Study of William Morris

Edward Burne-Jones

Sold

REF: 3048

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Description

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Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, A.R.A. (1833-1898)
Study of William Morris

Inscribed by May Gaskell lower centre: Portraits of William Morris/drawn for me by Sir Edward/Burne Jones 1896
Black chalk
13.6 by 10.5 cm., 5 ¼ by 4 in.

Provenance:
May Gaskell (1853-1940);
Given by her to the grandfather of the present owner circa 1939

Exhibited:
London, Leighton House, A Profound Secret: Burne-Jones and the Gaskells, 24th March to 30th May 2004

William Morris (1834-1896) is best known today as one of the most celebrated figures of the 19th century whose influence is still felt today. An artist, designer, author, poet and thinker, Morris spent much of his life fighting the consensus and seeking a fairer society. His design ethos was based around his championing the principle of handmade production over the increasing development of factory mass production, famously saying, Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.

Morris and Burne-Jones met whilst undergraduates at Oxford and had quickly become inseparable. They were both romantics with a passion for the history, art and literature of the Middle Ages and both abandoned their intended path (Burne-Jones for the Church and Morris for architecture). In 1861, Morris and Burne-Jones, along with Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), Ford Madox Brown (1821-1893) and others founded Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co, and until Morris' death, Burne-Jones remained his most important, versatile and reliable collaborator. They remained friends until Morris' death in 1896, although changing outlooks and ideas, did lead to underlying tension at times, for example, Morris disliked Burne-Jones accepting a baronetcy in 1894 and Burne-Jones sometimes felt undervalued and underpaid as a supplier of material to Morris' company.

Burne-Jones was a prolific caricaturist, producing humorous drawings on a wide range of subjects, from his friends and family to literary subjects and current events. By far the most represented figure in his caricatures was Burne-Jones himself, however, Morris was the next most regular object for the artist's pen. Given their close working and personal relationship, this is perhaps unsurprising. Apparently for many years, the two men would meet every Sunday morning for breakfast at Burne-Jones's house, The Grange, on North End Lane, Fulham. The two figures form almost exact opposites of each other; Morris is corpulent, vibrant, energetic and confident. Burne-Jones thin, scruffy, melancholic or uncertain, often overwhelmed. The majority of Morris studies date from the 1860s and 70s, however, the present sketches are rare late depictions, executed in the months before Morris' death.

These two drawings were drawn for Helen Mary (May) Gaskell (1853-1940), daughter of Rev. David Melville, a canon of Worcester Cathedral. She was the last, but possibly the most important, of the young women with whom Burne-Jones formed close romantic, albeit platonic, relationships later in his life. They met in the early 1890s, through Frances Horner (1854-1940), who was probably the artist's other most important female friend and despite the twenty-year age difference, Gaskell a...

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