

Edward Burne-Jones's *Spring*: Art as a Living, Germinating Process*

Liana De Girolami Cheney
Professor of Art History (emerita), UMASS, Lowell, USA

For Liana De Girolami, my godchild, niece, a spring of joy

I am the handmaid of the Earth

.....

I scatter every gift I gain
from sun and wind to gladden them.

-William Morris, *Flora*

This essay argues that Edward Burne-Jones's *Spring* (1868 and 1884, oil on canvas, Koriyama City Museum of Art, Fukushima, Japan) visualizes spring as the generative principle that unites nature and artistic creation. Burne-Jones did not simply present Flora as the Roman goddess of flowers; he transformed her into a spring allegory of creative becoming, in which the blossoming of nature and the flowering of artistic imagination participate in the same process of renewal. Through this philosophical reimagining of classical mythology, spring ceases to function merely as a seasonal motif and instead becomes the condition through which beauty is conceived, imagination awakened, and artistic creation brought into being. Rather than depicting nature as an object to be imitated, Burne-Jones presented nature as the visible expression of an underlying creative order. The blossoming flower and the work of art emerge from the same generative impulse, each revealing an invisible principle of growth, transformation, and renewal. In this sense, Flora becomes more than the goddess of flowers: she is Spring, the personification of artistic genesis, presiding over the perpetual springtime of the creative imagination.

Keywords: Spring and Flora symbolism, *poiesis*, beauty, color theory, Platonism, Pre-Raphaelite Art, William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones

Introduction

This essay focuses solely on the painting *Spring* by the Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898), created around 1884, an oil on canvas now in the Koriyama City Museum of Art, Fukushima, Japan (Figs. 1 and 1a-f). Since 1868, for Burne-Jones, the theme of spring had served as a perpetual source of inspiration, as

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Liana De Girolami Cheney, Ph.D., Emerita Professor of Art History, UMASS, Lowell, USA; Visiting Art Historical Researcher, University of Aldo Moro, Bari, Italy.

it evokes the physical and metaphysical parallels between spring, a germinating force of nature, and the artist's imagination, an intellectual and spiritual wellspring of beauty in art. These aesthetic formulations are evident in Burne-Jones's thought and art at several levels: as a concept of creativity in relation to beauty; as beauty in nature as a source of inspiration for the artist; and as both creativity and imagination being part of an evolving intellectual force (*furor poeticus*) as well as the product of *poiesis*, the power to make art. These artistic and intellectual formulations parallel the natural forces of semination, growth, transformation, and renewal, such as the arrival of spring and the creation, imagination, and visualization of beauty in art.

The artist drew inspiration from observing nature, particularly the season of spring, which symbolizes growth, transformation, and renewal. This influenced the creative process through inspiration, insight, and elaboration, shaping imagined works driven by both physical and metaphysical forces.

Keeping this reference in mind, Burne-Jones elucidated the significance of a painting by stating:

I mean by a picture a beautiful, romantic dream of something that never was, never will be—in a light better than any light that ever shone—in a land no one can define or remember, only desire—and the forms divinely beautiful—and then I wake up.¹

¹ William Morris's poem *Flora* was written in 1885 and is part of a collection of poems published by William Morris, *Poems by The Way* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1891, repr. London: Reeves & Turners, 1891). The full poem appears later in this essay, in the section "Spring in Selected Classical Literature." See also Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Victorian Symbolism and Renaissance Humanism: Burne-Jones's *Flora* in Dialogue with Botticelli's *Primavera*," *Pre-Raphaelite Review* (Summer 2026), for an essay on Burne-Jones's *Flora* of 1896, stained glass window at the Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art, Winter Park, Florida.

¹ David Cecil, *Visionary and Dreamer: Two Poetic Painters, Samuel Palmer and Edward Burne-Jones* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 143, quoting from a letter Burne-Jones wrote to William Morris; Robin Spencer, *The Aesthetic Movement: Theory and Practice* (London: Studio Vista Ltd., 1972), p. 37; Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Edward Burne-Jones's *The Mirror of Venus*: Physical and Intangible Female Beauty," *Journal of Literature and Art Studies* 9, 1 (2019), pp. 1-28, doi: 10.17265/2159-5836/2019.01.000, <https://eb-j.org/pdfViewer/articles/ODI1>. See also Lynn Federle Orr and Stephen Calloway, eds., *The Cult of Beauty: The Victorian Avant-Gard 1860–1900* (London: The Victoria and Albert Museum, 2012), passim.



Figure 1. Edward Burne-Jones, *Spring (Flora)*, 1864-1884, oil on canvas.
Koriyama City Museum of Art, Fukushima, Japan.



Figure 1a. Edward Burne-Jones, *Spring (Flora)*, det., Sky, 1864-1884, oil on canvas.
Koriyama City Museum of Art, Fukushima, Japan.



Figure 1b. Edward Burne-Jones, *Spring (Flora)*, det., feet and floral pattern, 1864-1884, oil on canvas.
Koriyama City Museum of Art, Fukushima, Japan.



Figure 1c. Edward Burne-Jones, *Spring (Flora)*, det., Seed Trail, 1864-1884, oil on canvas.
Koriyama City Museum of Art, Fukushima, Japan.



Figure 1d. Edward Burne-Jones, *Spring (Flora)*, det., Rose design, 1864-1884, oil on canvas.
Koriyama City Museum of Art, Fukushima, Japan.



Figure 1e. Edward Burne-Jones, *Spring (Flora)*, det., Blue sash, 1864-1884, oil on canvas.
Koriyama City Museum of Art, Fukushima, Japan.



Figure 1f. Edward Burne-Jones, *Spring (Flora)*, det., Blue sash flipped, 1864-1884, oil on canvas.
Koriyama City Museum of Art, Fukushima, Japan.

He continued to reflect on this aesthetic quest by describing beauty associated with creativity: "Only this is true: that beauty is very beautiful, and softens, and inspires, and rouses, and lifts up, and never fails."² He further explained his view of aesthetics, describing beauty as the harmony of different elements that unite to foster a fulfilling and meaningful life. This perspective aims to enrich our daily experiences and sense of responsibility. His ideas were influenced by his friend and mentor, William Morris (1834-1896), a poet, writer, and artistic designer who articulated his own concept of beauty as

Beauty, which is what is meant by art, using the word in its widest sense, is, I contend, no mere accident to human life, which people can take or leave as they choose, but a positive necessity of life, if we are to live as nature meant us to; that is, unless we are content to be less than men [humans].³

This essay consists of two major parts: Literary Sources for *Spring* and the Iconography and the Symbolism of *Spring*. The first part contains three sections: an analysis of the season of spring in classical thought; spring in selected classical texts; and spring considered in some British literature. The second part includes two sections. The first section analyzes the scene's background, including architecture, landscape, foliage, and flora. The second section discusses the figure Spring's formal classical design, composition, floating movement, decoration, and coloration. This section's conclusion highlights the key ideas from the beginning, focusing on the physical and metaphysical aspects and realms of sowing and seed scattering as concealed sources of creativity and imagination in the iconography and symbolism of painting.

Literary Sources for *Spring*

Spring in Classical Thought

Burne-Jones and Morris's visualized nineteenth-century aesthetics is grounded in classical philosophy, especially in the concept of *poiesis*. The word *poiesis* comes from the Greek ποιεῖν, meaning "to make" or "to bring forth." Its key classical definition appears in Plato's *Symposium*, where Diotima states that "every cause by which anything passes from not-being into being is *poiesis*."⁴

In this broad sense, *poiesis*, rooted in philosophy, encompasses not only poetry but all creative acts, such as painting, that manifest something unseen. The renowned Greek philosopher Plato (428/426-348/347 BCE) observed that disciplines such as music, medicine, and the arts also belong to this broader concept of creation, even though only poets are usually called "poets."⁵

This Platonic concept introduces a precise language for understanding the work of Burne-Jones and Morris. Their art does more than simply depict nature, ancient myth, or medieval romance; it crafts environments filled with pattern, figure, color, and desire through a collaborative transformation of materials. Morris's ceramics, textiles, printed books, and stained-glass designs reveal the dynamic rhythms of plant life achieved through labor and craftsmanship, while Burne-Jones's painted and designed figures of Flora to evoke a visionary realm of beauty. He also understood *poiesis* to mean "a land [realm] no one can define, or remember, only desire."⁶

² Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 2 vols. (1904; repr. London: Macmillan, 1940), hereafter GBJ, *Memorials*; William Gaunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), p. 152.

³ William Morris, *The Beauty of Life* (London: Brentham, 1974), a statement based on a lecture Morris delivered at the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design on 19 February 1880.

⁴ Plato, *Symposium* 205b-c, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), p. 499. Greek: "ἡ γὰρ τοι ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἰς τὸ ὄν ἰόντι ὁτρωδὺν αἰτία πᾶσα ἐστὶ ποιησις."

⁵ Plato, *Symposium* 205c, trans. Nehamas and Woodruff, p. 499.

⁶ Edward Burne-Jones letter to Cornell Price, 1880, in GBJ, *Memorials*, 2:213.

Burne-Jones and Morris's aesthetic concepts, particularly their concept of beauty, were influenced by Walter Pater's 1873 book, originally titled *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* and later titled *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*.⁷ The book championed classical ideals, pagan myths, and timelessness, revitalizing art through sensory and aesthetic appreciation, some of which were based on the Platonic tradition. Pater concluded that an artist's duty is to "burn always with hard and gemlike flame and to sustain this ecstasy," which he regarded as a key to artistic success. His ideas echo Plato's concept of *furor*, or poetic fury.⁸ In the *Phaedrus*, Plato stated that there are four forms of divine madness (*theia mania*): prophetic (Apollo), initiatory/mysteries (Dionysus), poetic (Muses), and erotic/love (Aphrodite/Eros). In *Ion*, Plato noted that "For a poet is a light and winged and sacred thing, and unable to create until he [the poet] is inspired and out of his senses and his mind is no longer him. As long as he possesses his mind, no man [human] is able to make poetry or prophesy." In reference to Burne-Jones, these Platonic aspects of poetical madness, *poiesis*, are associated with artistic creativity and imagination.

Furthermore, Burne-Jones was familiar with the Florentine Neoplatonic idea of *furor poeticus* (or *furor artisticus*) and beauty from the humanist, physician, and philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) through Pater's writings.⁹ In the Renaissance Neoplatonic aesthetic, Ficino observed, "Beauty consists of a certain charm," something spiritual that transcends sensual experience and that makes us long for the origin of what we perceive.¹⁰ In favor of this concept, Burne-Jones elaborated on the Neoplatonic aesthetic ideal by creating an idealized image that combines beauty and ardor, evoking love as "the billows of the seas"¹¹ and his own conceit of *poiesis* about beauty.

The British writer Pater adopted Ficino's view of physical beauty as a pathway to divine understanding or a spiritual experience of the good, emphasizing the human capacity to immerse oneself in the sensory and aesthetic present. Both Burne-Jones and Morris integrated Pater's aesthetic concepts into their contributions to the British art community. They emphasized an inward, reflective admiration of beauty, avoiding Victorian puritanism and moralistic narratives.

Thus Burne-Jones's artistic development was shaped by myth, beauty, and spiritual interpretations of classical and Renaissance philosophical and poetical themes. His depiction of Spring as Flora, regarded as a blossom of imagination, presents an elegant woman who symbolizes nature, beauty, and the dreamlike qualities of classical myth. The reappearance of mythological themes in nineteenth-century British art was not merely a nod to ancient Greece and Rome but also a reflection of Pre-Raphaelite spiritual concerns. The Pre-Raphaelites aimed for artistic transcendence beyond the industrial modern era.

⁷ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873).

⁸ Plato's *Phaedrus* (Stephanus number 245a) and Plato's *Ion* (Stephanus number 533e-534b).

⁹ Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Phaedrus*, in Michael J.B. Allen, ed. trans., *Commentaries on Plato: Volume 1, Phaedrus and Ion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Michael J.B. Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 41-67; and *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, vol. 1 (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1975), Book 1, Letter 7 on *De divino furore* (*On Divine Frenzy*), and Letter 52 on *Poeticus furor a Deo est* (*Poetic Frenzy is from God*).

¹⁰ Marsilio Ficino, *Symposium*, I. 3. in *Opera Omnia* (Basel: Heinrich Petri, 1561).

¹¹ Penelope Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones: A Biography* (Westminster, MD: Penguin, 1975), p. 115, referring to the impact of Maria Zambaco's beauty on him; see also Gaunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy*, p. 152. Burne-Jones read Walter Pater's philosophical writings, particularly *Plato and Platonism* (London: Macmillan, 1893), pp. 241-44, where Pater discussed Plato's ideas of Beauty and Nature. See also Spencer, *The Aesthetic Movement*, p. 37.

Spring in Selected Classical Literature

In addition to the impact of Platonic and Neoplatonic notions of *poiesis*, Burne-Jones and Morris, who studied the classical tradition at Oxford University, were inspired by Ovid's *Fasti* (Book 5) in creating *Spring*. These Pre-Raphaelite artists were also aware that Ovid was inspired by Platonic concepts of *furor*, as seen in his *Fasti*, where he wrote that the divine works through the poet's mind: "est deus in nobis, agitante calescimus illo" [there is a god within us; when he stirs, we catch fire] (Book 5). For example, these lines show the poet directly addressing the goddess and her first-person explanation of her rule over spring, in which Ovid calls upon the goddess to introduce herself: "Incipe, Fastorum deducere carmina, Maiae / ... ipsa doce quae sis ..." [Begin to draw out the songs of the *Fasti*, month of May / ... teach me [Flora] yourself who you are ...] (lines 183-184). Ovid added a beautiful visual transition in which her breath literally creates spring: "... dum loquitur, vernas efflat ab ore rosas ..." [While he/she speaks, spring roses blow from his/her mouth] (line 194). He revealed that Flora's original Greek identity is the nymph Chloris: "Chloris eram quae Flora vocor: corrupta Latino / nominis est nostri littera Graeca sono" [I was Chloris, who am called Flora: the Latin letter of our name is corrupted by the Greek sound] (lines 195-196). He also described Flora's realm as a perpetual spring as "Ver erat aeternum, placidique tepentibus auris / mulcebant zephyri natos sine semine flores" [I truly enjoy it always: always the brightest year] (line 207).

Furthermore, Ovid wrote about the four ages of humankind, noting that the Golden Age was marked by an everlasting spring. In his epic, *Metamorphoses* (Book 1), he highlighted "The Eternal Spring." He described the Golden Age as a time when "Spring was eternal, and calm Zephyrs with warm breezes caressed flowers born without seed" ("Ver erat aeternum, placidique tepentibus auris / mulcebant zephyri natos sine semine flores") [Spring was eternal, and with calm, warm ears / the zephyrs caressed the seedless flowers born] (lines 107-108). The poet also detailed the gods' actions during this era, with Jupiter overthrowing Saturn, which ended the Golden Age and introduced the four seasons for the first time, stating, "Iuppiter antiqui contraxit tempora veris / perque hiemes aestusque et inaequalis autumnos / et breve ver spatiis exegit quattuor annum" [Ancient Jupiter contracted the seasons of spring / through winters and summers and unequal autumns / and the short spring spent four years in intervals] (lines 116-118).

Another significant classical influence on Burne-Jones's representation of spring was Morris's poetical writing. In 1875, Morris translated and published a version of Virgil's *Aeneid*, which also reflected a solid grasp of Virgil's *Georgics*—a didactic poem focusing on agriculture, nature, and field hands. In the poem "Praises of Spring," Morris alluded to *Georgics* Book II (Lines 323-345) and to his brief poem "Spring as Flora," which appeared in the collection *Poems by the Way* (1885/1891), composed for Burne-Jones's imagery:

I am the handmaid of the earth,
 I broider fair her glorious gown,
 And deck her on her days of mirth
 With many a garland of renown.
 And while Earth's little ones are fain
 And play about the Mother's hem,
 I scatter every gift I gain
 From sun and wind to gladden them.¹²

¹² William Morris, *Flora* in *Poems by The Way*.

Additionally, he emphasized the power of nature and the seasons through his public lectures and his lengthy essay on the *Earthly Paradise*, published between 1868 and 1870, in particular the introduction about April:

O fair midspring, besung so oft and oft,
How can I praise thy loveliness enow?
Thy sun that burns not, and thy breezes soft
That o'er the blossoms of the orchard blow,
The thousand things that 'neath the young leaves grow,
The hopes and chances of the growing year,
*Winter forgotten long, and summer near.*¹³

Burne-Jones and Morris often revisited the theme of spring, not just as decoration but as a conscious critique of the Industrial Revolution. Their company, Morris Firm, employed springtime blossoms as allegories to embody Pre-Raphaelite ideals and support the Arts and Crafts movement. Living in Victorian England, Morris and Burne-Jones noted cities filled with coal smoke and a market flooded with inexpensive, machine-produced goods. They perceived industrialization as a spiritual winter that dehumanized labor and took away its joy. Spring, representing natural life, renewal, and vitality, stood in sharp contrast to the cold, stiff, and smoky factory surroundings.

Both men harbored a deep nostalgia for the classical and medieval eras, viewing them as periods rich in genuine creativity and spirituality, qualities they often found lacking in modern society. Classical works such as Ovid's *Fasti* (Book 5) and *Metamorphoses* (Book 1) portrayed spring as a season of renewal, fertility, and youth, with Flora, the goddess of flowers, as its emblem. She was celebrated with vibrant frescoes, poetry, and spring festivities that included floral crowns, communal feasts, and the release of wildlife to promote a fruitful harvest. Frescoes and sculptures often glorified her beauty and power. Medieval art similarly focused on seasonal themes and was distinguished by its intricate *millefleurs* tapestry style.

Ancient Roman culture, in particular, celebrated spring for its civic and agricultural importance, as evidenced by rituals involving fertility animals or wreaths at Floralia. Burne-Jones, however, used spring as a symbol of mystical and spiritual youth and renewal. In his paintings and watercolor studies entitled *Spring* or *Flora*, the focus moves to aesthetic balance. Flowers are depicted with detailed botanical accuracy, combined with sumptuous golds and textured backgrounds, turning a pagan goddess into a delicate Pre-Raphaelite motif. By focusing on spring, Morris and Burne-Jones could revive historic styles such as tapestries, illuminated manuscripts, and stained glass, integrating them into modern homes.

Morris philosophically defined how the human artistic imagination functions as an organic, unforced process of growth, as discussed in his prose work *The Wood Beyond the World*, where he focused on growth and vitality. In his lectures on *Hopes and Fears of Art* (1882), Morris elaborated on the metaphor of the seed, a symbol of creativity and imagination. In his lecture on decorative art, he asserted that the designer's imagination should absorb the beauty of the real world like a seed absorbs nutrients. An artist creates art out of stored inspiration. Imagination acts as the soil, and art is the flower that springs from it. As Morris noted: "Art was free. Whatever a man [human] thought of, that he [she/he] might bring to light by the labor of [the] hands."¹⁴ He also described the scattering of seed in his 1881 lecture on *Art and Beauty of the Earth*, illustrating it as a key metaphor for how

¹³ William Morris, *The Earthly Paradise. A Poem* (London: F.S. Ellis, 1870 and 1871).

¹⁴ William Morris, *Art and the Beauty of the Earth*, Lecture delivered at Burslem Town Hall on October 13, 1881, then published in London: Longmans & Co., 1898.

the artistic imagination engages with the world. The growing seeds symbolize the internal development of ideas, while the scattering signifies the spread of these artistic ideals into daily life. Morris stated:

But it is the **sowing of the seed** of this art that I want to speak to you about ... I want you to understand that it is not a small or a light matter, but a most serious one; **the scattering of the seeds of a new life** to the world.¹⁵

Spring in British Literature

The British writings of Walter Pater (*Studies in the Renaissance* of 1873), William Morris (*Earthly Paradise* of the 1860s), and John Ruskin (*Edinburgh Lectures* of the 1850s) depend on classical ideals and their revivals, unveiled in Platonism and projected in Pre-Raphaelite art.¹⁶ In his theory of art and visual representations, Burne-Jones, too, was influenced by the classical resurgence in art as well as by British commentaries on the admiration for this rebirth. Burne-Jones searched for a classical metaphor to express his dreams and existence in his drawings and paintings, that is to say, a pursuit for a canon of art that resulted in his adage, “To love beauty,” as reflected in his allegorical and mythological paintings, for example, the cycles of *Pygmalion and Galatea* of 1868-1878, *Cupid and Psyche* of 1874-1876 (both cycles at the Manchester Art Gallery), and, in particular, the *Perseus and Andromeda* of 1875-1878 (Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield and the cartoons in the Southampton City Art Gallery, England, and Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, Germany).¹⁷

In addition to Morris's translation of Virgilian classical literature and his impact on British literature, the central figures in the second-wave Pre-Raphaelites adhered not only to the writers of Pater's *The Renaissance* but also to the artist and art critic John Ruskin's famous guidance to “go to nature in all singleness of heart.”¹⁸ Ruskin's examination of nature was seen as an awakening akin to spring, representing a sacred, lifelong moral pursuit for artists. It implies that keenly observing nature—such as the veins on an oak leaf—means that, for an artist, tracking spring's arrival is an act of engaging with divine renewal. This process helps artists discover a higher good and spiritual beauty.¹⁹ *The earth veil* described by Ruskin is absorbed by Morris as a human imagination or as the “very skin and surface of the earth, our imagination is healed”²⁰ and visualized as Burne-Jones's *Spring* with its shimmering trail of scattered seeds (Fig. 1c).

They opposed the artificial, meticulously groomed landscapes often promoted by Victorian art academies. Morris emphasized humble English wildflowers like daisies, honeysuckle, and fritillaries instead of exotic greenhouse varieties. For them, restoring local meadows symbolized a form of accessible, universal beauty that everyone could appreciate, as shown by Burne-Jones's *Spring*.

¹⁵ Morris, *Art and the Beauty of the Earth*.

¹⁶ Henry Ladd, *The Victorian Morality of Art: An Analysis of Ruskin's Esthetic* (New York: Ray Long & Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1932), pp. 295-327. This essay does not intend to compare the literary works of these writers. Instead, it concentrates exclusively on emphasizing some of Burne-Jones's theoretical influences.

¹⁷ Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Edward Burne-Jones' Mythical Paintings* (London/New York: Peter Lang, 2014), Part 2, chaps. 4-9.

¹⁸ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1843), vol. 1, part 2.

¹⁹ Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, chapter on Of Truth of Vegetation, *Study of an Oak Leaf*, in *Unto this last: Two Hundred Years of John Ruskin*, Yale Center of British Art Exhibition 2019 curated by PhD Candidates in Yale University Department of the History of Art.

²⁰ Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 1:7.14; Stephen Kite, “From Earth Veil to Wall Veil: Ruskin, Morris, Webb, and the Arts and Crafts Surface,” <https://courtauld.ac.uk/research/research-resources/publications/courtauld-books-online/ruskins-ecologies-figures-of-relation-from-modern-painters-to-the-storm-cloud/5-from-earth-veil-to-wall/>.

The Iconography of *Spring*

The pursuit of spiritual cultivation through the invocation of spring was undertaken by Burne-Jones and Morris. The symbolism of spring invoked notions of physical and spiritual growth, the fertility of soil and the soul, and awakening. It is concerned not only with organic renewal as a benefit of the Earth but also with the spiritual awakening of love and creative becoming.

This section is divided into two iconographical parts. The first part analyzes the background and foreground of the painting, including subdivisions on architectural types and a meadow landscape, followed by an examination of the lower area of the painting, featuring a spring floral path and flowers. The second part focuses on the center of the painting, describing the large and beautiful figure of Spring and its sources, including its symbolic meaning (Figs. 1 and 1a-f, and 2).

Burne-Jones depicted a majestic female figure representing spring, dressed in elegant classical attire in shades of magenta and purple and encircled by a deep blue sash, appearing in flight over patches of soil on Earth. Spring spreads seeds across the soil, cultivating and enriching it with the potential for a new, beautiful millefleurs garden. In the middle ground, there are two architectural features: a brick house on the left and a terrace or large porch on the right that extends to a lush green meadow. In the background, the meadow's vibrant greenery of trees, bushes, and plants contrasts against the shimmering sky of blue and purple, dotted with clouds of similar celestial colors that echo the purple and dark blue hues in Spring's attire (Fig. 1).

The Architectural and Landscape Background

In the painting *Spring*, Burne-Jones depicted a British brick building or residence, featuring a plausible window and a narrow balcony or railing on the left. It has a rounded arch at the front and a short staircase leading to a wooden platform on an Italianate terrace. This second architectural feature, possibly simulating marble, is an Italianate portico or loggia situated behind Spring. A large bench is placed beside an open arch forming a broad rectangular alcove, and stairs lead down into a meadow or cultivated land. The background features a vibrant natural meadow with trees, bushes, and plants, contrasting with the surrounding human-constructed buildings in the middle ground (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Edward Burne-Jones, Partially reconstructed architecture behind *Spring*.

Photo credit: Liana De Girolami and Dr. Julie Root Sawyer.

The Architecture

On his third trip to Italy, in 1871, Burne-Jones, with his assistant and studio companion Thomas Broke, spent a great deal of time sketching the Roman countryside, including a visit to Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli of 125-134 CE (Fig. 4). The Roman ruins show buildings with round arches, featuring vertical and horizontal structural intersections that lead to open terraces reached by steps. This intertwined architectural feature, although simplified, is viewed in the context of Burne-Jones's architectural background in the painting. Carlo Crivelli's *Annunciation with Saint Emidius* of 1486 (oil on tempera, at the National Gallery, London, Fig. 5) is a familiar painting that influenced many of Burne-Jones's other works. It displays architecture combining classical and Italian Renaissance elements, such as palaces with grand staircases, symmetrical gates with triumphal arches

leading to courtyards and gardens, interior spaces with framing designs, and palaces with projecting balconies viewed in foreshortened perspective.



Figure 4. Roman ruins, Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, 125-134 CE. Italy.



Figure 5. Carlo Crivelli, *Annunciation with Saint Emidius*, 1486, oil and tempera. National Gallery, London, England.

Burne-Jones emphasized Spring's appearance in an earthly setting by creating depth through three distinct areas: a courtyard in the middle ground, a landscape in the background, and a flower-lined path in the foreground. The painting shows the courtyard's middle ground extending into the background, featuring two materials—brick and stone—and two structures: a house wall and a terrace with a bench and an arched gate (Figs. 1 and 3).

The use of brick not only aligns with nineteenth-century British architecture, particularly in rural homes, factories, and agrarian areas, but also reflects Burne-Jones's fascination with classical Italian masonry, including porticos, loggias, and verandas; low architectural benches for resting and reading in the open garden; stepped arrangements and open arches to suggest multiple paths of movement; and floral decoration to imply a perfumed natural area in contrast to a human-made architectural structure. He was inspired by the Italianate style of the porch bench shown in Fra Filippo Lippi's *Seven Saints* from 1450, a tempera on wood painting he saw at London's National Gallery when it was added to their collection in 1861. Within a lunette-shaped scene, seven saints are seated on an ornate marble bench along a lush, flower-filled path, symbolizing Medicean patronage.

They appear deep in thought and meditation. Behind them, an elaborate meadow of trees extends into a depiction of a heavenly spring sky. Inspired by this image, Burne-Jones painted a version in the 1860s, which is now housed at the Museo de Arte de Ponce in Puerto Rico. He adopted the architectural layout, extended the landscape, and portrayed the seated poses of the figures on the bench in his painting *The Hours* of 1870-1882, signed on the lower right as EBJ with the date 1882, oil with tempera on canvas, at the Graves Gallery (Sheffield Art Gallery, UK).²¹ Burne-Jones's aim was also to create a natural English environment that is dreamlike, a space for pondering creativity, imagination, and life. Some of this imagery is found in numerous sketchbooks of drawings from 1887 to 1894, now in the Te Papa Collection at the Museum of New Zealand.²²

The Meadow

Burne-Jones contrasted the real architecture and landscape with an aesthetic depiction, replicating a stone or marble bench as a wide stone seat integrated into the terrace masonry. Its view of the garden or meadow extends beyond. The projecting bench steps align with the meadow's perspective, offering a layered spatial view (Figs. 1 and 3).

Following Ruskin's advice to observe and imagine the landscape outside Oxford, Burne-Jones began drawing, sketching, and creating watercolors of trees, plant arrangements, and natural scenes throughout his career. This is evidenced by his numerous sketchbooks from Birmingham, Oxford, and London, as well as his landscape-background paintings.²³ At that time, it was common for artists and Burne-Jones to sketch outdoors in woods or landscapes, then translate these natural studies into completed works, such as oil paintings or watercolors, used as backgrounds.

In these natural settings, Burne-Jones demonstrated his affection for nature and his creative ingenuity. Influenced by contemporary British scientific achievements, events, and research, Burne-Jones, a Pre-Raphaelite artist, was known for naturalistic portrayals while maintaining an interest in science.²⁴ The Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery displays early landscape sketches by him that show detailed outdoor observations. Burne-Jones's early visual explorations and observations of the countryside influenced his later work, which incorporated landscape watercolors from the Cobham area in Surrey. Two gouache watercolors are now housed at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery: *Landscape Study of Trees at Cobham, Surrey* and *Landscape Study with Cypress Trees of Cobham* (Figs. 6 and 7; compare with 6a and 7a). This pair of small watercolors highlights his careful depiction of nature. Created in 1863-1864, these landscape studies depict woods at Cobham, Surrey, during a visit to his close friend and fellow painter John Roddam Spencer Stanhope (1829-1904).²⁵ Stanhope

²¹ For the image and William Widman's 2019 commentary, see <https://www.eb-j.org/browse-artwork-detail/MTQyNg==>; and Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Edward Burne-Jones's *The Hours*: The Laps of Time," *Iconocrazia* 2 (18 December 2020), pp. 1-32.

²² See Image Id 2DDJD4A-4.

²³ Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1973), p. 13; Maria Teresa Benedetti and Gianna Piantoni, eds., *Burne-Jones. Dal preraffaellismo al simbolismo* (Milan: Gabriele Mazzota, 1986), p. 55; Stephen Wildman and John Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer*, Exh. Cat. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998, pp. 82-83.

²⁴ On the discussion of Edward Burne-Jones's natural and artificial landscape and British history and landscape and sources, see Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Edward Burne-Jones's On Nature* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), chap. 1.

²⁵ Dan G. Painshill Park in Cobham Surrey, only eighteen miles from Central London, is Europe's most important eighteenth-century garden and is a popular day out for all ages. Between 1738 and 1773, the Honorable Charles Hamilton created, over a period of thirty-five years, the romantic landscape that can be seen today, following a remarkable period of restoration. Hamilton used nature to stimulate the senses and emotions of his visitors. Painshill is only 158 acres but appears to be much larger. The mixture of spectacular views, surreal follies, a serpentine lake, a vineyard and a crystal grotto, created what could almost be regarded as a forerunner of today's amusement parks. See Michael Symes, *Mr. Hamilton's Elysium: The Gardens of Painshill* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2010).

was also a landowner and antiquarian, passionate about Florentine Renaissance art, and later became part of the British Aesthetic and Crafts Movement.



Figure 6. Edward Burne-Jones, *Landscape Study of Trees of Cobham, Surrey*, 1863, watercolor and gouache with gum Arabic. Birmingham Art and Galleries, UK.



Figure 6a. Today's Trees at Cobham, Surrey, UK.



Figure 7. Edward Burne-Jones, *Landscape Study with Cypress Trees of Cobham, Surrey*, 1863, watercolor and gouache with gum Arabic. Birmingham Art and Galleries, UK.



Figure 7a. Today's Cypress Trees at Cobham, Surrey, UK.



Figure 8. Burne-Jones, *March of the Marigolds*, 1870, oil on canvas.

Private Collection, London.

Photo credit and courtesy: Rupert Maas Gallery, London.

Burne-Jones continued to use Cobham's landscapes for the richness of the green trees, plants, and foliage, as well as the foreground paddock. Probably these studies of luscious green landscapes served as background studies for Burne-Jones's paintings, e.g., *The Merciful Knight* of 1863, watercolor and body color on paper, signed and dated EDWARD BURNE JONES 1863, at the Birmingham City Museums and Art Gallery.²⁶ Burne-Jones's quest for botanical accuracy continues to be visualized in *Green Summer* of 1864, a watercolor and gouache on paper, now in a London private collection,²⁷ and in the *March of the Marigolds* of 1870, oil and mixed media on canvas, in a London private collection (Fig. 8). Burne-Jones depicted the marigolds, knowing they originated from a town garden in Russell Square, near his home and opposite the British Museum.²⁸ The

²⁶ For the image and commentary of Stephen Wildman, 2018, see <https://www.eb-j.org/browse-artwork-detail/NjQx>.

²⁷ The models include Jan Morris, in the center, holding a peacock feather, and Georgiana (his wife) reading a book. This version was exhibited in 1865 at the Old Watercolour Society, receiving unfavorable comments. The second version painted in oils of 1868 with the same group of damsels was purchased by William Graham, a devoted patron of Burne-Jones. For image and commentaries of Stephen Wildman (2019) and William Walters (2021), see *Green Summer watercolour 1864*, *Burne-Jones Catalogue Raisonné*, <https://www.eb-j.org/browse-artwork-detail/MTMwMQ==>.

²⁸ See *The March Marigold; model Augusta Jones (the model also for Astrologia)*, *Burne-Jones Catalogue Raisonné*, <https://www.eb-j.org/browse-artwork-detail/MzIyMQ==>.

landscape mirrors Spring's background, showcasing a meadow that resembles a classic green tapestry filled with yellow marigolds and lush foreground foliage, all set against an idyllic deep-space scene. To the right in the foreground, a vibrant botanical meadow displays a patch of golden marsh marigolds, representing joy and resilience. The middle and background areas reveal a peaceful green landscape dotted with trees, plants, and bushes, along with winding paths and roads.

The Foreground Path of Flowers

Burne-Jones and Morris's fascination with medieval illuminated manuscripts featuring *millefleurs* and fifteenth-century tapestries revived a passion for botanical art and an interest in naturalism.²⁹ As seen in Morris's textile designs and in Burne-Jones's backgrounds, low grounds, and edge-to-edge blossoms create dreamlike and creative effects in his oil paintings, as in *Spring*. The art critic Ruskin also praised the medieval illuminated manuscripts for their pure and brilliant colors and vivid pigments on their old vellum pages.³⁰ In nineteenth-century Britain, during a global surge in botanical interest, plants were extensively used to decorate glasshouses, gardens, and cottages, as seen in water weeds and river flora. These open and closed garden spaces (*hortus conclusus*) served as symbols of love, hope, and virtue.³¹

In the painting *Spring*, while crossing the Italianate terrace, the figure tosses seeds (Fig. 1c). The stoned terrace contrasts with the base of the picture plane, transformed into a lush, dense carpet of spring flowers pushing through the landscape. Besides the prominent, colorful tulips lining the lower ground, Burne-Jones depicted traditional low-growing English spring flora, such as pansies. These flat, dark, face-like petals are woven into the grass, symbolizing thoughtfulness and remembrance, the eternal recollection of the season of spring. Violets are also depicted in dense, tiny clusters of deep blue and purple sweet violets—arising directly on the earth, symbolizing faithfulness, as Spring surfaces periodically and, curiously, matching the color of Spring's sash. Primroses, with their pale, creamy yellow blooms, grow directly at the base of the stone masonry. This flower is a classic visual indicator of early spring. Faintly visible further back, where the grass meets the architecture, are taller stalks of narcissi, with trumpet-shaped heads, signaling new beginnings and rebirth. The multicolored low-lying floral meadow mirrors the medieval *millefleurs* tradition. The flowers act as a visual manifestation of the renewal spring brings, as their seeds glide above the soil.

Burne-Jones was heavily influenced by his fascination with medieval illustrated manuscripts and emblematic books that tell romantic stories, specifically works like Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung's *Romance de la Rose* (1236-1276),³² which formed the foundation of the British poet Geoffrey Chaucer's *Romaunt of the Rose* (*Romance de la Rose*, 14th century) and influenced subsequent medieval tales.³³ Furthermore, Burne-Jones's visual and literary influence of the *Romance de la Rose* and *millefleurs*

²⁹ Michaela Braesel, "The Influence of Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts on the Pre-Raphaelites and the Early Poetry of William Morris," *Journal of William Morris Studies* (2004), pp. 41-54, <https://morrisociety.org/wp-content/uploads/15.4.Braesel.pdf>; William Morris, "Some Notes on the Illuminated books of the Middle Ages, (1894)," in *The Ideal Book: Essays and Lectures on the Arts of the Book by William Morris*, ed. William S. Peterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 10-14.

³⁰ John Ruskin, *Collected Works*, ed. E.T. Cook & Alexander Wedderburn, *The Library Edition*, 39 vols. (London & New York: George Allen, 1903-1912), 10:285; and James S. Dearden, "John Ruskin, the Collector, with a catalogue of the illuminated and other Manuscripts in his Collection," *The Library*, 5th:ser., 21, 1966), pp.124-153 and 139.

³¹ A perfumed and enclosed garden, whose symbolism is rooted in the *Songs of Songs* (4:12).

³² Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Charles Dahlberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 1-27; Douglas Kelly, *Internal Difference and Meanings in the Roman de la Rose* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), pp. 23-30.

³³ Raymond Preston, *Chaucer* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1952), pp. 21-30 on *Romaunt de la Rose*, and pp. 153-179 on the Pilgrims, *Prologue of the Canterbury Tales*.

symbolism in his paintings, particularly *Spring*, stems from his study of Chaucer's interpretation of this love story during his undergraduate years at Oxford. This influence persisted through his collaboration with Morris on the illustration of editions of all of Chaucer's works at the Kelmscott Press, especially the *Romaunt of the Rose*.³⁴

Notably, in 1859, the British Museum displayed a Flemish illustrated edition of the medieval manuscript, *Romance de la Rose* (Fig. 9).³⁵ Burne-Jones was deeply captivated by this story and often brought his friend G.P. Boyce to the museum to admire its tale of love. He saw it as an art form that portrays love as a discipline fraught with obstacles, one that demands the gradual development of self-awareness. During one visit with Boyce to review a fifteenth-century manuscript at the British Museum, Burne-Jones described the *Romance de la Rose* as being "filled with the most exquisite illuminations, as fine as could well be in color and gradation, tenderness of tone and manipulation, and purity of color and light."³⁶ Burne-Jones produced numerous drawings on the theme of the rose, which were reproduced in numerous tapestries (Fig. 10).³⁷

Although in the painting *Spring*, Burne-Jones does not depict roses along the path, he ingeniously uses the intricate folds and clusters of fabric at the lower part of Spring's dress to create a concentric magenta-purple pattern resembling a rose. This mythic floral allusion is embodied in Spring, symbolizing her love of blooming and natural beauty (compare Figs. 9, 10 and 1d.)

The captivating interplay of color and light observed in the shimmering morning sky and the vivid hues of the figure's attire is also reflected in the unusual depiction of blooming yellow and red tulips along the path in *Spring* (Figs. 1a and 1b). The tulips facing outward suggest that spring has already begun. The vertical stance of the red tulips leads to the bench, steps, and landscape background, creating a metaphorical ascent and an artistic illusion of distance. The placement of the tulips and ground floral decoration contrasts with the visualized surfaces: the bench, steps, and arches are rigid, geometrical structures, while cultivated flowers, tulips growing majestically upward, and wildflowers represent living flora and natural growth, like the painter's imagination. Red tulips symbolize passionate love, the season for nurturing nature, and life's fragility, as their petals fall after blooming, enriching the soil and awaiting the return of spring.

³⁴ As recorded in GBJ, *Memorials*, 2:217, Burne-Jones observed, "I wish Chaucer would once for all make up his unrivalled and precious mind whether he is talking of a picture or a statue—I do wish it, for in the book I am putting myself wholly aside, and trying to see things as he saw them; not once have I invaded his kingdom with one hostile thought."

³⁵ MS Harley 4425, British Library, London. See J. Treuherz, "The Pre-Raphaelites and Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts," in *Pre-Raphaelite Papers*, ed. Leslie Paris (London: Tate Gallery, 1984), p. 167.

³⁶ Virginia Surtees, ed., *The Diaries of George Price Boyce* (Norwich: Real World, 1980), pp. 29-30.

³⁷ See Stephen Wildman's commentary (2018) on *Romaunt of the Rose* (*The Romance of the Rose*): *The Heart of the Rose* tapestry, *Burne-Jones Catalogue Raisonné*, <https://eb-j.org/browse-artwork-detail/ODA3>.



Figure 9. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung,
Romance de la Rose, L'Amant, det., 14th Century.
Flemish/French illuminated manuscript.
British Library, London.

Photo courtesy: © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 1d. Edward Burne-Jones, *Spring (Flora)*, det., Rose
design, 1864–1884, oil on canvas.
Koriyama City Museum of Art, Fukushima, Japan.



Figure 10. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Pilgrim and the Heart of the Rose*, 1890 designed; 1901 woven in silk as tapestry.

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham, UK.

The Seed Trail of Spring

Inspired by Morris's poem about *Flora* (1885), Burne-Jones depicts a scene that captures the essence of the poem, focusing on the moment when Spring arrives on Earth and bestows her blessings on the seeds: "I am the handmaid of the Earth ... I scatter every gift I gain from sun and wind to gladden them" (Fig. 1c).³⁸

As Spring metaphorically emerges from a cosmic realm in flight and arrives on Earth, she gently steps on the natural soil with her delicate bare feet, and her calves are adorned with classical sandals woven from myrtle and laurel-like leaves, evergreen plants that allude to rebirth, renewal, and inspiration.³⁹ The foliage straps on her feet create the illusion that her footwear is an extension of the spring landscape, harmonizing with the flower beds blooming along her path. The fine straps that wind around her toes are designed to resemble festive evergreen garlands, a sign of divinity, eternal youth, and renewal, like the season of spring, a conflation of nature and cosmic realms.⁴⁰

³⁸ In Morris, *Poems by The Way*.

³⁹ J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), pp. 96 and 110.

⁴⁰ Megan McNally, "Myth and Meaning in Edward Burne-Jones's *The Flower Book*," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide, Journal of Art and Visual Culture* 22, 2 (2023), np, doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2023.22.2.6.

Spring's dark blue-green laurel coronet, resembling a royal crown of divinity, echoes the foliage on her footwear. Her victorious achievement in fertilizing Earth is marked by her being crowned with laurel, a deeply rooted symbol in ancient Greco-Roman culture. The cosmic spring flood comes to Earth, opening the soil and allowing nature's essence or fluid to circulate freely, enabling plants to grow. The scattered seeds, the floral trail on the ground, and her foliage decoration are vital ingredients or energy, all symbolizing the myth of nature's rebirth and awakening, rooted deeply in the idea of renewal, not merely in the spectrum of nature but also in the metaphysical realm of creativity, imagination, and renewal of artists' quests.⁴¹

The Centre Figure, Spring

This section analyzes specific elements of Burne-Jones's portrayal of Spring, emphasizing two primary aspects: the figure's physical adornment, including her classical Graeco-Roman attire, the selection of vibrant colors on her garments, and the design of her sash; as well as the symbolic importance of her seed-scattering action, which alludes to germination, creativity, and inspiration.

Peter Nahum, curator and owner of the Leicester Galleries in London, noted that Burne-Jones's *Spring* or *Flora* depicts a figure scattering seeds of flowers (Fig. 1). The painting belonged to the seventh canvas in the St. George's series (1865-1867), which Burne-Jones made to decorate the home of artist, engraver, and illustrator Myles Birket Foster (1825-1899) in Witley (Surrey) during the mid-1860s. Although Burne-Jones intended to make the figure a standalone artwork as early as 1868, the painting may not have been finished until 1884 or 1894. Burne-Jones exhibited it at the New Gallery in London in 1898. *Spring* was then acquired by Alexander Constantine Ionides (1810-1890), a Greek shipping owner residing in London and a keen collector of Pre-Raphaelite artists, particularly Burne-Jones. Ionides displayed *Spring* at the entrance to his dining room at his home at One Holland Park Road in London.⁴² It is now housed at the Koriyama City Museum of Art in Fukushima, Japan.

In 1900, the engraver Abel Justin Mignon (1861-1920), enamored of Burne-Jones's *Spring* of 1868-1870 in watercolor and gouache, composed an etching printed in velum, published by Arthur Tooth and Sons and printed by A. Salmon & Arday. The etching-print is signed as EBJ and is now housed in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (E.127.1971) (compare Figs. 1 and 2).⁴³

⁴¹ Marieke J.E. van den Doel, *Ficino and Fantasy: Imagination in Renaissance Art and Theory from Botticelli to Michelangelo* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), chap. "Classical Theories of Plato and Platonism Tradition on Imagination," pp. 33-35; and 45-51.

⁴² For the comments of Peter Nahum on *Spring: engraving after the painting by Sir Edward Burne-Jones*, Peter Nahum at the *Leicester Galleries*, see <https://www.leicestergalleries.com/browse-artwork-detail/MTg2MjQ=>.

⁴³ For further data, see <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1110345/spring-print-mignon-abel-justin/> and <https://www.eb-j.org/browse-artwork-detail/NDk4>.



Figure 2. Abel Justin Mignon (1861-1920), engraver,
After Edward Burne-Jones's *Spring*, 1900, etching printed on velum (E.127.1971)
Published by Arthur Tooth and Sons, 1900.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
Photo credit and courtesy: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The Classical Attire

Burne-Jones's affinity for classical ideals, literature, and art is reflected in the treatment of the figure in allegorical and mythological paintings such as *Spring*. His interest in classical ideas and their visualization stems from his early education at Oxford⁴⁴ and his numerous trips to Florence, Rome, and Venice, where he saw the impact of the Graeco-Roman culture.⁴⁵ In England, the cultural expression and the British public's ongoing fascination with Antiquity—highlighted by their support for archaeological digs and their collection of ancient art—enhanced Burne-Jones's expertise as a connoisseur of antiques.⁴⁶ His support from wealthy Greek families living in London, such as the Ionides,⁴⁷ and his amorous involvement with the well-known Greek sculptress

⁴⁴ GBJ, *Memorials*, 1:68. See also Christopher Wood, *Burne-Jones* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1997), pp.12-17, on Burne-Jones's Oxford years.

⁴⁵ GBJ, *Memorials*, 1:197 and 2:24, 27, 64 and 334 for Florence; 2:25 and 26 for Rome; and 1:198, 244 and 2:334 for Venice. See Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones*, pp. 58-59, for a discussion on the impact of A.F. Rio's *Poetry of Christian Art* (trans. 1845) on Burne-Jones's appreciation of Italian art. This book was so significant for Burne-Jones that he gave it to his wife as a nuptial gift, see GBJ, *Memorials*, 1:141 and 2:141.

⁴⁶ M.A. Goldberg, "John Keats and the Elgin Marbles," *Apollo* (November, 1965), pp. 374-378; Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (London: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 1-14; Caroline Clifton-Mogg, *The Neoclassical Source Book* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), pp. 16-26; Sam Smiles, *The Image of Antiquity in Ancient Britain and the Romantic Imagination* (London: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 1-8.

⁴⁷ Julia Ionides, *The Ionides Family* (London: Associated University Press, 1995). Burne-Jones also attended many parties and social activities sponsored by Greek families in London, such as the Ionides and Legros. See Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones*, p. 119.

Maria Cassavetti Zambaco⁴⁸ further contributed to Burne-Jones's enchantment with the antique.

In England, the fascination with antiques expanded to include collecting classical artworks, such as the Elgin Marbles—Athenian relief sculptures from the Parthenon now displayed in the British Museum. Since the seventeenth century, English collectors, including the Earl of Arundel and later Lords Burlington and Leicester, have hired Englishmen in Rome to excavate and retrieve any antiquities they discovered.⁴⁹

By the late 1700s, London had become the center for trading in ancient art and antiquities. Johann Zoffany's painting of *Charles Towneley and His Sculpture Gallery* (1782, oil on canvas at the Art Gallery and Museum of Burnley, UK) vividly captures this quest by depicting the avid collector Charles Towneley (1737-1805) among his antiquities, alongside fellow antiquarians Charles Greville and Sir Thomas Astle.⁵⁰ The Society of Dilettanti in England (1734) and the British Art Colony in Rome, both established groups, sponsored exploratory missions to enhance understanding of Greek taste and Roman culture.⁵¹ Their aim was to motivate artists and collectors to visit, investigate, and excavate ancient sites. Both societies aimed to advance antiquarian knowledge in England. Hence, the artistic climate and preferences of Burne-Jones's era strengthened his focus on the classical tradition, evident in his allegorical and mythological pieces.

Before the German art historian and archeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann's 1764 book on the *History of Art of Antiquity*, nineteenth-century artists did not distinguish between Greek and Roman styles.⁵² The ancient Romans admired Greek art and actively preserved, copied, and collected it. From the Renaissance through the nineteenth century, European artists encountered a blend of what were called "ancient" styles. In England, Pre-Raphaelite painters like Burne-Jones were inspired by ancient art, particularly after the arrival of the Elgin Marbles in London between 1802 and 1812, which included Parthenon sculptures from Phidias's workshop.⁵³ Burne-Jones's affinity with ancient Roman art, which was enhanced by his Italian travels, was further extended by his appreciation of the beauty and significance of such a Greek treasure in London.⁵⁴

Burne-Jones's classical influence is evident in his depiction of ideal beauty across mythological and narrative paintings, as well as in his combination of classical and emblematic elements in his allegorical and mythological imagery. In *GERM*, a contemporary journal, he discussed his aesthetic ideas, art theory, and notions of ideal beauty, revealing his Platonic aesthetic influences.⁵⁵ For Burne-Jones, beauty was the *summum bonum* of life and the sole inspiration for his art. He expressed his artistic pursuit in these works: "Only this is true, that

⁴⁸ Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones*, pp. 114-15, 119, and 147, where she recounts how in an undated letter to F.S. Ellis, Burne-Jones comments on Maria Zambaco as the most beautiful Greek woman and "so constant of heart am I" ... and ... "that I think so still."

⁴⁹ Fani-Maria Tsigakou, *The Rediscovery of Greece* (New York: Caratza Brothers, Publishers, 1981), pp. 14-16 and 21-24; see the drawing by Charles Robert Cockerell, *Lord Elgin's Museum at Park Lane* (London: John Murray, 1808), p. 25.

⁵⁰ For the image see, Clifton-Mogg, *The Neoclassical Source Book*, pp. 23-24; and Michale Greenhalg, *The Classical Tradition in Art* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978), pp. 197-201.

⁵¹ Jason M. Kelly, *The Society of Dilettanti: Archaeology and Identity in the British Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

⁵² Greenhalgh, *The Classical Tradition in Art*, pp. 197-199. The Pre-Raphaelite painters, such as Burne-Jones, wanted to preserve the classical culture in the same manner as the ancient Romans—who were lovers of Greek art—preserved, copied, and collected the works. See also Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique* (London: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 79-99 and fig. 30, Johan Zoffany's *The Tribuna* (Her Majesty the Queen's Collection in London), displaying the antique collection of the Medici.

⁵³ Alison Smith, *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality and Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 139, for a discussion on Burne-Jones's study of the Elgin Marbles as part of the search for ideal form.

⁵⁴ E. Waterhouse, "The British Contribution to the Neo-classical Style in Painting," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 40 (1954), pp. 57-74.

⁵⁵ GBJ, *Memorials*, 2:125.

beauty is very beautiful, and softens, and comforts, and inspires, and rouses, and lifts up, and never fails.”⁵⁶

In the 1860s, Burne-Jones drew inspiration from both literary and visual sources, including classical sculpture he studied at the British Museum, to shape the composition and depiction of female allegorical and mythological figures in his paintings, such as *Temperantia* of 1872, a watercolor and gouache on velum signed and dated EB-J with the inscription TEMPERANTIA, now at the Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery (compare Figs. 11 and 1),⁵⁷ *The Cumaean Sybil* or *Delphic Sybil* of 1873, oil on panel, now at the Manchester Art Gallery (compare Figs. 11, 12, and 1),⁵⁸ and *The Mirror of Venus* of 1866 and 1877, oil and tempera on canvas, now at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon⁵⁹ compared with *Spring*. His detailed rendering of garments and folds echoes classical motifs, such as windblown, wet drapery and fluid overlapping folds seen in the work of the Greek sculptor Phidias, *The Three Goddesses* (Hestia, Dione, and Aphrodite) from the East Pediment of the Parthenon of 437 BCE, Pentelic marble, now in the British Museum in London—a museum Burne-Jones visited often (compare Figs. 13, 13a, and 1, a possible visual reconstruction). Consequently, the classical treatment of Spring's attire reveals the emergence of a mythological classical goddess as well as an affinity with Italian Renaissance absorption of the classical tradition.

⁵⁶ Gaunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy*, p. 152.

⁵⁷ See Peter Nahum's commentary of 2023 on *Temperantia*, *Temperance* (*Temperantia*, model Maria Zambaco), *Burne-Jones Catalogue Raisonné*, <https://www.eb-j.org/browse-artwork-detail/MzU0MQ==>. The Greek sculptress Maria Zambaco was his ardent muse and model for the painting.

⁵⁸ For the image and Stephen Wildman's 2019 commentary on *Sibylla Delphica* (*Sibylla Cumaea*, *The Cumaean Sibyl*, *The Delphic Sibyl*), *Burne-Jones Catalogue Raisonné*, see <https://www.eb-j.org/browse-artwork-detail/MTM2NA==>.

⁵⁹ For the image, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Mirror_of_Venus_Edward_Burne-Jones.jpg; and see Cheney, "Edward Burne-Jones's *The Mirror of Venus*," pp. 1-28.



Figure 11. Edward Burne-Jones, *Temperantia*, 1872, a watercolor and gouache on velum, signed and dated EB-J with the inscription **TEMPERANTIA**.

Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, UK.



Figure 12. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Cumaean Sybil or Delphic Sybil* of 1873, oil on panel. Manchester Art Gallery, UK.



Figure 13. Phidias, *The Three Goddesses* (Hestia, Dione, and Aphrodite), 437 BCE, Pentelic marble, from the East Pediment of the Parthenon.

Now in the British Museum, London

Photo credit: ©The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 13a. Phidias, Aphrodite in vertical pose, 437 BCE, Pentelic marble, from the East Pediment of the Parthenon. British Museum, London.

Photo reconstruction: Liana De Girolami Cheney.

No doubt Burne-Jones, inspired by Ficino's philosophy of beauty from the Italian Renaissance, was also influenced by Italian Renaissance painters such as Botticelli, who aimed to capture beauty in their imagery through mythic, languid, and melancholic slender figures. During his trip to Italy in 1859 with his mentor Ruskin, Burne-Jones studied the paintings of Botticelli. At the Galleria degli Uffizi, then, he saw the panels of Judith—the *Discovery of the Body of Holofernes* and the *Return of Judith to Bethulia* of 1472, tempera on panel (Figs. 15 and 15a, flipped).⁶⁰ The painting features the maid Abra and Judith dressed in flowing, opulent classical garments. They move quickly across an open hillside, with a lush middle ground of green and cultivated land leading into a bright, rolling pastoral landscape. In the far background, a military camp is depicted as actively engaged in battles. Within the atmospheric horizon, characterized by reflective greenish hues, rivers and hills provide a contrasting backdrop to the expansive, intense celestial sky that dominates the scene. Therefore, in the context of *Spring*'s treatment of attire, Burne-Jones integrated elements from both classical and Italian Renaissance styles (compare Figs. 15a flipped and 1).



Figure. 15 and 15a flipped. Alessandro Botticelli, *Return of Judith to Bethulia* of 1472, tempera on panel.
Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence

⁶⁰ Ronald W. Lightbown, *Botticelli: Life and Work*, 2 vols. (London: Paul Elek, 1978), 2:74-76; Michael Levey "Botticelli and Nineteenth Century England," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 23 (1960), pp. 291-306; Mark Evans and Stefan Weppelman, eds., *Botticelli Reimagined* (London: Victoria and Albert Publishing, 2016).



Figure. 15a flipped. Alessandro Botticelli,
Return of Judith to Bethulia of 1472, tempera on panel.
Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence



Figure 1. Edward Burne-Jones, *Spring (Flora)*, 1864-
1884, oil on canvas.
Koriyama City Museum of Art, Fukushima, Japan.

The Colors in Spring

For Burne-Jones and Morris, the use of color was not merely decorative but a fundamental tool for a harmonious design as part of the concept of the beautiful, evoking mood and atmosphere in a painting, emulating medieval and mystical spirituality and the mythical realm of imagination.⁶¹ Furthermore, they were inspired by the scientific British studies on synthetic colors. The first synthetic aniline dye, mauveine, was discovered by William Henry Perkin in 1856 and produced a vibrant, durable purple-magenta hue, influenced by chemist George Field's 1854 work, *Chromatography: or A Treatise on Colors and Pigments*. Field's book, with its chemical stability charts, served as a key resource for Pre-Raphaelite artists navigating the rise of industrialized colors, ensuring that synthetic violet and purple pigments remained stable and resistant to fading on the canvas. Morris, Burne-Jones's artistic and intellectual friend, had a copy of the 1869 revised edition in his personal collection, which has a handwritten note: "William Morris / Exeter Coll: Oxon."⁶² He probably acquired this book in his early years at Exeter College, Oxford, where he also befriended Burne-Jones and discussed its findings and importance with him.

⁶¹ Caroline Arscott, *William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones: Interlacing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), chap. 3 for discussion on color for Burne-Jones, chap. 5 for Morris's color symbolism. For the symbolism of color, see also Birmingham Cathedral Stained Glass Archives; and Exeter College and Archive Letters.

⁶² Today the book is housed in the Library of William Morris, located in the special collection Library at the Cohen Quad on Walter Street of the Exeter College at the University of Oxford.

In addition, Burne-Jones was fascinated by, and attempted to replicate in his paintings, the rare shade of “Tyrian purple,” an ancient, expensive natural dye extracted from the mucus of snails or mollusks in the Mediterranean Sea. Because of its rarity and beauty, it had been a status symbol for royalty since the time of the Phoenicians.⁶³ Burne-Jones discovered this purple color while examining a Byzantine Gospel at Quaritch’s bookshop in London. He mentioned this encounter in a letter to his friend Francis Graham, Lady Horner, stating: “Every sheet is dipped in a vat of Tyrian purple dye. There are twenty subtle shades of Tyrian purple. When you dipped the first sample, it appeared as a pale rose; after twenty-five dips, it resembled black poppy.”⁶⁴

Spring’s scene is dominated by vibrant magenta-purple and dark blue hues (Fig. 1). Burne-Jones, who used earthy tones in his early works, transitioned to more aesthetic, mythic, and symbolic colors to evoke a sense of ethereal mystery in the painting *Spring*. He also made insightful comments about colors, such as “I love blue; I think it is the most pure and beautiful of all the colors in the world, and the most lovely.”⁶⁵ The blue sash prominently encircles the figure of Spring, with her laurel crown also tinged in intense, brilliant, and vivid blue. This blue laurel coronet does not honor her as a poet, as in classical or Italian Renaissance art. Instead, Burne-Jones changed the green eternal foliage to blue, representing her divine influence and celestial symbolism. The panoramic view of the celestial atmosphere displays various shades of blue, hence the divine cosmic imprint on Earth.

The Initials B and J

Burne-Jones’s striking blue sash, flowing from Spring’s back, forms decorative letters, with B and J hinting at his initials—either intentionally or by chance (Figs. 16 and 1e and 16 and 1f, flipped image for comparison). Burne-Jones selected the color magenta because of his heraldic knowledge; it signifies the ancient symbolism of temperance, justice, and royalty.⁶⁶ But he added another layer of complex symbolism in the depiction of Spring’s sash, which, acting as a *vela* [sail], directs the wind to guide her, while her right hand grasps and twists a section of her dress into a knot. These serve as markers for both physical movement and metaphysical floating navigation.

⁶³ See Ben Maeder and Jonathan Swinger, “Roman Snail Dye Found in UK for First Time,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjje132jvygo>; and Jane Bridgeman, “The Purple Dye in Late Antiquity and Byzantium in the Royal Purple and the Biblical Blue,” in *The Royal Purple and the Biblical Blue*, ed. Ehud Spanier (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1987), pp. 159–166, https://www.academia.edu/33111750/Purple_Dye_in_Late_Antiquity_and_Byzantium_in_The_Royal_Purple_and_the_Biblical_Blue.

⁶⁴ See William Waters’s comments on Burne-Jones’s letter in Frances Horner’s autobiography, *Time Remembered* (London: W. Heinemann, Ltd., 1933), p. 139.

⁶⁵ Béatrice Laurent, “‘La plus belle couleur au monde’: le blue dans l’oeuvre d’Edward Burne-Jones,” *Textes & Contextes*, 17-2 (December 2022), pp. 1–24, <https://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=3770>.

⁶⁶ See overview of Burne-Jones’s designs and style by Vanessa Cumper, online post from the DeMorgan Collection, at <https://www.demorgan.org.uk/this-week-were-celebrating-burne-jones>.



Figure 16. William Morris, Decorative Letters B and J, wood-engraving, on Indian paper from Kelmscott Press.

Wood block cut by W. H. Hooper. Department of Engraving, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Photo credit and courtesy: ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 16. William Morris, Decorative Letter B, wood-engraving, on Indian paper from Kelmscott Press.

Wood block cut by W. H. Hooper.
Department of Engraving, Victoria and
Albert Museum, London.

Photo credit and courtesy: ©Victoria and
Albert Museum, London.



Fig. 1e. and flipped Edward Burne-Jones, *Spring (Flora)*, det., Blue sash, 1864–1884, oil on canvas.

Koriyama City Museum of Art, Fukushima, Japan.



Figure 16. William Morris,
Decorative Letter J, wood-
engraving, on Indian paper from
Kelmscott Press.
Wood block cut by W. H. Hooper.
Department of Engraving, Victoria
and Albert Museum, London.
Photo credit and courtesy: ©Victoria
and Albert Museum, London.



Fig. 1f and flipped Edward Burne-Jones, *Spring (Flora)*, det., Blue
sash flipped, 1864–1884, oil on canvas.
Koriyama City Museum of Art, Fukushima, Japan.

At the Kelmscott Press, Morris designed many patterned initials inspired by medieval illuminated manuscripts, producing beautiful decorative initials in ornate woodcuts and engravings on Indian paper, often adorned with foliage motifs such as acanthus leaves, flowers, and vines. The letter B was commonly used to symbolize biblical, poetic, and British chapter headings or initials. In his portrayal of Spring's sash, Burne-Jones intentionally incorporated the initials B and J (with J adapted from I by Morris), symbolically signing the painting as BJ and acknowledging Morris's lettering skill. Additionally, the initials symbolically resemble those in a heading and highlight a new chapter or start, similar to the metaphor of spring's arrival and the beginning.⁶⁷

Spring a Mythic Sower

In creating the figure of Spring in partial celestial flight, Burne-Jones continued his exploration of a floating figure in mid-air, symbolizing movement, change, and transformation, similar to his different versions of *Evening Star* (*Vesper* or *Hesperus*) from the 1870s. He experimented with the technical aspects of image composition, materials, and textures, using watercolor, bodycolor, and gum Arabic on paper, investigating coloration, focusing on greens, cobalt greens, and various shades of blue to suggest a cosmic force of nature and the transformation from daytime light into evening shimmering light (Fig. 17).⁶⁸ The figure in *Evening Star*, in its various versions,

⁶⁷ Interestingly, the Morris decorative letters from the Kelmscott Press influenced not only the Arts and Crafts Movement but also American decorative lettering. The well-established American literary company from Philadelphia belonging to the elite literary and academic culture of the late nineteenth century included Richard Meade Bache (1830-1870), who wrote a linguistic essay *Vulgarism and Other Errors of Speech* (1869); *American Wonderland* (1871), a tale rooted in indigenous culture and featuring enchanted forests and valleys, magical trials, and powerful forces; and the fictional work *Young Wrecker of the Florida Reef* (1865, whose heading initials are remarkable), a depiction of nineteenth-century life in South Florida and Key West. Bache moved in educated Victorian circles in Philadelphia and traced the connection between American authors and the Pre-Raphaelites. See <https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupname?key=Bache%2C%20Richard%20Meade>.

⁶⁸ See John Christian's commentary (for the exhibition at the Old Water Color Society's Pall Mall exhibition of 2019) on the history of the commission and patronage of *Evening*, *The Evening Star*, *Hesperus*, *Vesper* (first version) and on various versions, *Burne-Jones Catalogue Raisonné*, <https://eb-j.org/browse-artwork-detail/MjQzOA==>; F. De Lisle, *Burne-Jones* (London: Methuen, 1904), p. 182 (as *Vesper*, first version); Harrison and Waters, *Burne-Jones*, pl. 28 (as *Hesperus*, *The Evening Star*); and David Breuer, et

navigates through the atmosphere, floats in mid-air within the celestial realm of an open sky, and then transitions into the natural realm of Earth. Below the panoramic view of the heavens is the bird's-eye view of the cultivated Earth, depicting a cityscape, rural meadows, and distant mountain valleys. The barefooted figure is adorned with a long transparent classical chemise that reveals her left breast; a nude arm lifts and holds the drapery of her garment. Her right arm also gracefully lifts the folds of her attire to facilitate her gentle, rhythmic movements through the air. Evening Star slightly turns her head toward the vast horizon as her tresses drift in the air, mirroring the movement and folds of her garment.



Figure 17. Edward Burne-Jones, *Evening Star (Vesper)* First Version, 1870, Watercolor, bodycolor, gum Arabic on paper. Signed and initialed EBJ, 1870 (added). Private Collection, UK.

Photo credit and courtesy: ©Christie's of London.

al., *Pre-Raphaelite and Other Masters: The Andrew Lloyd Webber Collection*, Exh. Royal Academy (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2003), cat. p. 297, under no. 41, for the second version.

The second version of *Evening Star*, a watercolor and gouache with gold paint on paper composed between 1872 and 1873, was part of the Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber Collection in London (Fig. 18). Burne-Jones continued to explore the cosmic, mythic atmosphere of the floating figure. The symbolism of the *Evening Star* is conflated with the image of the Roman goddess of Dawn (*Aurora*). Her gesture and floating movement are similar to those in the first version, but her head is in profile, looking forward rather than at the magical opening of the new day, with shimmering light blues and purple that match her blue chemise (compare Figs. 17, 18, and 1). She moves through the air, passing over a city of clustered houses along the quayside, with towering buildings and a distant, motionless river. Burne-Jones continued to experiment with blue and green tonalities to evoke the transformation of night into the beginning of dawn, creating a type of northern light, the sky's glowing light resembling sunrise. In both *Evening Star* versions, the figure's gesture of holding her garment's fold with her right hand, along with the horizontal fold line, indicates that she is using her garment as a knot or guide, a detail mirrored in Spring's hand gesture (Fig. 19). Her airy tiptoeing movement and fluttering windblown garment are reminiscent of Botticelli's figure of the maid Abra in the Judith panel (compare Figs. 15a and 1).



Figure 18. Edward Burne-Jones, *Evening Star (Vesper)*, Second Version, 1872-1873, watercolor and gouache, and gold paint on paper.

Private Collection, London.

Photo credit and courtesy: ©Collection of Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber, London.



Figure 19. Edward Burne-Jones, *Evening Star (Vesper)*, version one, left; second version, center; and *Spring*, right.

Burne-Jones does not merely depict an allegory of spring or the mythological goddess Flora; her motion and the floral pathway surrounding her are not a direct botanical representation of a garden. Rather, her dispersal of mythical seeds functions as a metaphor for artistic creation. Inventively, Burne-Jones forms a metaphorical pouch with the rich, convoluted folds that Spring grasps with her right hand, while with her graceful left hand she scatters the seeds in a diagonal motion, creating a trail of shimmering golden light that resembles a magical, transparent path of richness.

Burne-Jones's *Spring* as a Floating Sower represents a cosmic, universal essence manifesting in the natural realm of Earth, with the act of sowing symbolizing artistic creation, imagination, and the spark of human creativity (Fig. 1c). Rather than literal farming, Burne-Jones uses the act of sowing as a metaphor for psychological and spiritual themes, similar to the Sower's gesture of holding a bag or pouch with seeds and scattering them into rich, prepared soil.

This metaphor's layered conceptual significance emphasizes the strong connection between the natural world and internal imagination: the Sower of ideals, the personification of nature, the concealed potential of nature revealed through art, and the symbolic duality of sowing or scattering seeds. The scattering of seeds, forming a golden stream, symbolizes both the passage of time and nature's fleeting cycles, reflecting how ideas, inspiration, and thoughts are first conceived or stored, then cultivated, and finally transformed into imagination and artistic creation. Spring, symbolizing the source of ideals, is depicted through a central female figure vividly engaged in running and scattering seeds across a mythic landscape. In Burne-Jones's artistic vision, she embodies the creative spirit—widely disseminated across a blank canvas to inspire the emergence of new myths, beauty, and ideas. Spring signifies a manifestation, while the act of planting seeds reflects his departure from rigid industrial constraints. Moving beyond strict botanical realism, he employed an "impromptu technique" to depict a deeply personal, imaginary world where nature functions purely as an emotional landscape.

Spring symbolizes the latent potential of both art and nature. Similar to a seed hidden underground, an inherent blueprint for life, Burne-Jones viewed human creativity as an internal force that must be unleashed into the world to fully realize its potential. These seeds symbolize raw inspiration that has been stored in the mind, waiting for the subconscious to nurture them into full narrative forms, as in creating a painting like *Spring*.

Burne-Jones's portrayal of flowers and growth is invariably imbued with meaning. By emphasizing the act of sowing rather than the harvest, he draws attention to the excitement of inception and the infinite potential of the artistic mind prior to encountering worldly complexities or limitations. This reflects the duality of nature and creativity, both physical and metaphysical. Consequently, he achieves his aim of creating a beautiful painting of rebirth, *Spring*.

Conclusion

Burne-Jones's *Spring* explores both the tangible and spiritual aspects of spring; it implies that although Nature produces beauty, it is ultimately the artist's imagination that animates it. The painting depicts Nature in full bloom, with imagination exposing the artwork's potential. Through the majestic figure of Spring, Burne-Jones represents the creative forces that underpin the *Spring* vision, serving as an allegory for artistic inspiration and imagination. Burne-Jones's union of formal design with artistic insights created beauty.

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