

The Object podcast
Transcript of Monsters and Marvels, Part III: The Mermaid's Tale
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When Edward Burne-Jones is 47 years old, he buys a cottage by the sea. It's 1880. He's been living with his wife and kids in London, the largest city in the world at the time, while carrying on a long and tragic affair. And now it's over, and he wants some peace and quiet, and so does his wife.

In fact, his wife picks out the house, riding south from London over the Sussex Downs to the village of Rottingdean. An isolated hamlet then on the South Coast of England, with no gas and no railway. She sees the grey garden walls and the massive windmill on the hill, its sails turning slowly in the sun. And then she sees this plain, whitewashed, three-story house facing the village green, and that's it: the holiday home they've been looking for, the weekend getaway. She asks to buy it on the spot.

Burne-Jones is an artist who can't stop working, though by this time he's fairly famous. He paints, he designs stained-glass windows, he makes patterns for furniture and clothes and shoes and jewelry. It's only in the country, where no one cares who he is, that he begins to slow down and focus.

He spends as many weekends there as he can. Eventually he buys the house next door, too, so there's even fewer people around. And in this house he turns the old kitchen into a private tavern, with a fireplace and a long black oak table and a settle, a kind of wooden bench, where he and a few friends can drink and smoke and throw dice. He calls it the Merry Mermaid.

Burne-Jones had drawn a few mermaids before moving to the sea, but now he seems to be conjuring them from the waves, in surprising numbers. Entire mer-families, with mer-mothers and mer-babies. Deadly mermaids. Gorgeous mermaids, like the one catching fish in the painting called "A Sea Nymph" at the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

Here, at the edge of civilization, Burne-Jones appears to observe them like a naturalist of the unknown. Like the inscription he writes on the back of a painting of a mer-family going about its mer-business: quote "Study from nature off Rottingdean."

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This is The Object podcast, produced by the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Today, part three of Monsters and Marvels, the finale, about the enduring metaphor of the mermaid. I'm Tim Gihring.

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For the first nine months of our lives, we exist in something like seawater. Swimming around in the tiny ocean of our mothers. And then we become landlubbers. Most of us will never spend more than a few hours bobbing around the surface of what mostly covers the Earth.

It's actually hard to overstate how little we know about the ocean, and for how long we haven't known it. For most of human history we've only known the ocean from what we've pulled off the top or from what it's left behind, on our beaches and boats. We've had no way to explore its depths until the last 90 years. And so, we've been left to imagine.

The first merfolk are gods, who come out of the sea to mix it up with us humans, stranded on land. The Babylonian god Oannes, for example, is a strange sort of merman, with both a fish body *and* a human body—like a guy in a fish suit, who rises out of the sea every day to lecture people in whatever knowledge there is to know. A kind of amphibious professor.

The fertility goddess Atargatis, who was worshipped a few thousand years ago, falls in love with a shepherd and then accidentally kills him, from her supernatural lovemaking or something. She is depicted in many forms, often riding a lion. But in one legend, she feels so terrible about the accidental death of her lover that she throws herself in a lake and turns into a fish. Except, she's so beautiful that the waters refuse to completely transform her—she's a fish only from the waist down, the way we now usually think of mermaids.

Sarah Peverley is a professor of English at the University of Liverpool and a BBC New Generation Thinker. She's writing a cultural history of mermaids. And she says that mermaids emerge as this kind of liminal creature, quote “caught between two worlds, the land and the sea.” The world we know and the world we don't know. And in these early incarnations, she says, merfolk act as a bridge between these different realms—they represent the things we don't know and let us in on the secrets.

In the early medieval era, Peverley says, mermaids are linked to paradise and salvation. They are here to help. But then the benevolence disappears. In the medieval bestiaries of the 1100s, those popular books of fabulous creatures like dragons and unicorns, merfolk are blended in with the sirens who lure sailors to their doom. Human from the navel up, a fish from the navel down, and dangerous from head to tail.

By the late Middle Ages, mermaids are often shown with a mirror and comb. A symbol of self-reflection and duality, Peverley says, but also vanity and lust. They embody change and transformation—and everything men feared about strong, independent women.

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Edward Burne-Jones grows up as far from the sea as you can get in the UK, in Birmingham, England, the heart of the Industrial Revolution. And when he gets to Exeter College, at Oxford, he and some other students from home fall in together—they call themselves the Birmingham Set.

One of these friends is William Morris, who goes on to become the most famous English designer of the 1800s, a founder of the Arts and Crafts movement. Though he's not in fact from

Birmingham at all—he's grown up rich, with a pony and a miniature suit of real armor, playing out his medieval fantasies. But he's come to loathe the Industrial Revolution, and what it's doing to places like Birmingham, at least as much as Burne-Jones.

One day, Burne-Jones and Morris go to a bookshop and they find a copy of Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the ancient tales of King Arthur and the Round Table, of Sir Lancelot and Camelot. Neither of them can afford the book on their own, so they buy it together and have joint custody, another way they're bound together for life.

They become obsessed with the Middle Ages. They visit Gothic cathedrals together, and read poetry about knights and damsels in distress. And they launch a magazine to chronicle their obsessions for the medieval-curious, creating a subculture around a simpler, more enchanted time.

Grace Nuth, who lives in Ohio, is the senior editor of *Enchanted Living* magazine, and the co-author of *The Faerie Handbook*, and has written a lot about the intersection of art and magical creatures. And she says that if Burne-Jones and Morris were alive today, quote, “they’d be playing Dungeons and Dragons.”

They're true believers, she says. And eventually they fall in with the older artists who called themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The rebels who first revived the medieval era, in the 1850s, with clean lines and classical themes—the artist as craftsman of the bold and beautiful.

But Burne-Jones and Morris carry on with it, Nuth says, long after the original Pre-Raphaelites had mostly moved on. By the 1880s, Burne-Jones has been painting Arthurian legends and fairy tales—noble knights and sleeping beauties—for nearly 30 years, when the mermaids begin to show up.

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Let's step back for a second and think about what people really thought about mermaids in the medieval era—did they really believe in them? Sarah Peverley, the professor, says they believed in merfolk as real creatures, as most people did for most of human history. Though what that meant was different then, quote “there was no separation of real and imaginary in the modern sense.”

Mermaids, she says, like the other exotic beasts thought to inhabit distant and hostile places, like the ocean, exemplified the quote “unfathomable and complex nature of God's creation.” To think of creatures with the head of a human and the tail of a fish was to understand—just a little bit—how incredible God's plan was, and how unknowable. They were part of a giant puzzle, she says, a picture only God could see in its entirety.

But eventually, by the time of the Enlightenment in the 1700s, some people believe they can see how the puzzle works. People have seen a lot of the world by then, using science and observation to describe it. And what they haven't seen are unicorns or dragons. Or mermaids.

By the time that Edward Burne-Jones comes along, in the Victorian era, the fabulous beasts that inhabited the boundless medieval imagination have long since shuffled off into the realms of fantasy and fiction for most Western Europeans. Mermaids have become free agents. And because they no longer mean what they used to mean, they could mean anything.

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Burne-Jones, like the other pre-Raphaelites, has some relatively radical ideas about women. This is the Victorian era, right, when women are expected to wear corsets and keep their hair up and be the perfect wife and mother. To be demure. But the pre-Raphaelites say forget all that. Ditch the corset, let your hair down.

They want to explore transformative emotions, Peverley says, and the sensuality of free-flowing hair and loosely draped clothing, if any. And so the models they find are down with this, in real life, trading the corset for tunics and letting their hair down.

Grace Nuth says the pre-Raphaelites, and the women they brought into the movement, were “the hippies of their time. Rebels in their personal lives, rebels in how they dressed, rebels in how they dressed their homes.” Instead of the overstuffed Victorian style, they chose the freedom of the simple life.

Only, it wasn't always so simple.

Burne-Jones is married and in his early 30s, with a long stringy beard down to his chest, when he meets the young Maria Zambaco—the 23-year-old daughter of a wealthy Greek merchant, with dark hair and large brown eyes that seem more perceptive than most. Zambaco's mother hires Burne-Jones to paint Maria, as part of the classical duo Cupid and Psyche, and they fall in love.

The pre-Raphaelites had become notorious for their affairs with models, and now Burne-Jones is in the thick of it. His wife becomes closer with William Morris, whose own wife is having an affair with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, one of the founders of the Brotherhood. The affairs go on for years.

Finally, in 1869, Zambaco brings Burne-Jones to the banks of the Regent's Canal, in the Little Venice section of West London. She's brought a vial or two of laudanum, a kind of opium, with the idea that she and Burne-Jones will commit suicide together, there by the water. Burne-Jones is taken aback, and when Zambaco threatens to drown herself, he tackles her.

The commotion draws out the neighbors, including the poets Robert and Elizabeth Browning, who reportedly call the police. Burne-Jones seems mortified, alarmed that things have gotten so out of control. And then he faints.

And yet it's not the end of the affair. It goes on for years more until they pull away, and Burne-Jones is left to reconcile the forces he's been playing with.

Nuth says that Burne-Jones, by the 1870s, has seen this quote "gamut of womanhood: woman as mother, woman as delicate creature, woman as strong, as out-of-control, chaotic, emotional being." And then he begins to depict all of these different aspects, in mermaids.

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A year after buying the cottage by the sea, Burne-Jones creates the mermaid painting now at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, called *A Sea Nymph*. It shows a mermaid rising out of the blue sea, gorgeous and naked, her long red hair billowing in the breeze. She's hoisting some large silver fish, like dumb-bells.

Nuth says she looks like a warrior, tough enough to fish with her bare hands. Sarah Peverley says this quote "stunning denizen of the deep" could be friend or foe—it's not entirely clear what she's up to with those fish. Are they her pets, or are they her lunch?

The following year, in 1882, Burne-Jones paints a mother mermaid tenderly holding her mer-child.

And then, around 1887, he creates an enormous watercolor, six feet high, called *The Depths of the Sea*. He borrows a large glass tank from a friend and fills it with greenish water, so he can capture the murky, mysterious effects of light underwater. And he paints a mermaid dragging a naked man to the ocean floor.

A few years before, he seemed to settle on the idea that women were not to be taken lightly. "A woman at her best," he told a studio assistant, "self-denying and devoted, is pathetic and lovely beyond words; but once she gets the upper hand and flaunts, she's the devil." "Beware," he said, as though acknowledging his own desire to draw near.

And here, in what Peverley calls a "submarinal world, with its lurid half-light and claustrophobic caverns," Burne-Jones has brought desire and death together, with ambiguous meaning. The mermaid, Peverley says, "has a powerful agency of her own, the ability to best a man." But to what end, it's not clear.

Burne-Jones's wife has said that the mermaid in "The Depths of the Sea" was modeled on their mercurial friend Laura Lyttleton, whom they called the Siren, as she beguiled all she met with her charm and beauty. She had settled down and married, in 1885, only to die a year later in childbirth.

But as Peverley tells me, quote "There is no titillation here, just a trail of bubbles as the last breath of human life effervesces to the surface."

Nuth points out that there are two versions of the painting, and in the first the mermaid has a more kindly, cherubic expression. As though the man was perhaps already dead, and now she's

simply bringing him to his eternal grave. But in the second, she says, the mermaid has a Mona Lisa smile. As though anything were possible.

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Burne-Jones dies about 10 years later. There are more mermaids, of course, painted and drawn by other artists, right through the Golden Age of Illustration, in the early 1900s. But then, with World War I, everything changes.

The world is nearly destroyed, and nothing saved us from ourselves. And now whatever faith is left in more enchanted realms suddenly looks naïve. As Nuth puts it, after the war “it isn’t considered acceptable anymore to dream and be whimsical and charming and to focus on beauty in art, instead of meaning.”

Right after World War II, mermaids resurface in a number of romantic comedy films, like “Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid,” and “Mad About Men,” as strong, seductive women—the sort of femme fatales, Peverley says, that the pre-Raphaelites would have been proud of. And then in the 1960s, the counterculture rediscovers the world of dragons and faeries and mermaids, throwing off the shackles of reason and capitalism once again for something more hopeful. The fantasy world of *The Lord of the Rings* that’s been with us ever since.

Mermaids, Peverley says, are still powerful symbols of suppressed desires and drives, helping us think through complex ideas and hidden truths. “There has never been a time,” she says, “that we haven’t used merfolk to express and navigate aspects of our own humanity, and there probably never will be.”

Nuth says that mermaids, by their very nature, will always be an example for people who feel not quite themselves in this world, quote “anyone who has ever felt like they didn’t belong, who has ever felt out of place.”

A couple years before he dies, Burne-Jones gets one last major commission, to paint a dancing girl. But it’s 1896 and William Morris has just died, and Burne-Jones is devastated. He asks if he can produce a figure of hope instead.

He creates an enormous, nearly life-size image of a woman—a woman from head to toe this time. He puts a shackle around her ankle and a branch of apple blossoms in her hand, a symbol of hope. And he lifts her other hand to the sky. Her palm open. As though she is bound to this world, while reaching for another.