

An American's Visit to Burne-Jones

In the summer of 1887, Martin Brimmer wrote home to Boston and, in a letter to the painter Sarah Wyman Whitman, described his visit to Edward Burne-Jones.¹ His letter is of interest, as it shows the viewpoint of an American with a keen critical sense towards Burne-Jones's art, particularly the Perseus series, which was begun in 1875. Brimmer (1829-1896), the first President of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and a learned Victorian amateur, had purchased Le Chant d'Amour at the William Graham sale in 1886, which made² him the first American to own a Burne-Jones painting. The letter's recipient was Sarah Wyman Whitman (1842-1904), then a well-known Boston artist, the proprietress of a "salon" which included George Santayana, William James and Mrs. "Jack" Gardner. Twice she portrayed her friend Martin Brimmer in oils, and, after his death in 1896, she executed³ a memorial window to him at Memorial Hall at Harvard. The historian Samuel Eliot Morison, who knew her as a child, described Mrs. Whitman in his One Boy's Boston as "a disciple of Ruskin...who cherished pre-Raphaelite art and artists," a comment more applicable to her book designs and stained glass windows than to her paintings, where the French training she received from William Morris Hunt and Couture is evident.⁴ For the Riverside Press she designed the "Brimmer" typeface, first used for her friend's study Egypt: Three Essays on the History, Religion and Art of Ancient Egypt (1892), and many bindings in what might be termed a "post-Rossettian" style.⁵ Her lecture on book illustration, given before the Boston Art Students' Association in 1894, was reminiscent of Morris's lectures on "Printing" and "Some German Woodcuts of the Fifteenth Century." Mrs. Whitman's stained glass fit securely into the Burne-Jones-Morris tradition, in its attempt to integrate medieval techniques with modern uses. Like the Morris firm, she established a workshop and did entire decorating projects, the most famous one being the interior of the Central Congregational Church, Worcester, Mass. (1886).⁶ Whether Mrs. Whitman had personal contact with the Pre-Raphaelite circle is uncertain; but as an artist she certainly would have been interested in Brimmer's comments in the letter which follows.