

Rupert C. W. Bunny and the Pre-Raphaelite Aesthetic

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Fig. 1. Rupert Bunny, *Les Roses de Sainte Dorothée*, c. 1892. For full details, see Fig. 8.

Rupert Bunny (1864-1947), although born in colonial Australia, lived and worked in France for some 46 years, and his work is therefore mostly associated with French art. While Bunny was a particularly eclectic artist, responsive to many contemporary themes, including the pan-European movement known as Symbolism, his *oeuvre* has a strong British influence as well, particularly from the Pre-Raphaelite artists and their followers, an aspect which has been less recognised in writings on his work.¹ Bunny was the first expatriate Australian artist to gain a *mention honorable* in the French annual exhibitions (for *Tritons*, c. 1890, at the *Société des Artistes français*) and he continued to be the most acclaimed of his generation. During the decade of the 1890s and into the new century, Bunny exhibited in both the Paris salons and in the London galleries, particularly the Royal Academy, assimilating the various styles and subject matters he observed in these glittering capitals.

Charles Rupert Wulsten Bunny, the fifth of seven children, was born in St. Kilda, a suburb of Melbourne, Australia, to cultured European parents. His British father, Brice Frederick Bunny (1820-85), was a barrister at the English bar before he joined the dash to the Victorian goldfields in 1852, just three weeks after his engagement to Marie Hedwig Dorothea Wulsten (1828-1902), daughter of a Prussian lawyer.² Gold fever soon abated and he established a law

¹ This article draws largely on B. Kane's *Rupert Bunny's Symbolist Decade: A Study of the Religious and Occult Images 1887-1898*, MA Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1999, particularly chapters 1, 3 and 4, that concentrate on British influences. For an excellent analysis of Bunny's career in France, see D. Edwards et al., *Rupert Bunny, Artist in Paris*, Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2009. For Symbolism as a pan-European movement, see P-L. Mathieu, *The Symbolist Generation: 1870-1910*, trans. M. Taylor, Geneva and New York, Skirra & Rizzoli, 1990; and J. Clair, *Lost Paradise: Symbolist Europe*, Montreal, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1995.

² H. Mackinnon, "Before the Nineties," *Table Talk*, 22 February 1934, p. 7.

practice in Melbourne, where he and Marie (who had followed him) married.³ Bunny's parents had a great influence on him: from his Eton-educated father, described as a "torrential speaker, a linguist, a music lover and widely read," he acquired his love of classical literature and biblical stories, including the tales of Christian saints.⁴ From his mother came his passion for music and ability at the piano and, significantly, his fluency in both German and French.⁵ This latter skill was honed during a two-and-a-half-year period in Europe (largely Germany and Switzerland) with Mrs. Bunny and five of his siblings when Bunny was nine. Judge Bunny was left to "batch" with Bunny's future patron, Alfred Felton (1831-1904) and Professor Herbert Strong of the University of Melbourne.⁶ Marie Bunny continued to support her son's artistic career until her death in 1902. Bunny's cosmopolitan education and upbringing equipped him to enter the sophisticated art and social circles of London and Paris.

Bunny studied in Melbourne (1881-83) at the National Gallery's School of Design (under Oswald Campbell) and then School of Painting where, under George Folingsby (1828-91), he received an academic training in accord with his master's allegiance to the Munich school of realism. He is reported as saying that he never had to unlearn anything taught by Folingsby.⁷ Europe was a lure, however, so in 1884 he accompanied his now seriously ill father to London, where he spent some eighteen months at Phillip Calderon's St. John's Wood Art School, a Royal Academy preparatory school. Finding this "a complete waste of time,"⁸ on the advice of fellow artists, Thomas Gotch (1854-1943) and Henry Tuke (1858-1929), he moved to Paris in late 1885 to study privately in the *atelier* of the renowned French history painter Jean-Paul Laurens (1838-1921).⁹

In 1887, nearly two years after Bunny's arrival in Paris, the highly influential *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* published Edouard Rod's article "Les Préraphaélites Anglais," initiating a vogue for British art.¹⁰ There was a vigorous exchange of ideas across the Channel and the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82), one of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and his friend and follower Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98) was acclaimed, particularly by the young exponents of the Symbolist movement.¹¹ Their work was widely known in both London and

³ J. Samuel, "Brice Frederick Bunny," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 3, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, (1969) reprint 1974, p. 297.

⁴ Samuel, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

⁵ H. Mackinnon, "Christmas in Germany," *Table Talk*, 15 March 1934, p. 10.

⁶ H. Mackinnon, "A Trip to Europe under Sail," *Table Talk*, 1 March 1934, p. 6. Bunny's sister, Hilda Mackinnon, gives an account of the artist's early life. For a detailed chronology of Bunny's biography, movements, exhibitions, and friendships, see M. Eagle, *The Art of Rupert Bunny in the Australian National Gallery*, Canberra, Australian National Gallery, 1991, pp. 243-46; Edwards, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-96; D. Thomas, *The Art and Life of Rupert Bunny. A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols, Port Melbourne, Thames & Hudson, 2017.

⁷ C. Turnbull, "Rupert Bunny: Great Artist and Great Australian," *Herald*, 28 September 1946, p. 17.

⁸ C. Turnbull and T. Buesst, *The Art of Rupert Bunny*, Sydney, Ure Smith, 1948, p. 11.

⁹ For discussion of Bunny at Laurens's studio see Thomas, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 36. Gotch and Tuke met at the Slade School of Art, London, and both studied under Jean-Paul Laurens in the early 1880s. Interestingly, although initially an artist of the *plein-air* school, Gotch, after a period in Paris in the early 1890s, was also influenced by the fashion for the late Pre-Raphaelites under the umbrella of Symbolism, see *The Last Romantics. The Romantic Tradition in British Art. Burne-Jones to Stanley Spencer*, ed. J. Christian, London, Lund Humphries in association with Barbican Art Gallery, 1989, p. 122.

¹⁰ E. Rod, "Les Préraphaélites Anglais," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Vol. 36. series 2, 1887, pp. 177-95.

¹¹ For the cross-currents between London and Paris and the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites in the 1890s, see *Pre-Raphaelite Art in its European Context*, eds. S. Casteras and A. C. Faxon, London,

Paris through reproductions and exhibitions and their specific influence is evident in many of Bunny's works of the late 1880s and the 1890s, in various media.

Throughout this period, many British and French artists were stimulated by literary works and shared an interest in classical myth and medieval legend. In Britain these included Rossetti, Burne-Jones and George Frederic Watts (1817-1904); in France the great muralist Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824-98) and his compatriot Gustave Moreau (1826-98), a painter of ornate and enigmatic images.¹² Bunny's education, both at home and at school, ensured his receptivity to these literary influences.



Fig. 2. Photograph of Alastair Cary Elwes (L), Rupert Bunny (R), and Zsigmund Justh (front), 30 May 1888. The University of Melbourne Art Collection.

Bunny's interest in the Pre-Raphaelite movement is confirmed in the Parisian diary of Zsigmund Justh (1863-94).¹³ This well-connected young Hungarian writer first met Bunny on 22 January 1888, soon after the latter's arrival in Paris, in the apartment of the older French poet, Louise Ackermann. With him was fellow artist and pupil of Laurens, the Englishman Alastair Cary-Elwes (1866-1946). The three men became close friends (Fig. 2). Vitally interested in the visual and literary arts, Justh's observations are pertinent and discerning. He records that Bunny was "the more congenial" of the "two young English artists" and continues: "It is mainly Bunny who talks. Both are influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites. Their poets: Algernon Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Their artists: (among the older ones): Giotto, Fra Angelico ... Leonardo da Vinci and Titian's portraits."¹⁴

Certainly, the influence of Rossetti and others in his circle can be seen in Bunny's graphic work executed in the late 1880s and 1890s. The

Associated University Presses, 1995, particularly Faxon "Introduction," pp. 11-28; Casteras, "The Pre-Raphaelite Legacy to Symbolism," pp. 33-49; for Burne-Jones, see L. des Cars, "Burne-Jones and France," in *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer*, ed. S. Wildman and J. Christian, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998, pp. 25-39.

¹² Watts and Burne-Jones (*King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*) exhibited at the *Exposition universelle*, Paris, 1889; Puvis de Chavannes and Moreau exhibited with the two aforementioned artists at the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery, London in 1877.

¹³ Translated by Hidas in Edwards, *op. cit.* I am most grateful to Deborah Edwards, former Senior Curator Australian Art and Denise Mimocchi, Curator Australian Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales, who arranged my access to the curatorial research files for the exhibition *Rupert Bunny: Artist in Paris* and the translation of Justh's 1888 diary. This invaluable resource was not available at the time of the publication of my MA thesis (1999) but validates the conclusions drawn there.

¹⁴ Hidas in Edwards, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

University of Melbourne's art collection is a rich source of examples of Bunny's works on paper, many of which depict poetic images of women, often pensive or making music, for instance, "*Sigh no more ladies*" (1896) (Fig. 3), a black and white illustration for a poem from Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, published in the *Magazine of Art* (1896); or two untitled watercolours [*Woman with lute and companions*] c.1889-93 (Fig. 4), and [*The Golden Age*] c. 1890s. Each of these works on paper has some stylistic and subject elements associated with the Pre-Raphaelites and their later followers, such as a preoccupation with music and an Arcadian world of innocence and beauty.

Moreover, in "*Sigh no more ladies*" the pervasive influence of Burne-Jones is suggested by its intricate detail, the imagined medieval costuming of the women and their sweet faces reminiscent of Botticelli.¹⁵ The impact of Burne-Jones and, to a lesser extent, Rossetti, can be clearly observed in other paintings by Bunny, especially those images of female saints (and angels) and the Virgin Mary.¹⁶



Fig. 3 (above). Rupert Bunny, "*Sigh no more Ladies*," 1896. Printer's proof on tracing paper; sheet: 45.2 x 26.8 cm; composition: 23.3 x 16.3 cm. The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Estate of Rupert Bunny 1948.



Fig. 4 (left). Rupert Bunny, *Untitled [Woman with Lute and Companions]*, c. 1889-93. Watercolour (black) on paper with hand-painted black frame; sheet: 22.1 x 15.3 cm, irreg. The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Estate of Rupert Bunny 1948.

Despite the obvious association of saintly subject matter with a French Catholic background, Bunny's paintings of female saints are indebted to British figurative paintings of the late nineteenth century. The rise in popularity of images of female saints in later Victorian art can

¹⁵ B. Kane, *Sanctity and Mystery: the Symbolist Art of Rupert Bunny*, The Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2001, catalogue numbers 21, 45 and 14.

¹⁶ *Una and the fauns*, c. 1894 (Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art), for example, the first of Bunny's paintings exhibited at the Royal Academy, London, was inspired by Edmund Spenser's sixteenth-century allegory, *The Faerie Queene*. There is a hint of the decorative quality of the later canvases of Burne-Jones, such as those of *The briar rose* series, 1870-90.

be loosely linked to the Pre-Raphaelite movement and in particular to Rossetti, who briefly engaged with the mid-century religious revival and essayed, to modest effect, a rebirth of religious art. Likewise, Rossetti's followers, Burne-Jones and William Morris (1834-96), were at that time ardent Tractarians.¹⁷ Through the Oxford Movement there was an invigorated interest in the Catholic legacy of Anglicanism, its rituals and spiritual aspects, with an accent on the performance of miracles and saints.¹⁸ Yet, as early as 1850, in his poem "Hand and Soul," Rossetti had perceptively remarked through the voice of Chiaro: "much of that reverence which he had mistaken for faith had been no more than the worship of beauty."¹⁹ By the 1880s the classicist (and founder of the Society for Psychical Research) Frederic W. H. Myers (1843-1901) described Rossetti's images of women as the "sacred pictures of a new religion," in which, as Elizabeth Prettejohn argues, Myers sought "an image of salvation to heal an age of religious doubt."²⁰

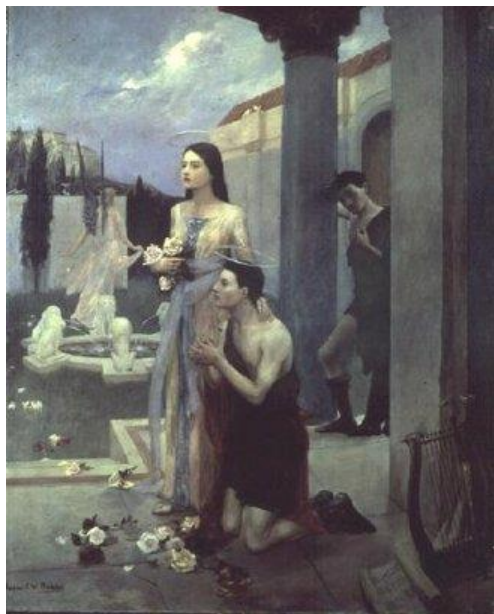


Fig. 5. Rupert Bunny, *Ste. Cécile*, c. 1889.
Oil on canvas, 200.1 x 160.8 cm.
Collection Philip Bacon, Brisbane
Courtesy of Philip Bacon Galleries.

In Britain, art became the new religion; an ideal of beauty became the new article of faith.²¹ Thus the female saint, that compound of spirituality, poetry and beauty, came to dominate the lexicon of the cult of female beauty, with the work of Rossetti and his followers offering prime examples.²² Four of Bunny's major religious works of the 1890s—*Ste Cécile* (c. 1889), *Les roses de Sainte Dorothée* (1892), *The Burial of St. Catherine of Alexandria* (c. 1896), and *Angels Descending* (c.1897)—fit well within this charter,²³ and his portrayals of female saints in particular are most closely aligned with the work of Burne-Jones. *Ste. Cécile* (Fig. 5), was commissioned by Alfred Felton, a close friend of the Bunny family and a loyal patron of the artist.²⁴ Felton shared Bunny's passion for music and thus the patron saint of music and song was a natural choice. It is highly likely that the legend was known to both men through Mrs. Anna Jameson's popular publication, *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1848). In fact, as Adele Holcomb writes, Jameson's belief in the role of Christian art in contemporary life aligned well with that of the original Brotherhood and even

¹⁷ Wildman and Christian, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-47.

¹⁸ Christian, "A Critical Somersault," in Wildman and Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 8. For a further discussion and bibliography, see Kane, *Symbolist Decade*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁹ D. G. Rossetti, "Hand and Soul," *The Germ*, February 1850, p. 26.

²⁰ E. Prettejohn, *Rossetti and his Circle*, London, Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997, p. 74.

²¹ For an excellent analysis of Victorian attitudes to beauty, religion and the Middle Ages, see M. Warner, *The Victorians. British Painting 1837-1901*, Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1996, pp. 26-36.

²² For analysis of the cult of beauty and the Aesthetic Movement, see S. Calloway and L. F. Orr, *The Cult of Beauty: the Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900*, London, V&A Publishing, 2011.

²³ The title of Bunny's paintings is given in French if first exhibited in Paris, or English, if exhibited initially in London.

²⁴ For a biography of Felton, see J. Poynter, *Mr. Felton's Bequests*, Carlton, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Press (2003), 2nd ed. revised 2008.

William Holman Hunt acknowledged her influence on his art.²⁵ Moreover, the particular details of the legend of St. Cecilia that appear in both Burne-Jones's and Bunny's imagining of the subject, can be traced directly to Jameson's recounting of the story, encapsulated in the following summary:

Cecilia, a noble Roman of the third century AD and a clandestine Christian, was known for her outstanding musical abilities, both in song and on instruments. Destined for marriage, through her "fervent eloquence" she converted her betrothed, Valerian. Following his baptism Valerian returned to Cecilia to find her with her guardian angel who held two garlands of celestial roses, with which he crowned the couple. Valerian's brother, Tiburtius, detected the perfume of the unseasonal flowers (invisible to a heathen's eye) and on being told their source he too converted immediately. The two brothers were promptly martyred; however Cecilia lived through days of torture before finally succumbing to the executioner's sword.²⁶

In his painting *St. Cécile*, Bunny, in tune with the *zeitgeist*, eschews the violence of martyrdom and torture, depicting the sacred moment of conversion. The devout pair, centrally placed and motionless, seem linked in a sublime state in their chalky, pillared space; the angel departs, trailing roses, and Tiburtius leans thoughtfully against a pillar, the elusive fragrance tantalising him. When writing in 1848, Mrs. Jameson noted that the subject had not frequently been depicted,²⁷ but St. Cecilia did become popular in the 1890s, and even earlier in the century she had featured in Alfred Tennyson's poem, "The Palace of Art" (1832, rev. 1842) and been famously drawn by Rossetti in an ecstatic swoon, upheld by an attendant angel (*St. Cecilia* c. 1856-57) as an illustration for the Moxon edition of Tennyson (published 1857). Bunny's chaste Cecilia had little in common with Rossetti's passionate saint, but the iconic stillness of Bunny's work and his highlighting of the conversion of Valerian suggest his familiarity with the stained-glass versions of the saint's life designed by Burne-Jones. After Rossetti's illustration, Burne-Jones's stained-glass portrayal was the most well-known contemporary image of the saint in both London and Paris.²⁸

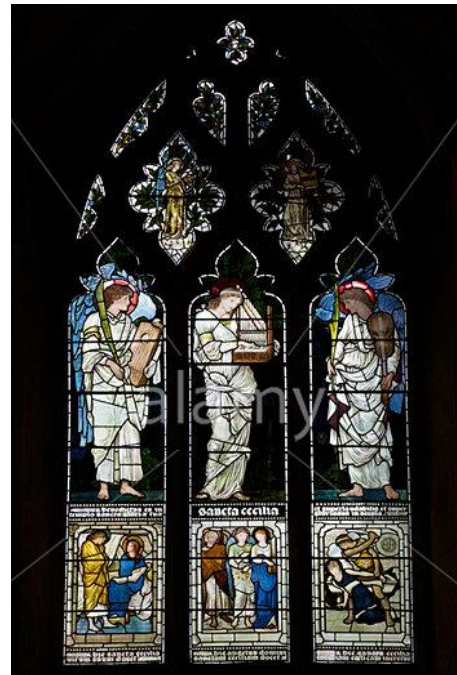


Fig. 6. After Edward Burne-Jones; Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., Charles Fairfax Murray, *The St. Cecilia Window (the life of St. Cecilia)*, 1874-75. Stained glass, East Window North Choir aisle, St. George's Chapel, Christ Church Cathedral Oxford. Courtesy of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford.

²⁵ For development and sources of *Sacred and Legendary Art* and its popularity see A. Holcomb, "Anna Jameson (1794-1860): Sacred Art and Social Vision," in C. Richter Sherman and A. Holcomb, eds, *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979*, Westport & London, Greenwood Press, 1981, pp. 112-13, 117-18.

²⁶ A. Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art*, Vol. 2., London, Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1848, pp. 201-05.

²⁷ Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

²⁸ Mauclair noted that reproductions of Burne-Jones's *St. Cecilia*, Moreau's *Salome* and Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* were owned by some 500 people at the time. C. Mauclair, *L'Art en Silence*, Paris, Société d'Éditions Littéraires, 1901, p. 199.



Fig. 7. Edward Burne-Jones, *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*, 1880-84. Oil on canvas, 290 x 136cm. Tate Britain. Presented by Subscribers 1900. Image: © Tate.

a sweet-faced, pale, slender female, dwelling in an imagined setting. These qualities are evident in Burne-Jones's painting *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* (Fig. 7), which was exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1884—significantly, the year of Bunny's arrival in London. It was again shown, to great acclaim, at the 1889 *Exposition universelle* in Paris, where it was instrumental in earning Burne-Jones a *Légion d'honneur*.³⁴

With the mid-century religious resurgence there was an increase in church-building, and Tractarian rituals profited from the Gothic revival in architecture with its accompanying decorative features, including stained glass.²⁹ Burne-Jones excelled in this medium and he produced for Morris & Company several stained-glass cycles, two of which were commissioned for Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford. These feature episodes in the lives of St. Cecilia (Fig. 6), and St. Catherine. Below the large traditional figure of each saint, flanked by angels, is a panel of incidents from her life; these images are likely to have been iconographical sources for Bunny's painting. The lower left light shows Cecilia speaking of her faith to Valerian, and centrally placed is the *Conversion of Valerian* (1875), in which a guardian angel stands between them holding the two circlets of celestial flowers.³⁰ These incidents are rarely seen in painting although they are fully described, as we have seen, in Jameson's *Legendary Art*.³¹ Burne-Jones has depicted the large figure of St. Cecilia (Fig. 6), as was customary, with her organ (which she is credited with inventing) while two of the predella panels feature Valerian's story.³² The correspondence between Burne-Jones's and Bunny's selection of episodes is significant and as Bunny often crossed the Channel at this time, visiting London galleries and his relatives in Cambridgeshire,³³ his having made a trip to Oxford and being familiar with its treasures is entirely credible.

In addition to the subject matter, both artists elongate the saint's form, but Bunny's primary stylistic debt to Burne-Jones lies in a particular aesthetic of feminine beauty, of

²⁹ A. Crawford, "Burne-Jones as Decorative Artist," in Wildman and Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³⁰ The third panel shows St. Cecilia's martyrdom by the sword.

³¹ Bunny painted *The Conversion of Valerian* c. 1899, see Thomas, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 97-98.

³² A further example of St. Cecilia in stained glass by Burne-Jones can be seen at Our Lady of Bloxham Church, Bloxham, Oxfordshire (1869). See M. Harrison and B. Waters, *Burne-Jones*, London, Barrie & Jenkins, 1973, p. 188. The 1875 design was reproduced several times; examples are in the Second Presbyterian Church, Chicago and the Princeton University Art Museum. There are slight differences, the most notable being Cecilia's halo and her blue garment.

³³ Eagle, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

³⁴ G. Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, Vol. 2, London, Lund Humphries, 1993, p. 201.

The marked influence of Puvis de Chavannes is also clear in the bleached colour harmonies of grey, blue and a soft sage green and in the very white skin tones of Bunny's *Ste. Cécile* (Fig. 5), while the Tuscan setting recalls Bunny's awareness of Fra Angelico (active 1417, d. 1455).³⁵ Bunny's painting was exhibited at the *Société des Artistes français* in 1889 and exhibition records indicate that Bunny returned to the subjects of both St. Cecilia and St. Valerian during the following decade.³⁶



Fig. 8. Rupert Bunny, *Les Roses de Sainte Dorothée*, c. 1892. Oil on canvas, 150.5 x 161 cm. (Private Collection). Courtesy of Menzies Art Brands.

Bunny reprised the subject of female martyrs three years later with *Les roses de Ste. Dorothée* (Fig. 8). During this period his work began to attract favourable attention. He was awarded, as mentioned above, a medal from the *Société des Artistes français* for his painting *Tritons* (c. 1890, AGNSW), and *Pastoral* (c. 1893, NGA), an even larger oil, was a runaway success both in Paris and across the channel. However, the work Bunny had prepared for the 1891 Salon [*La tentation de St Antoine*] failed Salon selection, so it is interesting that Bunny retreated from this experiment with the *femme fatale* and readdressed the ideal woman in the form of St. Dorothea of Cappadocia.³⁷

Jameson is Bunny's probable source for the tale. She recounts that Dorothea was, naturally, beautiful, a virgin and a Christian. Threatened with death if she did not worship the city's gods, Dorothea asserted her faith and described the gardens of Paradise with their eternal "celestial fruits and flowers." When two sisters failed to convert her, instead adopting her faith themselves, all three were condemned to torture and death. While Dorothea walked to her fate, a young lawyer, Theophilus, mockingly challenged her for proof of Paradise. Calmly assenting, she knelt in prayer and a boy "with hair bright as sun-beams," bearing a basket of apples and flowers, appeared before them.³⁸ It is this moment Bunny depicts.

The legend of St. Dorothea of Cappadocia was not popular in France, and again, Bunny's choice of subject became known in England through Rossetti and his circle. The British

³⁵ For the cult of Fra Angelico in nineteenth-century France see M. Driskel, *Representing Belief: Religion, Art and Society in Nineteenth Century France*, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992, pp. 68-71.

³⁶ See Thomas, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 97-98, for a photograph of *The Conversion of Valerian* c. 1899 and further details. By the early twentieth century, Bunny's darker tones in *Portrait of the Artist's Wife Jeanne as St. Cecilia* c. 1901 (the only later painting of this subject known) indicate his later interest in Velasquez and Rembrandt. In this painting Cecilia's story is not told; there is only a suggestion of distant music, prefiguring Bunny's so-called Nocturne series of c. 1907, several of which are held in the National Gallery of Australia.

³⁷ For a discussion of this fascinating lacuna in Bunny's exhibiting history at the Salon see Kane, *Symbolist Decade*, pp. 34-42.

³⁸ Jameson, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-86.

writer and critic, Algernon C. Swinburne (1837-1909) was close friends with Burne-Jones through the 1860s, during which time Swinburne composed his lengthy narrative poem *St. Dorothy* while Burne-Jones was occupied with his watercolours of *St. Theophilus and the Angel*, 1863-67 (Fig. 9). William Morris also wrote a version of the tale.³⁹



Fig. 9. Edward Burne-Jones and Charles Fairfax Murray, *St. Theophilus and the Angel: A Legend of the Martyrdom of St. Dorothea*, c. 1866. Watercolour and bodycolour, 67 x 88 cm. Courtesy of Sotheby's.

Bunny's *St. Dorothea's Roses* (Fig. 8)—so titled when exhibited in Brussels in 1897—although painted some forty years after the watercolour by Burne-Jones, sits well within this Pre-Raphaelite literary *milieu*. Moreover, Bunny's love of literature and poetry is well established, and Justh's 1888 diary entry confirms his fascination with both Rossetti and Swinburne.⁴⁰ The latter poet's *St. Dorothy*, dedicated to Burne-Jones in "affection and admiration," was published in his *Poems and Ballads* (1866).⁴¹ The following year Burne-Jones exhibited his watercolour, *St. Theophilus and the Angel* (Fig. 9), at the Old Water-Colour Society and again nearly thirty years later at the New Gallery in 1892-93 (cat. 72).⁴²

Although Bunny's large oil painting was also exhibited in 1892, it had been shown earlier in the year, in May, at the Paris salon.⁴³ So it is unlikely that Bunny saw Burne-Jones's work before preparing his own canvas and the compositional links should not be overstressed. On the other hand, both works reveal similarities in the specific incidents in the tale chosen by the artists. In each the emphasis lies on the miraculous flowers and fruits while the martyrdom is minimised: Burne-Jones depicts, in the middle ground, the saint's body being removed on a bier, whereas Bunny portrays her apparently post-martyrdom, as a saint with halo (Fig. 8). In both works the setting and costumes are medieval and each includes the figure of a dark, piping Pan, the pagan god. There is a sense of stasis in both works and Bunny's Dorothea again follows the sweet-faced Burne-Jones type. She is insubstantial, clad in white and capped with the distinctive halo, familiar in the Burne-Jones canon and often seen in the paintings of contemporary British "romantic" artists such as Thomas Gotch (1854-1931) or Edward Frampton (1870-1923).⁴⁴

³⁹ Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-67. For the friendship between Rossetti and Swinburne see T. Barringer, J. Rosenfeld and A. Smith. *Pre-Raphaelites. Victorian Art and Design*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2012, p. 13; and D. Latham, "Literal and Literary Texts: Morris' 'Story of Dorothea,'" *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 34, no. 3, Autumn 1996, pp. 329-39.

⁴⁰ As well as penning his own efforts, Bunny illustrated poems, such as Shakespeare's "*Sigh no more ladies*" (see Fig. 3) or Robert Herrick's "*To Dianeme*" for *The Magazine of Art* (1895) and other like journals. See Kane, *Symbolist Decade*, p. 64.

⁴¹ Algernon C. Swinburne, "St. Dorothy," *Poems and Ballads*, London, J. C. Hotton, 1866. pp. 274-91.

⁴² For the Old Water-Colour Society exhibition in 1867, see Wildman and Christian, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85. At New Gallery London, exhibited as *Theophilus and the Angel: A Legend of the Martyrdom of St. Dorothea*.

⁴³ At the *Société des Artistes français*, 1892, cat. 311.

⁴⁴ For example, Thomas Gotch, *The Child Enthroned* 1894, cat 121; see Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

The unifying factor is more likely to be Swinburne's poem. Bunny's painting certainly shares the same radiant imagery:

And when they came upon the paven place
 That was called sometime the place amorous,
 There came a child before Theophilus,
 Bearing a basket, and said suddenly:
 Fair sir, this is my mistress Dorothy
 That sends you gifts; and with this he was gone.
 In all this earth there is not such an one
 For colour and straight stature made so fair.
 The tender growing gold of his pure hair
 Was as wheat growing, and his mouth as flame,
 ... But for the fair green basket that he had,
 It was filled up with heavy white and red:
 Great roses stained still where the first rose bled. (n.l. pp. 289-90)

As in Swinburne's poem, Bunny establishes a winter scene. Swinburne makes several references to the chill and cold, stressing the miracle of the fruit and flowers in the "sharp and white" of mid-Winter. The poet also specifies "white stonework" and, as we have noted, a "paven place"; and as in Swinburne, Bunny's angel child's hair is blonde. The full-blown "great roses" too would have been enormously appealing for Bunny; they became an enduring motif, which he painted always in rose madder.⁴⁵ As in *Ste. Cécile* (Fig. 5), the red roses suggest the blood of her martyrdom, while the white roses testify to her purity. Swinburne (in accord with Jameson's description) defines the child as lucent, with "glowing gold" hair and "mouth aflame," and likewise Bunny's canvas glows with a bright white light, particularly on the background temples, Dorothea's halo, the child's hair and the heavenly fruit and flowers. As in Bunny's painting, Burne-Jones's watercolour (known through a black and white reproduction of the original and a replica version) also glows with a bright light from the sun on the horizon, which illuminates the background and highlights the temple and Theophilus and the angel.⁴⁶

The originality of Bunny's compositions was often praised and, although it is here argued he drew from the same sources as Burne-Jones, his portrayal is singular. Burne-Jones does not depict a child; rather, a conventional angel is the agent of the miracle and, like Swinburne, he includes also a statue of Venus (in the background) and the two sisters. By contrast Bunny, evoking the martyrdom, shows a statue after Cellini of Perseus holding the head of Medusa, and does not include Dorothea's fellow martyrs.⁴⁷ However it is striking that it is only Burne-Jones within his circle of artist friends who favoured St. Dorothea in his imagery, featuring

⁴⁵ Ives and Nottage in Edwards, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

⁴⁶ The original watercolour was commenced by Burne-Jones in 1863 and, while it was unfinished in his studio, a "replica" was begun by his assistant, Charles Fairfax Murray c. 1866, which Burne-Jones completed. The original 1863 watercolour was destroyed in World War II; a photogravure of the lost work is in the collection of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Its colour scheme is known through Burne-Jones and Fairfax Murray's replica (Fig. 9). For further details see *Burne-Jones Catalogue Raisonné*, (<https://www.eb-j.org/browse-artwork-detail/NzY2Mw==>).

⁴⁷ Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 32. Detailed in Jameson's version of the tale, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

her in several stained-glass windows, for example *St. Dorothy*, in St. Martin's Church, Brampton, Cumbria, 1878.⁴⁸ The shared literary sources are key to the similarities.⁴⁹



Fig. 10. Rupert Bunny. *Burial of St. Catherine of Alexandria*, c. 1896. Oil on canvas, 130.5 x 200.1 cm. (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne). Felton Bequest, 1928. Image: NGV.

Bunny's interest in the theme of the female saint continued over the next few years and in 1896 he exhibited the *Burial of St. Catherine of Alexandria* (Fig. 10) at the Royal Academy, London. The respect with which Bunny's work was viewed at this time is evident in the selection of this painting with *St. Dorothea's Roses* for the 1897 International Exhibition, Brussels, as representatives of British art. And at the Royal Academy of that year, 1897, Bunny exhibited *Angels Descending* (Fig. 13). The *Burial of St. Catherine of Alexandria* together with this painting, observes most faithfully the complex strands of British Aestheticism, which embraced the early poetic medievalism of Burne-Jones and concentrated on formal values, suppressing narrative and focusing on beauty.⁵⁰

As Jameson tells the tale, St. Catherine, a Roman princess, was yet another young, beautiful, virgin, who was, as well, gifted in philosophy, science and mathematics.⁵¹ In a dream she becomes the bride of Christ, with the Virgin Mary standing as godmother, and her eloquence converts hundreds of the sages sent to convert her. She is condemned to death but does not succumb easily. She is initially starved but is nourished by angels; she is then tied to the blade-studded wheel (which becomes her most familiar emblem). After the wheel is broken and destroyed by celestial fire she is finally beheaded. Typically for this period, Bunny ignores the gruesome martyrdom, restores the saint's head to its proper position and shows her being conveyed by angels across the desert to her final resting place in Mt. Sinai. Bunny's painting reflects the concepts of peace and death, transience and beauty, in step with themes that had been preoccupying Pre-Raphaelites and their followers since the famous painting of *Ophelia* by John Millais (1829-96).

⁴⁸ For a comprehensive listing of Burne-Jones's images of St. Dorothy, see *Burne-Jones Catalogue Raisonné*, (<https://www.eb-j.org/>).

⁴⁹ Literary sources other than Mrs. Jameson's legends include Voragine's *Golden Legend* and Lewis Morris's epic poem *A Vision of Saints* (1st publ. 1890, 2nd illustr. ed. 1892); see Kane, *Symbolist Decade*, p. 67.

⁵⁰ Kane, *Symbolist Decade*, pp. 69-70.

⁵¹ Jameson, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-86.



Fig. 11. Edward Burne-Jones, Morris & Co., Charles Fairfax Murray, *Entombment of St. Catherine*, predella, *St. Catherine Window*, 1878. Stained Glass. East Window, South Choir aisle, Chapel of Remembrance, Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford.

mauves and soft browns captures the gentle evening light. Sympathetic to the aesthetic tenor of the age, reality is suppressed, even to the weightlessness of the saint's body which, making no impression on the burial cloth, is conveyed effortlessly by the celestial women. By comparison, the angel bearing the legs of the saint in Bunny's charming small watercolour *Untitled [Burial of a Saint]* c. 1897 (Fig. 12), almost stumbles under her load. The narrative behind the oil painting is only inferred, the traditional symbols excised and the figures occupy the shallow frontal plane, as seen in the work of Leighton or Moore.

When shown in the Paris Salon of 1899, Bunny's painting attracted a lengthy review from the widely read French critic, Raymond Bouyer, who at first observed Bunny's reverence for Puvis and Burne-Jones, and then warmly extolled the way in which today's artists mysteriously merge "dream with reality, the setting with the spirit."⁵²

As with the St. Cecilia predella in Christ Church, Oxford, discussed earlier, it is Bunny's choice of this specific episode in the saint's life which is intriguing, and which suggests his familiarity with Burne-Jones's window. The *Entombment of St. Catherine*, c. 1878 (Fig. 11), is one of three predella episodes for the St. Catherine cycle in the Chapel of Remembrance and, as in Bunny's painting, it shows the saint, her head respectfully restored, being carried by four angels to her final resting place. There are no further similarities in composition. Of course, by the time of Bunny's work, some twenty years after the window was installed, the motif of the sleeping woman, sometimes understood as a metaphor for death, could be seen throughout the London galleries in, for example, Burne-Jones's renowned series *The Briar Rose* (1873-90), in Albert Moore's *Midsummer* (1887), and Frederic, Lord Leighton's acclaimed Academy work of 1895, *Flaming June*.

In this superbly confident canvas of Bunny's mature years, the four large angels are clad in a draped and tied costume, with gathered and bound hair. A muted palette of chalky greys, musky pinks,



Fig. 12. Rupert Bunny, *Untitled, [Burial of a Saint]*, c. 1897. Watercolour over pencil on paper, 42.0 x 54.5 cm. Private Collection. Courtesy of Philip Bacon Galleries.

⁵² R. Bouyer, "Un Salonier aux Salons de 1899. VI. L'art étranger—Comparaisons—La peinture anglaise: Londres et Glasgow," *L'Artiste série nouvelle*, t. II, 1899, p. 136.



Fig. 13. Rupert Bunny, *Angels Descending*, c. 1897. Oil on canvas, 157.5 x 98.9 cm. Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Morgan Thomas Bequest Fund, 1904.



Fig. 14. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Golden Stairs*, 1872-80. Oil on canvas, 269.2 x 116.8 cm. Tate Britain. Image: © Tate, London, 2017.

While dismissing many modern artists for “pedestrian realism” and “outrageous impressionism,” Bouyer stressed that artists like Bunny were rediscovering the “forgotten ideal of beauty” in their poetic canvases.⁵³ The painting received international recognition when it was awarded a bronze medallion in the British section of the *Exposition universelle* of 1900.

Echoes of Burne-Jones continued to appear in Bunny’s work of the 1890s, culminating in Bunny’s large oil painting *Angels Descending* (Fig. 13), exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1897. The angels—no longer the pale ethereal beings of his earlier works—are dressed in draped and folded gowns of glowing colour in the Pre-Raphaelite manner and, again, the Burne-Jones facial type is evident. It is, however, the selection of the vertical canvas and the singular descent of the women that links the work specifically to Burne-Jones’s painting *The Golden Stairs*, 1872-80 (Fig. 14), first exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1880. This significant Aesthetic work was well known through Felix Jansky’s 1894 engraving.⁵⁴

Furthermore, Bunny’s contemporary audience would have understood the descending scale of music, implicit in his work, but explicit in Burne-Jones’s *The Golden Stairs*, where all the women carry musical instruments. Bunny uses a close-up variant of the vertical composition of *Golden Stairs* and revisits the sinuous, repeated movement from right to left. *Angels Descending* was a success for Bunny, reproduced in *Academy Notes*, praised for its “decorative sense” by a reviewer in *The Magazine of Art*, and hung in the main gallery of the Royal Academy.⁵⁵ In keeping with the poetic tenor of the decade, the narrative of the angels

⁵³ Bouyer, *ibid*, p. 136. My warm thanks to Sylvia Sagona for her apt translation of the florid nineteenth-century critical language.

⁵⁴ A. Bowness, ed., *The Pre-Raphaelites*, London, The Tate Gallery, 1984, p. 236.

⁵⁵ *Academy Notes*, 1897, p. 53; “The Chronicles of Art,” *The Magazine of Art*, 1897, p. 47.

descending to bury a saint is subsumed in the decorative effect of the work. It was the first of Bunny's paintings to be purchased by an Australian gallery (South Australia, 1904) and was a fitting finale to the aesthetic, spiritual mood of the nineties, summed up by Burne-Jones when he said to Oscar Wilde "The more materialistic science becomes, the more angels I shall paint."⁵⁶



Fig. 15. D. G. Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1848-49. Oil on canvas, 83.2 x 65.4 cm. Tate Britain, Bequeathed by Lady Jekyll 1937. Image: © Tate, London, 2017.

familiarity with the pious Dominican's fifteenth-century fresco *The Annunciation* (1437-46), in the Convent of San Marco in Florence, can be detected in one or two of his small sketches (works on paper in the collection of the University of Melbourne), and the fresco, upper left, in his *Ancilla Domini* particularly recalls Masaccio's *Expulsion from the Garden of Evil* (1425), in the Brancacci Chapel, Sta Maria del Carmine.⁶⁰ It is Rossetti's influence, though, that is most clearly evident.

As we have seen, traditional religion was also an antidote to scientific materialism: there was a rise in interest in the veneration of the Madonna during the nineteenth century and representations appeared regularly in both the French Salons and the British galleries.⁵⁷ In 1896, the year Bunny exhibited *The Burial of St. Catherine of Alexandria* in the Royal Academy, he sent the smaller oil, *Ancilla Domini* (Fig. 16), to the Royal Society of British Artists. While *St. Catherine* and *Descending Angels* shows Bunny's preoccupation with aesthetic precepts, Bunny's *Ancilla Domini* revisits certain principles closely associated with the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: their celebration of the *primitifs*, their search for meaning in the spiritual medieval era, and their realistic depiction of these imagined worlds.⁵⁸

Zsigmond Justh's 1888 diary entry records Bunny's and Cary-Elwes's interest in Fra Angelico and in a letter of 1889 he writes of a possible trip to Florence and Venice with the two artists in order to see "the primitives."⁵⁹ Bunny's

⁵⁶ Quoted Warner, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁵⁷ For the rise of the Marian cult see Holcomb, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-14; for discussion of the history of ideas in Christian art, see H. Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, Oxford & Mass., Blackwell Publishers, 1992, pp. 97-99.

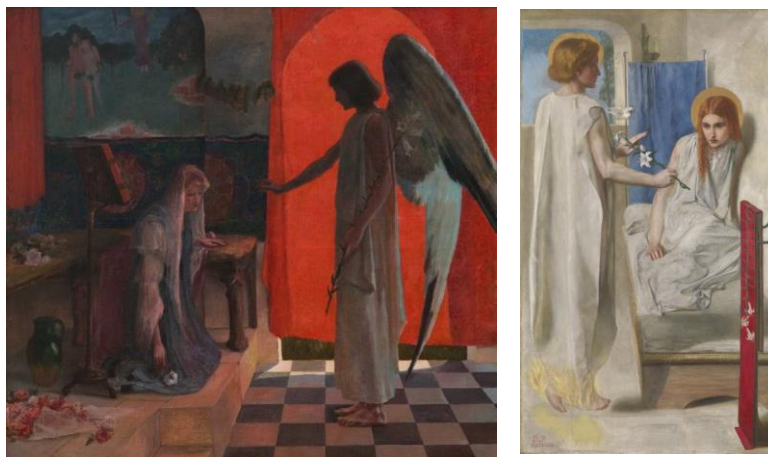
⁵⁸ For a revival of interest/visual quotations from the original Brotherhood at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, see Prettejohn, "The Pre-Raphaelite Legacy," in Barringer et al., *Pre-Raphaelites. Victorian Art and Design*, pp. 234-35. For analysis of the link with Aestheticism, Bohemianism, the Erotic and Whistler, see Barringer, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-67.

⁵⁹ Justh, quoted by Edwards, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

⁶⁰ For two untitled examples, [*Annunciation to the Virgin*] see Kane, *Sanctity and Mystery*, cats. 12 & 37 (not illustrated). Bunny possibly saw a panel, *The Annunciation* after Fra Angelico, which entered the collection of the National Gallery, London, 1894, see M. Davies, *National Gallery Catalogues: the Earlier Italian Schools*, London, Trustees of the National Gallery, 1951, pp. 26-27.

Fig. 16 (left). Rupert Bunny, *Ancilla Domini*, c. 1896. Oil on canvas, 100.3 x 110.4 cm. Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Gift of the M. J. M. Carter AO Collection and the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 1996.

Fig. 17 (right). D. G. Rossetti. *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* 1849-50. Oil on canvas mounted on panel, 72.6 x 41.9 cm. Tate Britain, Purchased 1886. Image: © Tate, London, 2017.



Both Bunny's *Ancilla Domini* and Rossetti's *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1849 (Fig. 15), use the devices of a dividing curtain and an arch to partition the space. However, Bunny's debt to Rossetti is most clear in Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* 1849-50 (Fig. 17), purchased by the Tate Gallery, London in April 1886.⁶¹ As noted, Bunny had moved to Paris in the preceding year, but in October 1886 he returned to visit his British family, and would have seen this well-publicised acquisition in London.⁶² In both paintings the annunciate angels are shown in profile with pageboy bobs and both wear an ankle length garment of rare simplicity;⁶³ further, each features a muscled arm, bare to the shoulder, and both carry a long-stemmed lily. The differences are equally stark, of course: Rossetti's angel is wingless, elevated by feet of heavenly fire and bears a gold nimbus.⁶⁴ There are other medieval features, so favoured by the original Brotherhood, in for example, Bunny's costume for the Virgin and in the settings. As well, the corner bench is in an imagined Gothic style where carved elongated angels with crossed arms form the legs. Although not historically logical these characteristics would recall for the contemporary audience the pious, pure faith of the medieval era.

During the 1890s, Bunny, a natural and gifted colourist, moved between the bleached palette of *St. Cécile* c. 1890 or *A summer morning* 1897 (AGSA) and the brighter hues in such works as *Una and the fauns*, 1894 (QAGOMA) or *Mermaids Dancing*, 1896 (NGV).⁶⁵ The walls of the Royal Academy too, sang with colour, with for instance J. W. Waterhouse's *St. Cecilia* or

⁶¹ The work was exhibited at the RA (no. 288) and Whitechapel (no. 16) in 1883 and was purchased from Christie's sale April 3, lot 113 1886. See Rossetti Archive: <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s44.rap.html> (accessed 22 June 2020).

⁶² Eagle, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

⁶³ On the whole, the 1890s angels in both London and Paris have more complex, folded costumes, e.g. Arthur Hacker's *The Annunciation* RA 1892 (illustrated in *Royal Academy Pictures* 1892, Part IV, p. 122) or Alfred Bramtot's *Le rêve de Marie* 1890 (illustrated in *Société des Artistes français*, 1890, p. 132); for further examples and discussion see Kane, *Symbolist Decade*, pp. 86-88.

⁶⁴ The conceit of the flaming feet appears in Frank Cadogan Cowper's *St. Agnes in Prison Receiving from Heaven the Shining White Garment*, 1905; see Christian, *Last Romantics*, p. 27.

⁶⁵ British critic Jope-Slade described *The Intruders* (a lost work) in terms of its "brilliant and intense blue ... flaming vermilion (and) ... dazzlingly bright ... white." R. Jope-Slade, "An Australian Quartette," *The Magazine of Art*, Vol. 17, 1895, p. 392.

Frederic Leighton's *Flaming June*—major drawcards in the main gallery.⁶⁶ The dominant feature of Bunny's *Ancilla Domini* (and a sharp contrast to Rossetti's largely white palette) is his depiction of the glowing vermilion curtain through which light pours. By this time, in France, the Nabis's use of large areas of intense colour may well have been a stimulant for Bunny even though they distorted realism in their efforts to grasp a spiritual meaning. Instead, Bunny creates a realistic setting in the style of the original Brotherhood, while through colour he establishes the emotional intensity of one of Christianity's great mysteries.⁶⁷

It has been shown that from the mid-1880s Bunny shared several literary sources and many aspects of the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic, finding in Rossetti's images and, particularly, in the late work of Burne-Jones, a rich source of inspiration. In this he stands alone among Australian artists; none of his peers shows such a direct influence from the Pre-Raphaelites and the movement's second generation.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the selection of some of Bunny's paintings for the British section in important European exhibitions demonstrates that this British aesthetic was clearly recognised. However, with the dawn of the twentieth century, Bunny's religious work becomes grittier and more imbued with human drama, as, for example, in *St. Veronica* (c. 1902),⁶⁹ while his images of women assume a greater physical presence. This can be seen foreshadowed in the more womanly forms of *Angels Descending* (1897); within a very short time, his women leave their wings behind, don tea gowns, and become the nattering, chattering and gossiping ladies of the Edwardian idyll. The poetic nineties had passed. By 1911, on his first return visit to Australia, Bunny could refer dismissively to the "downfall of the ideal of prettiness" which, he continued, had been "tottering for some time."⁷⁰ The Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic had given way to the thrust of the modern.

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⁶⁶ A. Hobson, *The Art and Life of J. W. Waterhouse RA 1849-1917*, London, Studio Vista/ Christie's Book, 1980, p. 186; S. Jones et al., *Frederic, Lord Leighton*, NY & London, Harry N. Abrahams/Royal Academy of Arts, 1996, p. 236.

⁶⁷ For further details, see Kane, *Symbolist Decade*, pp. 84-89.

⁶⁸ For the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites in the decorative arts see C. Menz, *Morris & Company: Pre-Raphaelites and the arts and crafts movement in South Australia*, Adelaide, Art Gallery of South Australia Board, 1994.

⁶⁹ Rupert Bunny, *St. Veronica*, c. 1902, oil on canvas, 86 x 111 cm, Private Collection:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saint_Veronica_by_Rupert_Bunny_\(c.,_1902\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saint_Veronica_by_Rupert_Bunny_(c.,_1902).jpg)

⁷⁰ "The Art of Mr. Rupert Bunny. An Eminent Australian," *The Southern Sphere*, 11 July 1911, p. 15.

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