

THE SLEEPING WOMAN: A VICTORIAN FANTASY

"She sleeps, nor dreams, but ever dwells
A perfect form in perfect rest."

Alfred Lord Tennyson
From "The Sleeping Beauty"

In the late 1860s to 1895 in England the sleeping woman became an almost obsessive subject for certain painters. She appeared in a pose of sleep and unconsciousness which she had never really taken previously in Western art, with the exception of the Sleeping Ariadne of the third century B.C. In the paintings of Frederick, Lord Leighton, Albert Moore, and Sir Edward Burne-Jones this theme is developed and repeated almost compulsively.

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If we are to understand the preoccupation of these artists, we must try to see their place in a world that was moving too rapidly and changing too violently. The sleeping beauties show how their particular temperament wanted to "stop the world" in its inevitable development. This feeling expressed itself in a desire to "freeze" women because women were beginning to assume a new role in society at the turn of the century. In "An Animated Conversation" (1888) Henry James had formulated the danger to the relationship between men and women which the new self-awareness of women would create. He wrote that the "great evolution . . . which will certainly become the huge 'issue' of the future" is "the essential, latent antagonism of the sexes . . . founded on irreconcilable interests. Hitherto we have judged these interests reconcilable . . . But all that is changing because women are changing."¹ It is probable that these men who were not entangled with wife and children (or who, like Burne-Jones, ran away from his family on occasion) felt more deeply and were more sensitive to the tensions of the times. It seems that the desire to call a halt to the changes taking place so violently in society at the end of the century brought forth this reaction in England.

Burne-Jones with his sleeping princess in her court, Albert Moore with his doll-like women, and Leighton with his mourning and sleeping women anticipate and attempt to negate the troubles to come in the twentieth century, troubles from which these women are hiding in sleep. Forgetfulness, torpor, rather than dreams, seem to constitute a necessary drugging or nap before the breakdown of Victorian society. There is a necessity to sleep away problems either of a