The Great Bookcase, designed by William Burges (1827-1881), 1859-1862, 317.5 x 173.9 x 49.5 cm. WA1933.26 © Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology.

Not Acceptable to Present Taste: William Burges's Great Bookcase

Matthew Winterbottom

Designed by William Burges and painted by fourteen young artists between 1859 and 1863, the 'Great Bookcase' was recently displayed for the first time at the Ashmolean Museum. Made to hold books on art and architecture, it is painted with a sophisticated iconographic scheme relating to the pagan and Christian arts. Despite acknowledging that it was not 'acceptable to present taste', Kenneth Clark's acquisition of the bookcase for the Ashmolean in 1933 was remarkably far-sighted. Nevertheless, it was to take over eighty years before the bookcase was placed on public display at the museum.

In May 2016, the Nineteenth-Century Art Galleries at the Ashmolean Museum reopened to the public following their redevelopment. This project, which included the installation of much needed environmental controls, was funded through the generosity of Barrie and Deedee Wigmore. Key to the redisplay was the return, after an absence of nearly sixty-five years, of William Burges's magnificent Great Bookcase. (fig.1) Standing at over three metres tall, and lavishly gilded and decorated with paintings by Burges and his many artist friends, the bookcase forms the magnificent new centrepiece to the redisplayed galleries. (fig. 2) Although acquired by the Museum in 1933, it does not seem to have been placed on public display before it was lent to the pioneering exhibition, 'Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Arts' at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1952. (1) Rather than returning to Oxford, it was subsequently lent to Knightshayes Court in Devon, Burges's great unfinished country house. There it remained for over five decades, leaving only for the exhibition, 'The Strange Genius of William Burges', held in Cardiff in 1981. (2) It was only in 2016 that the bookcase returned to the Ashmolean Museum to be displayed in the galleries for the first time.

2 Gallery of Nineteenth-Century Art, Ashmolean Museum, © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

The bookcase was one of several remarkable works of art acquired by the young Kenneth Clark during his brief tenure as Keeper of Art at the Ashmolean during the early 1930s. (fig.3) Purchased for £50 in 1933 from the Tower House sale, the bookcase was a particularly far-sighted and pioneering acquisition at a time when Victorian art and architecture was generally despised and derided. (3) Clark, himself, wrote that although the bookcase was:

> not acceptable to present taste it will always remain an important document in the history of the [Pre-Raphaelite] movement and a minor realisation of the ideals behind such projects as the decoration of the Library of the Oxford Union and the building of the University Museum. (4)

Given his specific references to Oxford, it seems certain Clark had intended the bookcase should be on public display in the Ashmolean. He surely cannot have foreseen that this would take over eighty years to achieve!

3 Kenneth Clark (1903-1983); private collection. photographed around 1933.

4 The Prioress's Tale Wardrobe, designed by Philip Webb (1831-1915) and painted by Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898), 1858-1859. 219.71 x 157.48 x 53.7 cm. WA1939.2

Clark's interest in the Gothic Revival had begun before he joined the Ashmolean during his time as a student at Oxford in the 1920s. Clark's admiration for the writings of John Ruskin had drawn him to the movement that Ruskin had so passionately believed in. Charles F. Bell, then Keeper of Western Art at the Ashmolean, suggested that Clark choose the Gothic Revival in architecture as the subject of his BLitt thesis. This was to lead to Clark's first book, the ground-breaking *Gothic Revival: an Essay in the History of Taste*, published in 1928 and still considered a classic introduction to the subject. Clark's work on the Gothic Revival helped change public opinion, albeit painfully slowly, and it marked the beginning of a new and serious appreciation of Victorian art and architecture.

It is not, therefore, surprising that as the supreme example of Victorian Gothic Revival furniture, the Great Bookcase should have been acquired by Clark for the Ashmolean Museum in 1933. Indeed, it is doubtful that any other Museum, the V&A included, would have been prepared to purchase it at that time. It was at exactly this time that the V&A was seriously contemplating de-accessioning some of its Victorian furniture, including the remarkable armoire designed by A.W.N Pugin that had been purchased directly from the Mediaeval Court at the Great Exhibition. (5) Had Clark not left the Ashmolean in the following year to become the Director of the National Gallery, aged only 30, no doubt he would have arranged to display it in the galleries together with the important collection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings that had been bequeathed to the Museum by Martha Coombe (1806-1893) in 1893. Martha was the widow of Thomas Coombe (1796-1872), who had made his fortune as printer to the University of Oxford. Coombe was a patron of the Pre-Raphaelites in the early 1850s when their work was little appreciated. (6)

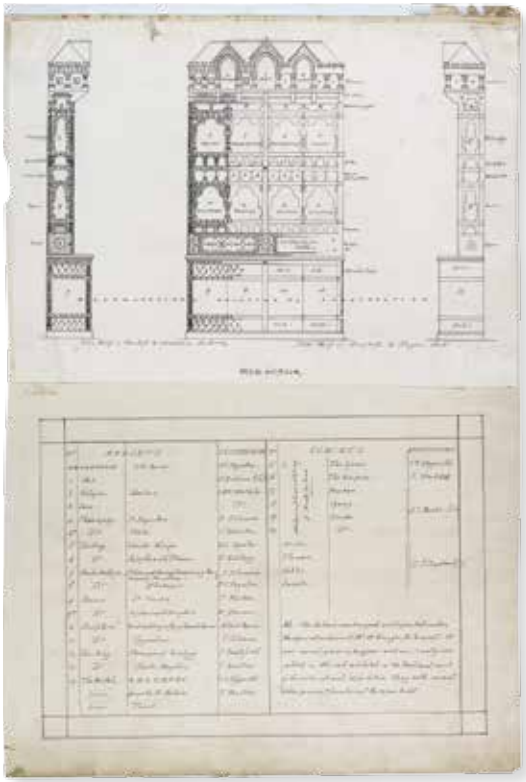
The Great Bookcase, itself, has relatively peripheral connections to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood -- or at least, to its founding members -- although it is possible one of its painted panels may have had been worked on by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (see below). More relevant is the Prioress's Tale Wardrobe that had been on loan to the Ashmolean since 1901 and which was displayed with the Coombe Bequest of paintings. (fig.4) Designed by Philip Webb and painted by Edward Burne-Jones with scenes from Chaucer's Prioress's Tale, using Jane Burden as a model, the wardrobe had been a wedding gift to William Morris from Burne-Jones. (7) First displayed in the principal bedchamber at the Red House, it moved in 1865 to Kelmscott House, Hammersmith, where it stood in the Drawing Room. It was first lent to the Ashmolean in 1901 by Jane Morris and was eventually bequeathed by May Morris in 1939. Probably painted between 1858 and 1859, the wardrobe was completed in the same year that work on the Great Bookcase began. It is the earliest surviving piece of painted furniture made by Morris and his circle. Kenneth Clark knew that the wardrobe had been promised to the Ashmolean by May Morris, and this must have influenced his decision to acquire the Great Bookcase in 1933.

Although both pieces clearly look back to medieval antecedents, they are stylistically, iconographically and technically very different. Burges, himself, described the painted furniture of William Morris as that 'used by the middle-classes in the times of our forefathers', whereas his was 'more like that found in the houses of the nobility.' (8) Both pieces belong to the brief period from the late 1850s to the early 1860s when Gothic Revival painted furniture was at the vanguard of avant-garde taste. This was to culminate in the spectacular displays of painted furniture by Burges, Morris, and others in the Mediaeval Court at the International Exhibition of 1862. This painted furniture was to give a very different character to the Medieval Court, compared to that laid out by Pugin eleven years earlier at the Crystal Palace. Described as 'the high water mark of the Gothic Revival in England', (9) the Medieval Court was arranged by Burges for the Ecclesiological Society. As the largest piece of furniture shown, Burges's own Great Bookcase dominated the displays. (fig.5) It was not, however, universally admired or even understood. The Builder and Architectural Review was particularly scathing:

5 The Medieval Court at the International Exhibition, 1862. The Great Bookcase is just visible in the background © Victoria and Albert Museum.

> Mr. Burges' Bookcase illustrative of Pagan and Christian art, is full of the childish follies which are spread over all this painted furniture. The outline of the case is simply ugly; the cornice is heavy and disproportioned; panels of what looks like real Florentine inlaid marble, are set in the commonest of deal frames, unredeemed even by good workmanship. The paintings are awkward and of unequal merit. First we have a lot of flowers, then the fables illustrated, and thirdly, the History of Cock Robin. As if such subjects were not sufficiently absurd, we have one half of one of the foxes, in the story of the Three Foxes, in one panel, whilst his tail and hind quarters are depicted with the fable of the Wolf and the Lamb. The panels are enclosed by crocketed arches, and they are the best parts of the detail. They show an amount of knowledge which ought not to be linked with the rest of the work. The lower part of the Bookcase is likewise painted, and in the same eccentric drearily- humorous fashion…The plain surface is peppered with gilt shells, similar to those which children cut out and stick against the walls. We had almost omitted to mention a series of very humorous delineations of the metals, but what they have to do with a bookcase, with Cock Robin's history, with Gay's or Aesop's fables, with Pagan or Christian art, with red-haired women, with ornithological females, with calceolaria, wild rose, or daisy, with Florentine marble or painted pine, we must leave the medievalists to tell us. We confess ourselves fairly puzzled. (10)

In fact, the bookcase has a remarkably coherent and highly sophisticated decorative scheme that reflects Burges's wide-ranging interests, erudition and also his extraordinary sense of humour. As much has already been written on the earlier history of the Great Bookcase, a brief overview will here suffice. (11) It was created for Burges's own architectural practice at 15 Buckingham Street in London. Begun in 1859, it was completed three years later in time to be shown at the 1862 International Exhibition. Burges designed the piece to house his books on art and architecture, and his painted decorative scheme reflected this. Fourteen young artists, many of whom were associated with the Pre-Raphaelite movement, were invited by



6 Plan of the Great Bookcase, William Burges, *c.*1862 © RIBA Collections.

7 William Burges, tracing of *Art* flanked by *Religion* and *Love* on the pediment of the Great Bookcase, *c.*1862 © RIBA Collections.

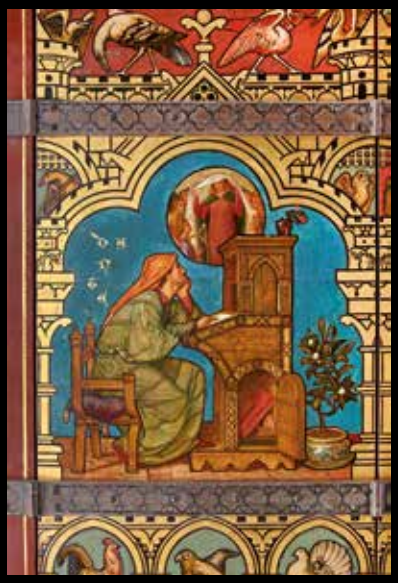
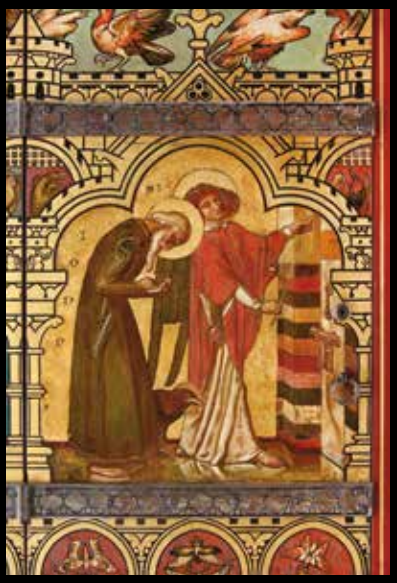
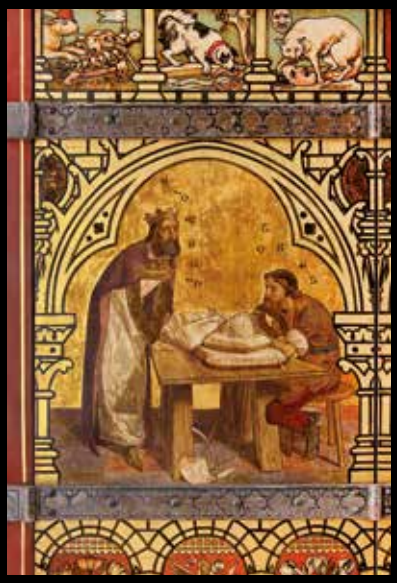
Burges to work on the bookcase. Burges's own plan of the bookcase, together with annotated tracings of the painted panels, survive in the Royal Institute of British Architects in London. (figs 6 and 7) These identify the subjects of the panels and the artists that painted them. Many of the panels on the bookcase, itself, have also been signed by the individual artists or annotated with their names by another, unidentified hand.

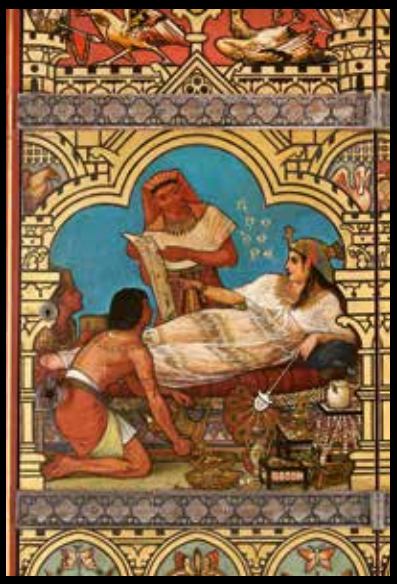
The painted decoration depicts the Christian and Pagan Arts, with Christian themes on the left and Pagan themes on the right side of the bookcase. The painted scenes adhere to Burges's belief that the paintings should be kept flat, without landscape backgrounds, and that they should alternate with ornaments. Subjects include *The Apparition of Beatrice to Dante* (Poetry) by Edward Poynter and (possibly) Dante Gabriel Rossetti (fig. 8); *St John and the New Jerusalem* (Architecture) by Simeon Solomon (fig. 9); *Edward I and William Torrel* (Sculpture) by Albert Moore (fig. 10); *Fra Angelico Painting the Virgin* (Painting) by Thomas Morten (fig. 11); *Rhodopis Commissioning a Pyramid* (Architecture) by Poynter (fig. 12); *Sappho serenading Phaon* (Poetry) by Henry Holiday (fig. 13); *The Origin of Painting* by Frederick Smallfield (fig. 14); and *Pygmalion and Galatea* (Sculpture) by Solomon. (fig. 15) On the base, medievalised figures of *Arachne*, *The Pierides* (fig. 16) and *Syrinx* are all by Henry Stacy Marks. These are described by Burges as 'Metamorphoses Relating to Architecture'.

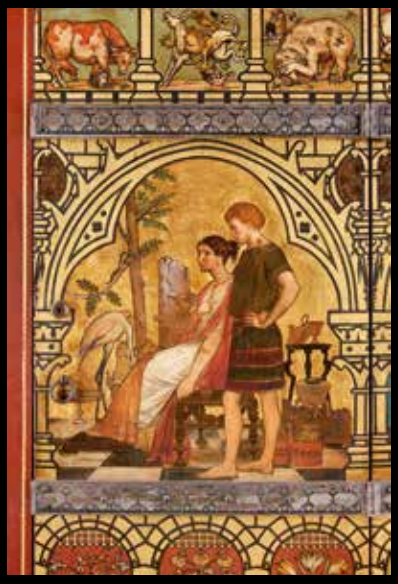
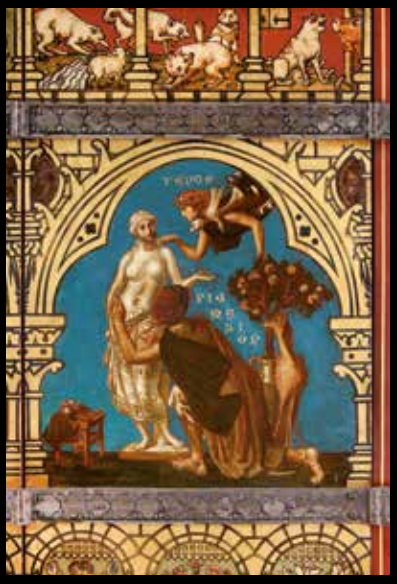
Row one - Left to right:
8 Edward Poynter (1839-1919) and (possibly) Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), *The Apparition of Beatrice to Dante*
9 Simeon Solomon (1840-1905), *St. John and the New Jerusalem*
10 Albert Moore (1841-1903), *Edward I and William Torrel*

Row two - Left to right:
11 Thomas Morten (1836-1866), *Fra Angelico Painting the Virgin*
12 Edward Poynter, *Rhodopis Commissioning a Pyramid*
13 Henry Holiday (1839-1927), *Sappho serenading Phaon*

Row three - Left to right:
14 Frederick Smallfield (1829-1915), *The Origin of Painting*
15 Simeon Solomon, *Pygmalion and Galatea*
16 Henry Stacy Marks (1829-1898), *The Pierides*
All © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



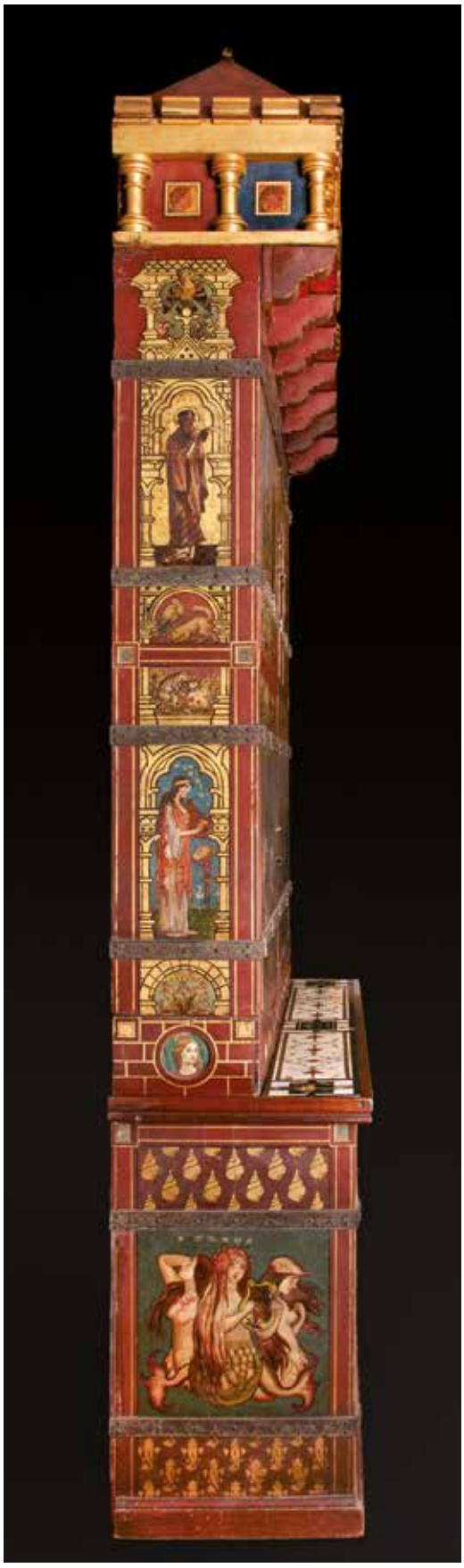



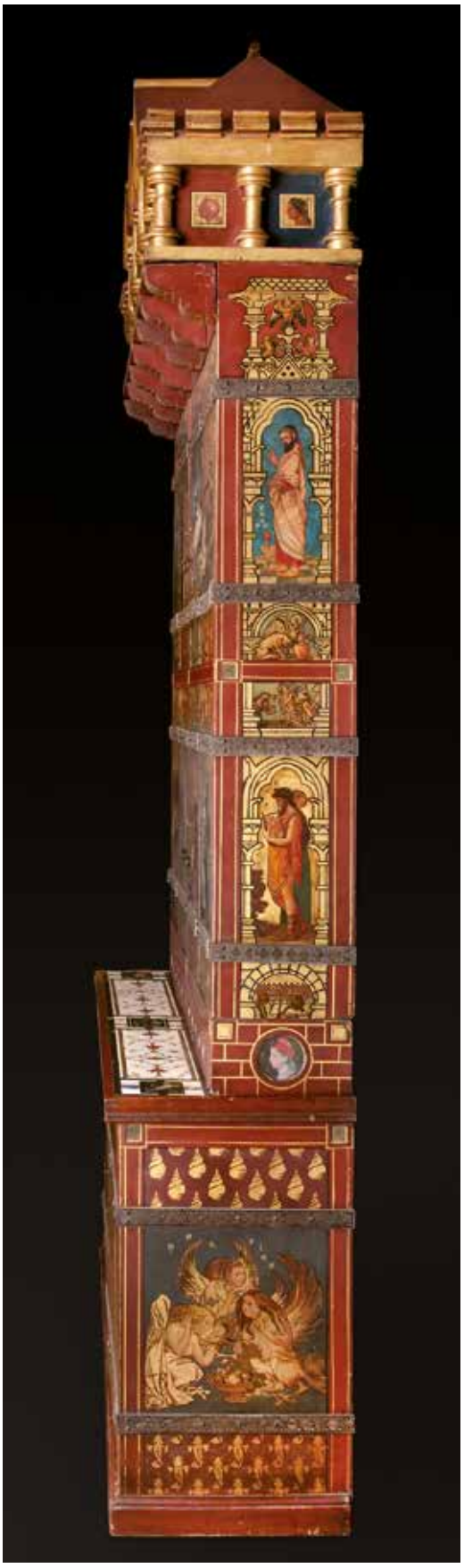

17 Frederick Weekes (1833-1920), *Metals* © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

18 William Burges, *The Death of Cock Robin* © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Moving upwards, the narrower horizontal bands represent the Sea, the Earth and the Air. These are all by Poynter with the exception of Frederick Weekes's charming *Metals* (fig. 17) and Burges's own *Tale of Cock Robin* (fig. 18). The bands show the shells and fishes in the ocean, the metals under the earth, the flowers of the four seasons growing in the earth, the beasts that walk the earth, represented by scenes from Aesop's Fables, and the insects and birds of the air. More birds are depicted in the next band that shows *Nephelokokkygia* ('Cloud-Cuckoo Land' from Aristophanes's *The Birds*). Above these, immediately below the pediment, are the stars in the firmament. The elaborately castellated and gabled pediment represents Heaven, with *Art* by Edward Burne-Jones in the central arch (fig. 19) flanked by *Religion* and *Love* by Nathaniel Westlake, and with Poynter's *Muses* on either side. The sides of the cabinet (figs 20 and 21) are painted with *Harpies* by Weekes and '*Syrens*' by John Anster Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald, or Fairy Fitzgerald, as he was known, also painted the original figures of the *Metals*, but these were replaced by Weekes's very different versions following the collapse of the bookcase in 1878 (fig. 22). Continuing up the sides are roundels representing *Law* by Morton and George Adolphus Story, with *Music* above personified by St Cecilia by Morten and Orpheus and Eurydice by William Frederick Yeames. Further up are *Philosophy*, represented by St Augustine by Solomon and Plato by Charles Rossiter. There is uncertainty about the involvement of Rossetti in the *Dream of Dante* panel because, although Poynter is identified as the artist on Burges's plan of the bookcase, the panel itself has 'DG Rossetti' written on it by an unidentified hand. (12) Although Rossetti and Burges certainly knew each other – they were near contemporaries and both went to King's College School - stylistically the panel is more likely to be the work of Poynter. Perhaps Rossetti was involved with the initial design or perhaps the annotator of the panel was simply misinformed?

19 Edward Burne-Jones, *Art* © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.





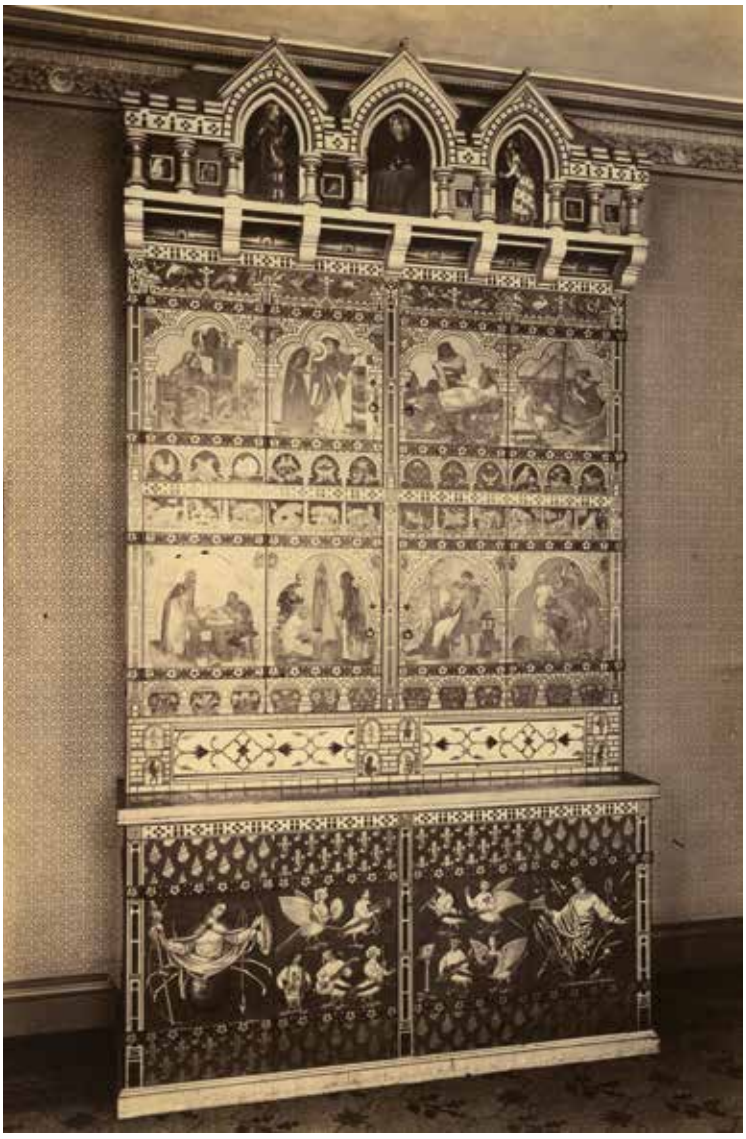
20 & **21** Side views of the Great Bookcase© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

It is certain that Burges was responsible both for the overall scheme of the cabinet and for the designs of the painted panels. Henry Stacy Marks later recalled how he came to work on the bookcase:

> About the year 1860 I decorated some furniture for W. Burges, the architect, or rather artist-architect, for he could design a chalice as well as a cathedral, and draw with his own hand all the necessary details. He was a learned archaeologist. His favourite period was the thirteenth century, while the style he disliked almost to hatred was that called Queen Anne. It is not as an architect, however, that I have to speak of him, but as a decorator. When I first met Burges, it was at Leigh's in Newman Street, where he then happened to be engaged on a "diaper" of rampant lions, though he drew from the "antique" or the life usually. We entered into conversation. I found we had many tastes in common, and a few days afterwards I found myself in his chambers, No.15 Buckingham Street, overlooking the river, a house which, according to rumour, Peter the Great once lived in. The walls of the room in which I found Burges were painted in distemper with conventional draperies, and trees above, on which were perched birds such as were never seen by mortal eye, drawn either by Burges or by any friend who happened to look in. These were done in outline filled in with a flat tint. In the centre of the room was a lofty cabinet for books on art, the doors divided out in a painted architectural arrangement of pillars and arches, the whole crowned with parapet and gables. The panels were arranged to have a figure composition in each, by young painters, adherents to the Gothic revival movement, of subjects from Pagan and Christian history. Burne Jones, Albert Moore, Poynter, Smallfield, and others, had already contributed their work. The rectangular base had merely the ground laid for the decorations ; these I painted under Burges's superintendence and from his suggestion — a concert of the Pierides, half women, half birds, occupying the two centre panels flanked by single figures of Arachne and Syrinx. (13)

Leigh's Academy was an art school originally founded in 1845 by a group of disillusioned students from the Government School of Design in Somerset House, London. In 1848 it moved to Newman Street with James Matthews Leigh, a former pupil of Etty as Principal. Many of the young artists who worked on the bookcase for Burges had studied there. Stacy Marks stated that: 'A series of small heads of birds for the inside panels….was the only work I did for [Burges] without being coached'. (fig. 23) He added that Burges, 'liked articles of furniture generally to suggest or symbolise their contents' and fondly recalled his 'irrepressible love of fun'. This sense of humour, so disliked by the *Building News and Architectural Review*, is found across the bookcase and contrasts greatly with the sombre character of the Prioress's Tale Wardrobe. Burges's humour should not, however, detract from the serious and extensive erudition behind the decoration of the bookcase. Burges subtly links seemingly disparate scenes and stories. For example, Nathaniel Westlake's *Religion* in the pediment depicts Beatrice. This sits above Poynter's *Dream of Dante*. Similarly, Poynter's *Rhodopis*, *Cloud Cuckoo Land* and *Animal Fables* are all linked through Aesop. According to Herodotus, Rhodopis was a fellow slave of Aesop in Egypt. In some versions of the story she is said to have been freed by Charaxus of Mytilene, brother of Sappho, thus also linking this panel with Holiday's neighbouring *Sappho serenading Phaon*. Above lies *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, the great bird city in the sky in Aristophanes play *The Birds*. In the play, the birds are said to be ignorant because they have never read Aesop. One can imagine that Burges was amused that some reviewers of the bookcase demonstrated their own ignorance by failing to understand these references and criticising its seemingly uncoordinated decorative scheme.

Although, as Stacy Marks confirms, thirteenth-century France was Burges's great passion, the Great Bookcase shows many other influences. Its main inspiration came from two fourteenth-century French armoires in the cathedrals of Bayeux and Noyon. (14) The latter, with its alternating red and blue painted decoration and castellated and crocketted pediment was particularly influential. (15) However, other, non-European influences can be seen. These include the incorporation of two Indian inlaid marble panels which now sit horizontally on top of the base but were originally below Poynter's *Flowers of the Four Seasons*, with Fitzgerald's original *Metals* on either side of them (see fig. 22). They thus represented the rocks and minerals in the earth. The influence of the Far East can be seen in the remarkable fish and shells on the base and the dragonflies, spiders, flying fish and seahorses on the inside of the cabinet doors, which appear to be derived from Japanese *katagame* stencils. (fig. 23) Burges considered pre-industrialised Middle- and Far-Eastern societies to be living embodiments of the medieval spirit and ideals that he so admired. He was an early collector of Japanese art and objects in the 1850s, and described the Japanese Court at the 1862 International Exhibition as 'truly…the real medieval court of the Exhibition.' (16)



22 The Great Bookcase before its collapse in 1878 and subsequent remodelling; photograph © RIBA Collections

When the bookcase collapsed in 1878, Burges appears to have taken the opportunity to simplify some of its decoration. The Indian marble panels were moved and Italian *pietra dura* panels were added. Fitzgerald's *Metals* were replaced by Weekes's versions. However, many of the painted gothic details on the pediment and on the vertical and horizontal elements of the bookcase were removed in favour of simple gilded lines (compare figs 1 and 22). This was perhaps in response to Aesthetic taste of the 1870s, and it imparts an almost Japanese quality to some areas of the decoration. Looking back on the furniture that Burges relocated from Buckingham Street to Tower House in the late 1870s, E.W. Godwin claimed that it had become progressively simpler over time, gradually ridding itself of its architectural excrescences and overgrowth of painted figures. (17)

Following its move to the Tower House, the Great Bookcase was to remain in the Library there for the next fifty-five years until Kenneth Clark's remarkable decision to acquire it for the Ashmolean Museum. After another eighty-three years, it has finally taken its rightful place in the galleries displayed together with the museum's outstanding collection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings and the Prioress's Tale Wardrobe. On display in the same gallery is a pair of Chinese Ching dynasty armchairs that belonged successively to Millais, Rossetti and Holman Hunt. These, together with the wardrobe and bookcase, form one of the most important and impressive groups of 'Pre-Raphaelite' furniture anywhere. We hope that the new displays finally do justice to Kenneth Clark's original vision for the galleries.

23 Reverse of door showing birds' heads by Henry Stacy Marks © RIBA Collections.

NOTES

(1) 'Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Arts', Victoria and Albert Museum (1952), J.1.

(2) *The Strange Genius of William Burges*, exh. cat. (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 1981), B.6.

(3) See Charles Handley-Read, 'Notes on William Burges's Painted Furniture', *Burlington Magazine* 105, no.278, p. 502, n.60.

(4) *Annual Report of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford* (1933), pp. 24-25.

(5) See Christopher Wilk, ed. *Western Furniture, 1350 to the Present Day in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: Philip Wilson/ Victoria and Albert Museum, 1996), pp.150-51.

(6) See Jon Whitely, *Oxford and the Pre-Raphaelites* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2004), pp. 24-25.

(7) Whitely, *Pre-Raphaelites*, p. 56.

(8) *Strange Genius*, p.68

(9) Ibid., p. 69.

(10) *Building News and Architectural Review* 9 (8 August 1862), p.100.

(11) See Handley-Read, 'Notes', pp. 502-05; and J. Mordaunt Crook, *William Burges and the High Victorian Dream* (London: John Murray, 1981), p.321.

(12) Handley-Read, 'Notes', p.503.

(13) Henry Stacy Marks, *Pen and Pencil Sketches* I (London: Chatto and Windus, 1894), pp. 219-20.

(14) Handley-Read, 'Notes', p. 499.

(15) Subsequently destroyed in World War I.

(16) Ayako Ono, *Japonisme in Britain : Whistler, Menpes, Henry, Hornel and Nineteenth-century Japan* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 28.

(17) E. Godwin, 'The Home of an English Architect', *Art Journal* (1886), pp. 301-03.