

## Edward Burne-Jones and the Legend of the Briar Rose

In 1890 when Edward Burne-Jones exhibited *The Legend of the Briar Rose*, a series of four paintings illustrating the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale, the works received almost unqualified praise. Heralded as a “masterpiece” that would “ensure the artist’s immortality as long as paint and canvas hold together,”<sup>1</sup> as “the works by which in the future he will be best known,”<sup>2</sup> and as paintings that “carried his name to the highest pitch of popularity and set the final seal on his triumph,”<sup>3</sup> the Briar Rose series seemed assured a prominent place in art history. Although the paintings enjoyed an international reputation in the 1890s, as Burne-Jones’s popularity faded during the twentieth century, so did the appeal of the Briar Rose canvases.<sup>4</sup> While the recent revival of interest in the art of Burne-Jones has focused attention on many aspects of his career, the Briar Rose paintings have not elicited the same scholarly attention as his other major series.<sup>5</sup> As works that provide insight into the artist’s often enigmatic imagery, they deserve careful scrutiny.

The legend of the Briar Rose was not a new subject for Burne-Jones in 1890; the series he exhibited in that year was the culmination of a theme which had held his attention for almost four decades, reflected in tile designs, embroideries, book illustrations, and three separate series of Briar Rose paintings, as well as other individual paintings and almost a hundred preparatory drawings based on the tale.<sup>6</sup> What was the appeal of the Sleeping Beauty story for Burne-Jones and his contemporaries? Reviewers suggested it lay in the political analogies that could be drawn between the fairy tale kingdom and the present realm. Yet the story also had significant personal implications for the artist.

In the early 1860s, when Burne-Jones did his first Briar Rose designs, a series of drawings for nine ceramic tiles produced for the firm of Morris, Marshall and Faulkner and destined for the home of the artist Birket Foster (Fig. 1), he represented the Sleeping

Beauty tale as a sequential narrative.<sup>7</sup> Following the version by Charles Perrault in *Contes du Temps Passé* and the German “Little Briar Rose,” related by the brothers Grimm, Burne-Jones depicted the story from the pronouncement of the wicked witch’s curse to the final wedding of the princess to her princely rescuer. But by 1873, when he finished the first series of three paintings based on the tale, now in the *Museo de Arte* in Ponce, Puerto Rico, he no longer depended on traditional literal descriptions. Instead of presenting a step-by-step equivalent to the story, he chose visual images that would capture its essence without explicitly telling it: the prince enters the briar wood (Fig. 2), the king and his courtiers are asleep (Fig. 3), and the slumbering princess awaits her rescuer (Fig. 4). In so doing, Burne-Jones followed Alfred Lord Tennyson’s approach in his poem, “The Day Dream,” written in 1842, which describes the sleeping palace and the princess in detail before introducing the prince’s arrival and the awakening.

In a second set of four Briar Rose canvases begun by 1873, Burne-Jones added a new subject, *The Garden Court* (Fig. 5), showing sleeping ladies-in-waiting.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the first set of Briar Rose paintings, which Burne-Jones finished in two years, work on the second series dragged on for over two decades. These canvases were twice the size of the first set, and constituted a major effort on the part of the artist. He worked on the series chiefly between 1873 and 1875, then he took up the subject again in 1884. According to his working list now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, between 1884 and 1890 he “redrew” *The Council Chamber* and *The Garden Court*, apparently beginning new canvases for these paintings and perhaps for all four.<sup>9</sup> These were the paintings exhibited at Agnew’s in the 1890s, which Alexander Henderson purchased with the stipulation that they be shown for a few days in Toynbee Hall, in London’s East End, where several thousand people came to see them. In 1891, they were in-