

## THE RED LION SQUARE CHAIRS: CHRONOLOGY AND ICONOGRAPHY

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The exciting re-appearance of the decorated “Rossetti-Morris” chairs from Red Lion Square, after more than a century during which their location was unknown and their very existence doubted, offers the opportunity to begin an account of their creation and the place it occupies in the careers of both men. This essay is a preliminary tracing of what is known and can be deduced about the painting of the two pictorial scenes on the chairbacks. It is not exactly a study in authorship, however, for the painted furniture, both at Red Lion Square and subsequently at Red House, like the contemporaneous mural decoration of the Oxford Union debating chamber, deserves to be treated as a collaborative project, an exercise in creative interplay and exchange inspired by the close friendship between the artists at this date. In this respect, the medieval/chivalric themes are entirely apt, since the friendship was in some degree comparable to that of the knights attached to the legendary court of King Arthur.

At the end of October 1856, William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones moved into rooms in Red Lion Square, Holborn, formerly rented by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Walter Deverell in the days of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Famously, Morris commissioned remarkable furniture from a local cabinet maker. The earliest extant reference comes in a letter from Burne-Jones towards the end of November, in which he mentions “chairs and table” already made to Morris’s design, “as beautiful as medieval work,” which, “when we have painted designs of knights and ladies upon them..., will be perfect marvels” (G. Burne-Jones, 1: 147).

A month later, on 18 December, describing the new tenancy to William Allingham, Rossetti wrote: “Morris is rather doing the magnificent there, and is having some intensely medieval furniture made--tables and chairs like incubi and succubi. He and I have painted the back of a chair with figures and inscriptions in gules and vert and azure, and we are all three going to cover a cabinet with pictures” (*Letters of D.G. Rossetti*, 1: 312).

According to Morris’s first biographer, J.W. Mackail in 1899, “First came a large round table, ‘as firm, and as heavy, as a rock’: then some large chairs, equally