideas and exchanges. Along with many other women artists, De Morgan supported the movement for women's rights and was a signatory of the *Declaration in Favour of Women's Suffrage* 1889. Many of these women, like De Morgan, chose to exhibit their works in the new and innovative galleries opening in London rather than the 'establishment' Royal Academy. These included the Grosvenor Gallery which was described as a 'palace of art', the New Gallery and the Dudley Gallery.

De Morgan's interest in social issues and reform led to her supporting philanthropic enterprises, such as the education of (perceived) deprived working-classes. She donated the painting *The Christian Martyr* (c.1882) to the 1895 exhibition of the South London Art Gallery. This painting portrays a woman martyr, about to drown in the Solway Firth for her Christian beliefs, showing how courage and fortitude can overcome adversity. Most of her works depict female characters. Her earliest and most influential model was her sister's nursemaid, Jane Hales, who at almost the same age as Evelyn (around 16 years old) made a most convenient and willing model and is the prototype for all Evelyn's subsequent women. These contrast noticeably with the women painted by male Pre-Raphaelite artists, such those by Edward Burne-Jones, who seem to be ephemeral, dreamlike constructions in danger of wilting away. Instead, Evelyn De Morgan presents strong, athletic women, who are beautiful but robust. Jane Hales features as a model in a number of the Centre's paintings, including *The Dryad* (1884-5), *Love's Passing* (1883-4), and *By the Waters of Babylon* (1882-3).

Other works by De Morgan reveal her interest in complex literary allegory and symbolism. Her early works such as *Ariadne in Naxos* (1877) and *Venus and Cupid* (1878) show a debt to the Classical influence taught at the Slade School of Art by Sir Edward Poynter. After her marriage to William De Morgan, Evelyn's works become more symbolist as she and William experimented with spiritualism. Themes such as life-after-death, the transformation of the soul, and moral messages about the transitory nature of life dominate her works.