

Ashmolean acquires archive of the last Pre-Raphaelite

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The Ashmolean has acquired an important record of the Pre-Raphaelite artists, the illustrated letters of Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98) to Helen Mary (May) Gaskell (1853-1940).

Image



Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98) letter showing the 'fat man'

The archive, which has remained with May Gaskell's descendants, consists of more than 200 letters dating from 1892 up to the year of Burne-Jones's death: three albums of intimate letters from the artist to Mrs Gaskell; two albums of illustrated letters to Mrs Gaskell and her daughter, Daphne; and other ephemera such as the artist's brushes which he used when painting his famous portrait of

Amy Gaskell. The letters are one of the most endearing records of all Burne-Jones's friendships. They recount both his innermost thoughts and feelings and feature a cast of humorous characters, fictitious and real.

They have been acquired for £200,000 with major support from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF); the Art Fund; the Arts Council England/Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund; the Friends of the National Libraries; and numerous private donations.

Two of the albums are on display in the Museum for its Great British Drawings exhibition where they can be seen until 31 August. They will now enter the Ashmolean's permanent collection. Following conservation, they will be made available as an invaluable resource to students and scholars of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, and they will be published online. The letters will add to the collection of drawings by Burne-Jones bequeathed to the Ashmolean in 1939 by Mrs Gaskell, forming one of the richest Pre-Raphaelite archives in the country.

Many of the letters were published by Josceline Dimbleby, May Gaskell's great-granddaughter, in her acclaimed book, *A Profound Secret* (2004), which recounts the author's research into her family's history.

On the occasion of this major acquisition, Josceline Dimbleby will give a Saturday Talk on 8 August at the Ashmolean, in conversation with the curator of Great British Drawings, Colin Harrison.

Josceline Dimbleby says: "My discovery of so many intimate and often witty letters from Burne-Jones to my great grandmother May Gaskell, forgotten for decades in an old chest of drawers, was one of the most exciting moments in my life, together with finding, wrapped in old paper and string at the back of one drawer, the paintbrushes he used for his famous portrait of my doomed great aunt Amy Gaskell, still with paint sticking to them. The letters revealed a passion that made it hard to think of this friendship as platonic and I spent a fascinating and happy three years piecing together and writing the story of what was *A Profound Secret*, feeling that I was getting to know my ancestors, and a very private side of Burne-Jones."

Burne-Jones met May Gaskell in 1892, and she became the last in the succession of women with whom he enjoyed especially close, but platonic, friendships. She was the wife of a dull cavalry officer, and, in an unfulfilling marriage, she corresponded with Burne-Jones up to five times a day. The letters include a series of cartoon-like tales featuring characters such as the 'fat lady' and the artist

himself, caught in mishap and misadventure. Beneath the surface lies the black humour endemic to Burne-Jones's frequent moods of depression and insecurity. There is, for example, a superb sequence of caricatures of the artist suffering from flu. In the course of their friendship, Burne-Jones became dependent on May, confessing to her that she 'reached the well of loneliness that is in me'.

He also sent whimsical letters to the infant Daphne Gaskell (1887–1966). She was only six when she met Burne-Jones and he took an affectionate and fatherly interest in her, his own children having grown up. His letters to Daphne, written in phonetic spelling, include birds and animals familiar from his other letters to children, and several fantastic inventions such as the 'Phlumbudge' and 'Flapdabble'. The archive also includes some letters to May's elder daughter, Amy (1874–1910), whom Burne-Jones painted in 1893 in one of the greatest Pre-Raphaelite portraits (collection of Lord Lloyd-Webber).

Colin Harrison, Senior Curator of European Art, Ashmolean Museum, says: "May Gaskell was Burne-Jones's closest friend in his last years. He gave her a selection of his finest drawings, which she in turn gave to the Ashmolean in 1939. The opportunity to acquire the albums of intimate and humorous letters that he sent to May and to her daughter, Daphne, was unmissable; and we are most grateful for the support from the NHMF, the Art Fund, and other bodies, as well as numerous private donors. Their generosity has ensured that the letters have ended up in their rightful home, and that the Ashmolean now has one of the most representative, as well as distinguished, collections of Burne-Jones's work in the world."

Sir Peter Luff, Chair of NHMF, says: "Sir Edward Burne-Jones was the most prominent of the second generation Pre-Raphaelites and his work had an enormous influence. This exceptional collection of letters, which throws light on the last years of his life, was the most important part of his collection in private hands. I'm delighted that National Heritage Memorial Fund investment will mean they can be available for everyone to explore and enjoy."

Stephen Deuchar, Director of the Art Fund, says: "The Ashmolean owns one of the finest collections of works by Burne-Jones in the world, which will be greatly enriched by this important and delightful collection of letters."

Notes to editors

Great British Drawings

Following the overwhelming popularity of the Ashmolean's Master Drawings exhibition in 2013, the museum is celebrating its position as one of the world's leading collections of drawings and works on paper. Great British Drawings features more than a hundred of the Ashmolean's best drawings by British artists, charting the history of drawing and artistic development in Britain. Among the artists represented are: JMW Turner; Rossetti, Millais, Holman Hunt; Paul Nash; Ben Nicholson; Graham Sutherland; Eric Ravilious; Peter de Francia; and more.

This acquisition has been made possible with the generous support of:

- The National Heritage Memorial Fund
- The Art Fund
- The Arts Council England / Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund
- The Friends of the Ashmolean
- The Friends of the National Libraries
- Private donors who wish to remain anonymous

The Art Fund

The Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for art, driven by the belief that everyone should have access to great art. In the past five years the Art Fund has given £34m to help museums and galleries acquire works of art for their collections. The Art Fund also helps museums share their collections with wider audiences by supporting a range of tours and exhibitions, including Artists Rooms and the 2013–18 Aspire tour of Tate's *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* by John Constable, and makes additional grants to support the training and professional development of curators.

Find out more about the Art Fund and the National Art Pass at the [Art Fund website](#).

The Arts Council England/Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund

The Arts Council England / Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund is a government fund that helps regional museums, record offices and specialist libraries in England and Wales to acquire objects relating to the arts, literature and history. It was established at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in 1881 and continues to be part of its nationwide work. The annual grants budget, currently £750,000, is provided by Arts Council England (ACE). Each year, the Purchase Grant Fund considers some 200 applications and awards grants to

around 100 organisations, enabling acquisitions of over £3million to go ahead. More information is available at the [Arts Council England/Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund webpage](#).

Friends of the National Libraries

The Friends of the National Libraries is a registered charity that was founded in 1931. Its purpose is to help libraries in the United Kingdom acquire books, manuscripts and archives, in particular those that might otherwise leave this country. Since then, the Friends have helped in the purchase of printed books, manuscripts, records and archives of historical, literary, artistic, architectural, musical or suchlike interest. Libraries which can receive grants include the British Library, the National Libraries of Scotland and Wales and any university, county, local authority and other library, record office, museum or gallery to which the public has access, and which in the opinion of the Trustees, constitutes a proper repository for a proposed acquisition. Visit the [Friends of the National Libraries website](#).

Further information

Ashmolean Museum: Claire Parris, Press Officer. Email: claire.parris@ashmus.ox.ac.uk, tel: 01865 278 178, mobile: 07833 384 512.