The Art Of Mrs. William De Morgan. By W. Shaw Sparrow.

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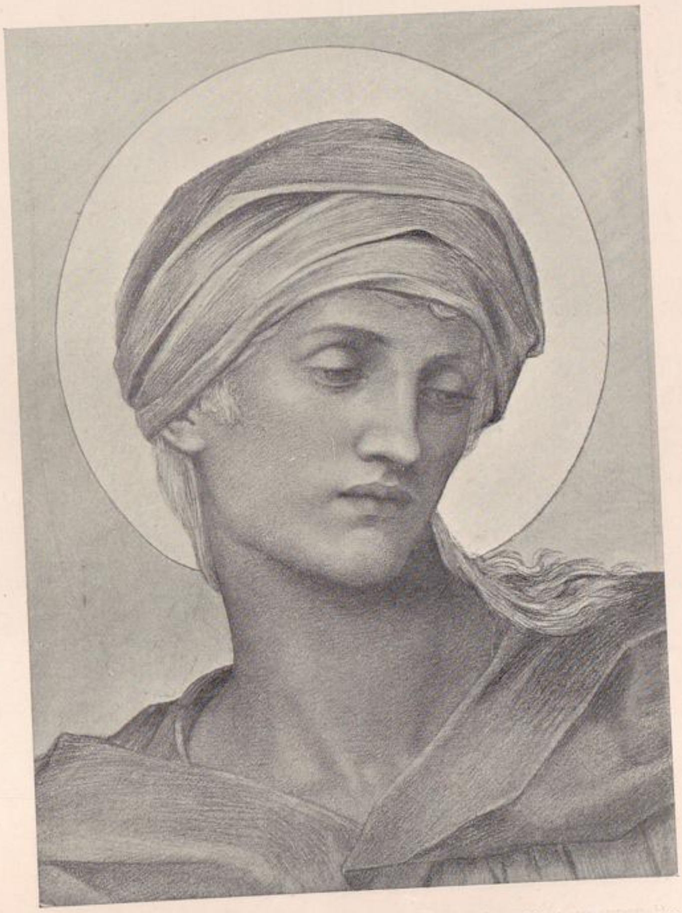
Visual Library

The Art of Evelyn De Morgan

THE ART OF MRS. WILLIAM DE MORGAN. BY W. SHAW SPARROW.

THE maiden name of Mrs. William De Morgan was Evelyn Pickering, and twenty-three years have passed since that name appeared for the first time in the catalogue of an important exhibition of pictures. A painting in oil was hung then (1877) at the Grosvenor Gallery; it had for its subject *Ariadne in Naxos;* it was close in drawing, thoughtful and precise in composition; and its style, its general character, was Pre-Raphaelite, but not as yet in what may be called a Victorian manner. Its painter, that is to say, was not in 1877 a devoted follower of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Miss Pickering, indeed—the maiden name seems the right one to employ when speaking of the artist's early work—had in those days barely scraped acquaintance with the most noted men of genius who had been influenced by the modern Pre-Raphaelite movement. She had not seen the pictures that Millais painted in his first period, nor had she a chance of becoming familiar with them till they were brought once more to public notice by the Millais Exhibition of 1886. With Rossetti's poetry, in 1877, Miss Pickering was well acquainted, but of his genius in painting she knew scarcely anything at all, and it remained almost unknown to her till she visited that fine show of Rossetti's pictures which was held after his death. As regards Burne-Jones, she certainly had seen a few of his paintings, and had certainly been moved by their peculiar greatness; but the influence of Burne-Jones had not then appeared in her work and become what it was soon to be—a determinant factor in the formation of her settled character as an artist. The short of the matter is that Miss Pickering's style had come to her at first-hand, a natural expression of her spiritual nature. She understood the great predecessors of Raphael; she and they were congenial: "across the great gulf of time they exchanged smiles and a salute." Even as a child she made friends with those who were represented in the National Gallery; it was from their pictures that her inborn love of art received its earliest encouragement.

Other æsthetic influences came soon afterwards, the first of these being the wise sympathy and the rich, suggestive art of her uncle, Mr. Roddam Spencer Stanhope. Then followed a course of academic study. It began at the Slade



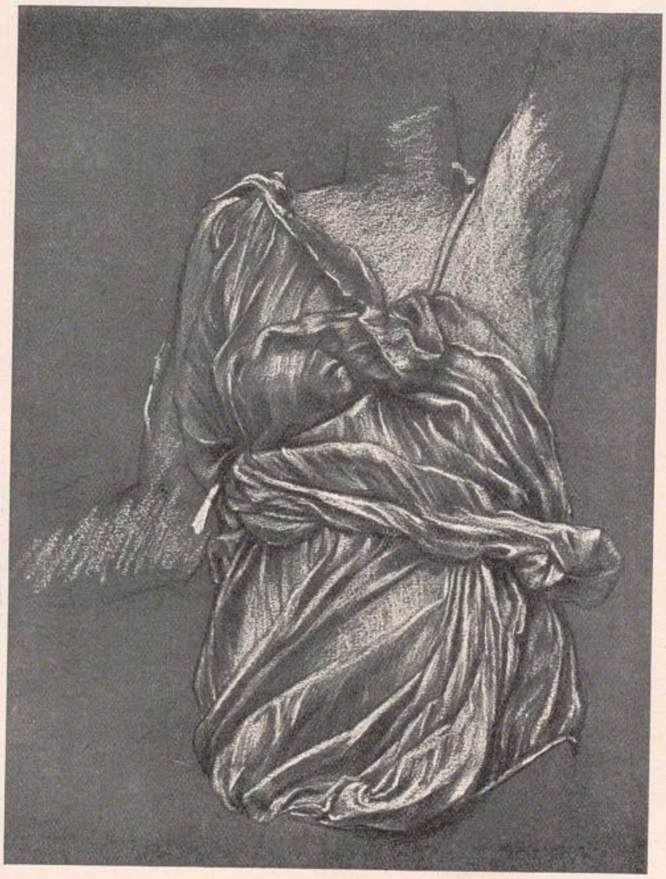
"MATER DOLOROSA"

BY EVELYN DE MORGAN

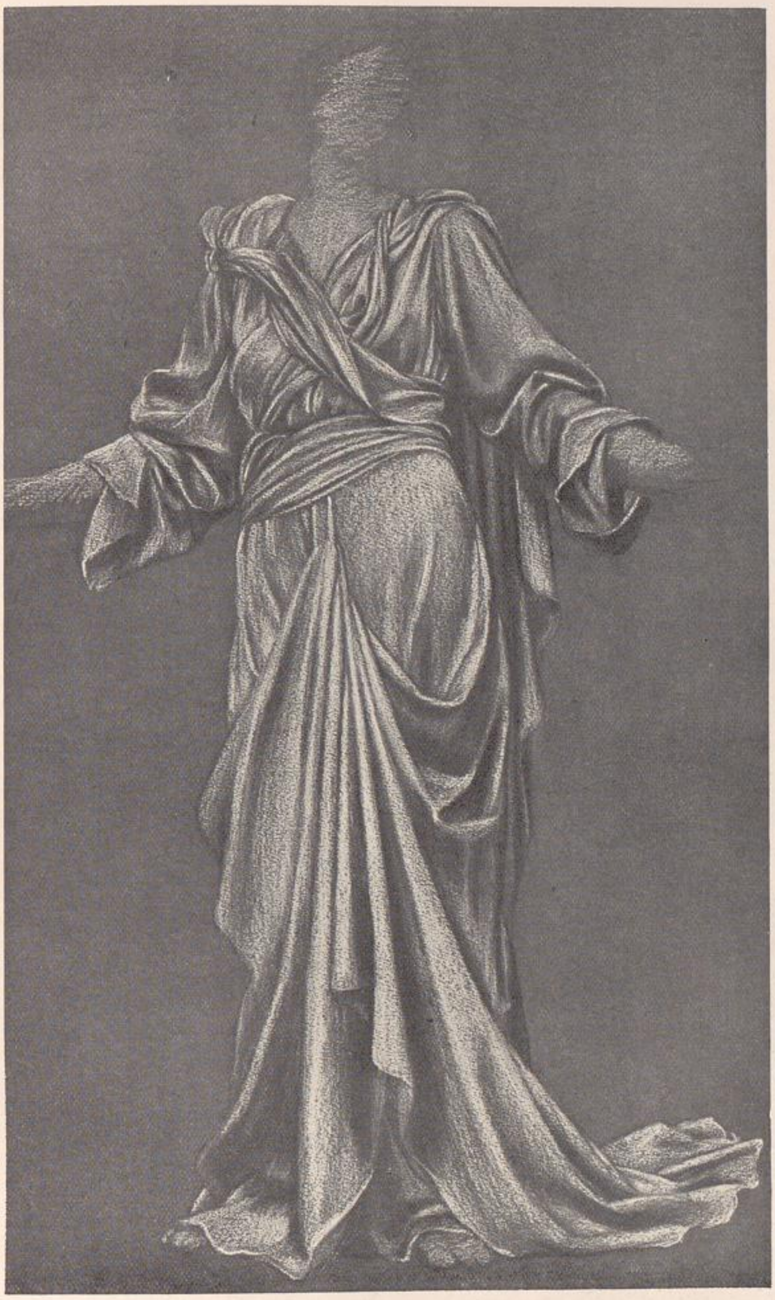
School, when Miss Pickering was sixteen; and it ended there eighteen months later, when she won the Slade Scholarship, a valuable prize given for a term of three years. Though valuable, this scholarship had attached to it certain conditions which Miss Pickering found irksome, so she boldly threw it up at the end of the first year, and started to paint pictures on her own account. This happened in 1877, a few months before *Ariadne in Naxos* was exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery.

About the same time Mr. Stanhope went to live in Italy, and year by year his niece passed several months with him, so that she was able to study her favourite Italian masters in their own home, amid surroundings friendly both to them and to a right appreciation of their naïve and serene merits. In England, the sentiment of a primitive painter is very rarely understood, so at variance is it with the habits of mind engendered by the grim warfare of life in huge commercial districts and cities. This helps to explain why our English Pre-Raphaelites have always had many opponents, even among artists and those who profess to be art lovers. And one remembers, also, that their German forerunners—Overbeck, Cornelius, and their disciples—were not more fortunate; in youth they had nothing in common with that public-spirited enthusiasm which appeared in Germany after the fall of Napoleon; and it is worth noting that even Goethe, usually a most generous-minded critic, had no patience with them and their sincere reverence for the devotional art of the early Italians. Indeed, he told Eckermann that a revival of old-fashioned styles in art ought to be looked upon as "a sort of masquerade, which can, in the long run, do no good, but must, on the contrary, have a bad effect on the man who adopts it. Such a thing," said he, "is in contradiction to the age in which we live, and will confirm the empty and shallow way of thinking and feeling in which it originated. It is well enough, on a merry winter's evening, to go to a masquerade as a Turk; but what should we think of a man who wore such a mask all the year round? We should think that he was crazy, or in a fair way to become so before long."

This is one manner of viewing a revival of old styles in art; but is it really a comprehensive manner? One may venture to think not, and for the following reason. No great primitive phase of art seems archaic to those who are never tired of living with it in congenial surroundings, such as may be found in some old Flemish and Italian cities; cities where the present seems actually to sleep in the past, so soon



"STUDY OF DRAPERY" BY EVELYN DE MORGAN

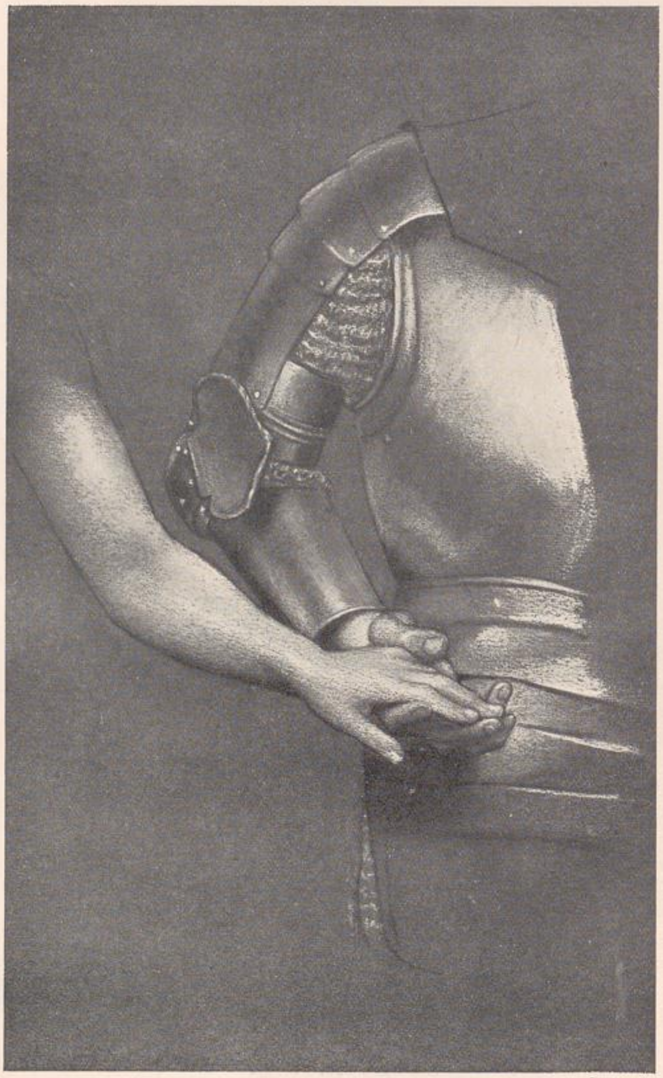


STUDY OF DRAPERY
BY EVELYN DE MORGAN

are its modes of thought forgotten by anyone who, penetrated with the *genius loci*, has imagination enough to become a spiritual contemporary of the early Old Masters whose work he loves best to contemplate. To such a student—call him a visionary if you like—the early Italian and Flemish painters are not antiquated, out of date. They are as familiar to him as Homer is to many ardent devotees. This is a fact worth remembering, for an intelligent recognition of its importance in art-criticism would prevent a great deal of idle talk about the alleged affectation of the Victorian Pre-Raphaelites. To-day, in this article, it is a fact which must not be forgotten even for a moment, as the work of Mrs. De Morgan is nothing if not the inevitable outcome of the intuitive fondness she has ever had for modes of æsthetic expression which still seem to most people primitive.

As we have already seen, the earliest of her art influences were found in the National Gallery, where the natural bias of her mind in childhood brought her into sympathy with the early Italians; we have seen, too, how this sympathy was encouraged and deepened by frequent visits to Italy; and mention has also been made of the artist's admiration for Burne-Jones. It is enthusiasm rather than admiration, and its effect on Mrs. De Morgan's technical equipment is easily noted in many pictures and studies. One feels, too, on very rare occasions, that it has touched the inner essence and life of a piece of work, leaving a trace of unpleasing wistfulness, of spiritual languor; but this has happened very rarely, and the fact is mentioned here only because that languor is the negation of all the human cheerfulness and vigour of spirit that make life liveable and civilisation progressive. This is how it appeals to me, and one must needs avoid that suppression of adverse criticism which turns a writer into a mere "flatterer, a beast that biteth smiling."

At the same time, however, I am well aware that what is truthful criticism to one man is of necessity more or less false to every-



STUDY BY EVELYN DE MORGAN

“FLORA”

FROM A PAINTING IN OILS BY

EVELYN DE MORGAN

(By permission of W. Imrie, Esq.)

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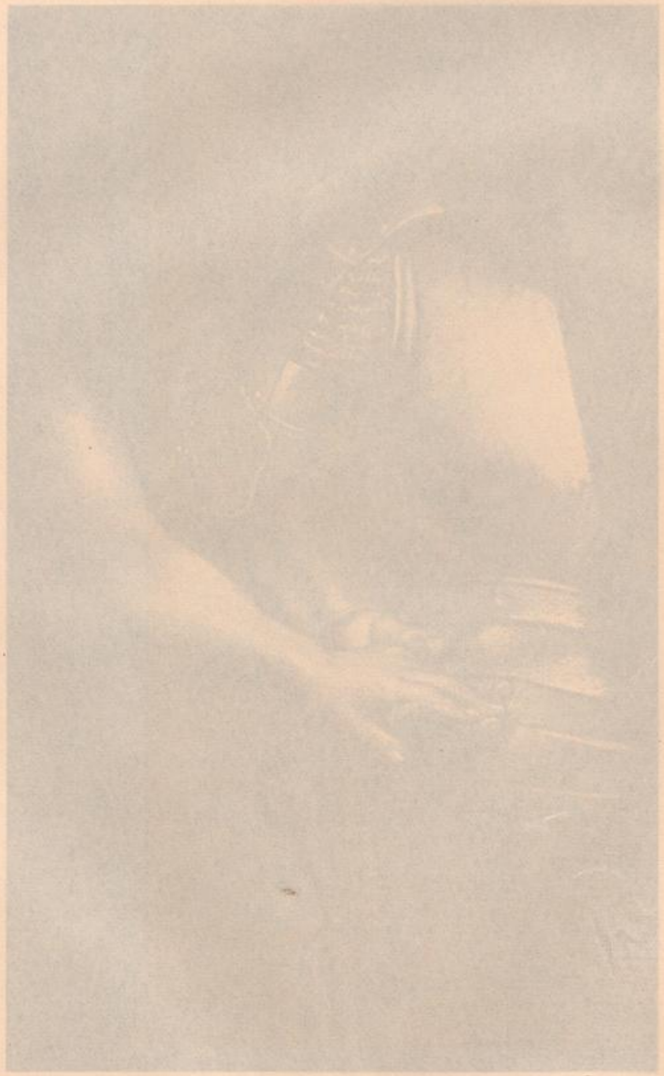

STUDY BY EVELYN DE MORGAN

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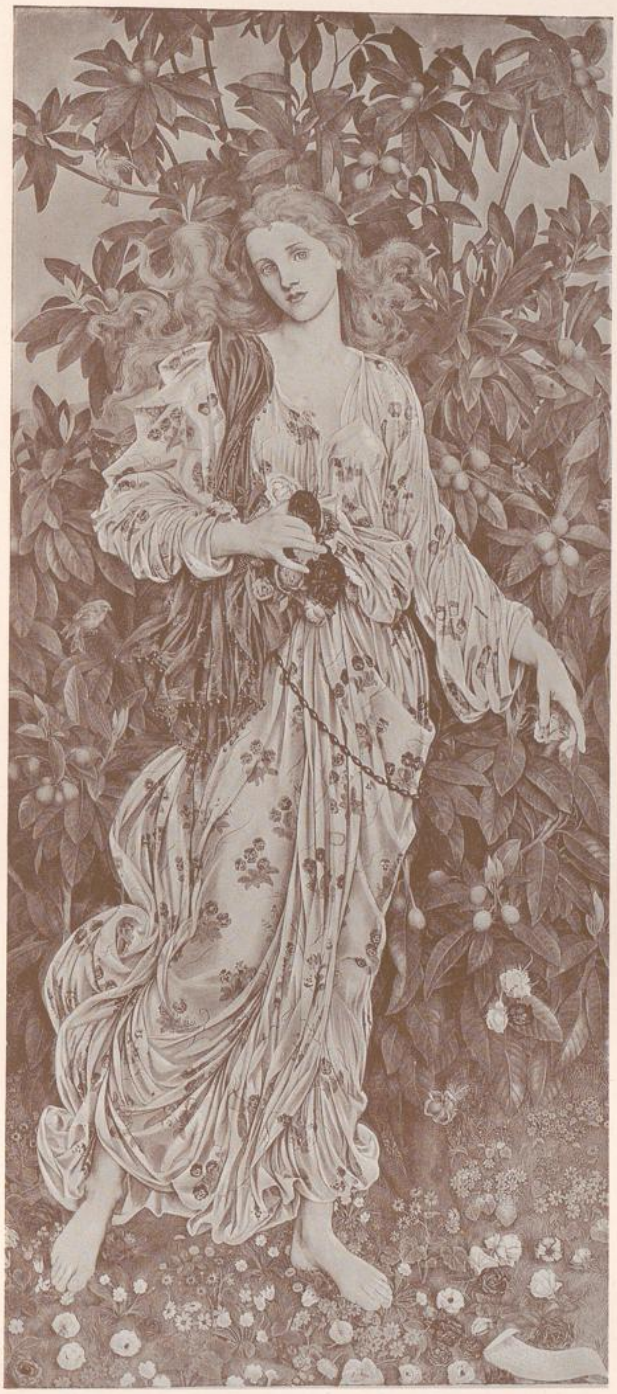
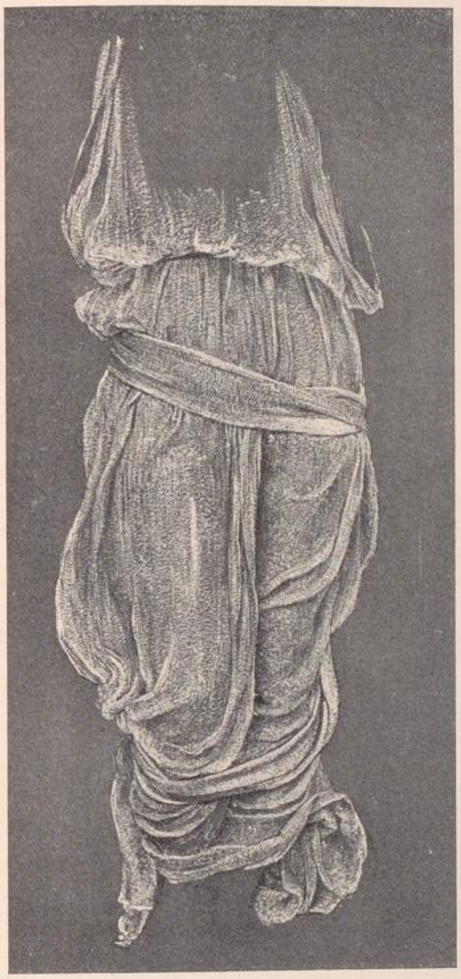
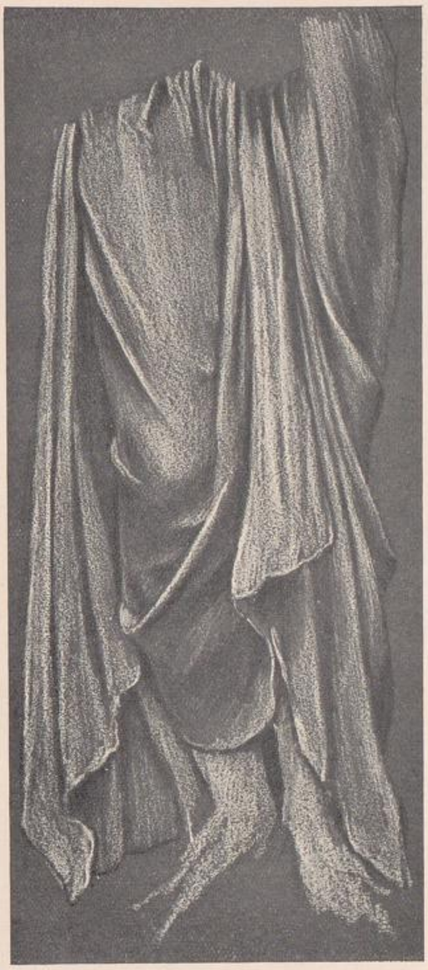






DRAPERY STUDIES BY EVELYN DE MORGAN

one else, since no two persons either see exactly the same forms and colours, or possess, in equal measure, a capacity for taking delight in the same kind of æstheticism. It is certain, then, that this attempt to estimate the work of Mrs. De Morgan will meet with some opposition everywhere. Many persons, I have no doubt, will prefer those pictures in the technique of which the influence of Burne-Jones happens to be most clearly evident, while others will find most pleasure when they feel the presence of Botticelli's spirit, as in the quietly beautiful picture entitled *Flora*.

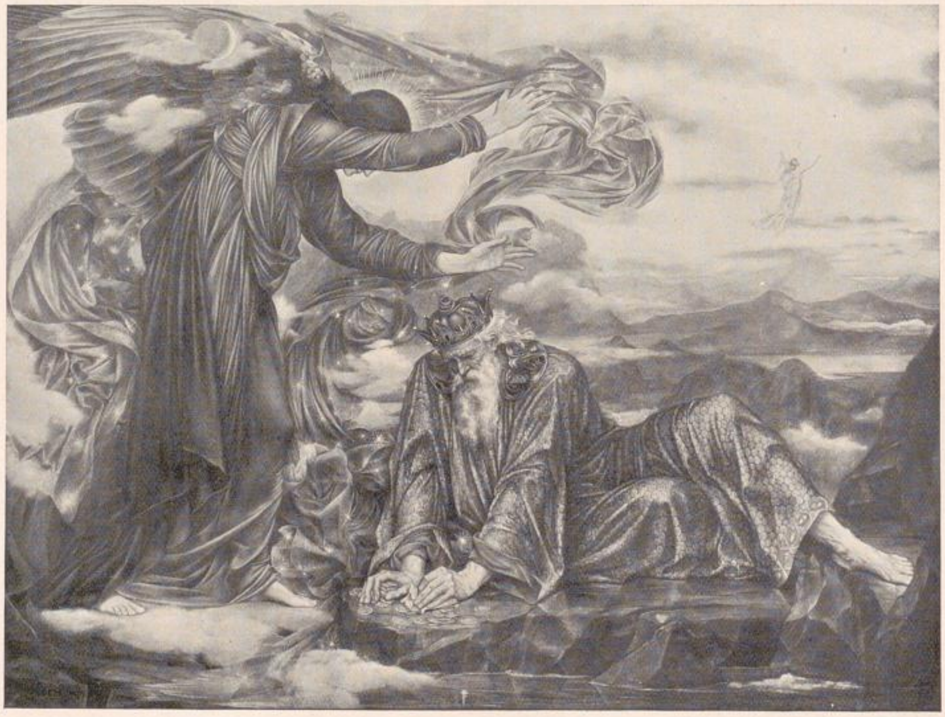
Flora is a "small life" figure. She is dressed in a white robe, dappled with many-tinted pansies, and the drapery is painted over gold-leaf, which shines through the colour. The scarf is scarlet, with a pattern of swallows in gold. The tree in the background, with its admirably-drawn foliage, so decorative in effect, is a Nespolo tree, that bears fruit in the early spring. This picture was painted entirely in Florence, where Mrs. De Morgan works during the winter, and none will fail to notice how lovingly and thoughtfully it is finished in every part.

Mrs. De Morgan's debt to Botticelli may also be felt in the illustration to be found on page 229—not in the triple-winged Ithuriel, but in the exquisite little figure of Eve, who sleeps, dreaming in the midst of scattered marguerites, forget-me-nots, and roses. This picture was inspired by the following lines from the Fourth Book of the "Paradise Lost," where Gabriel says :—

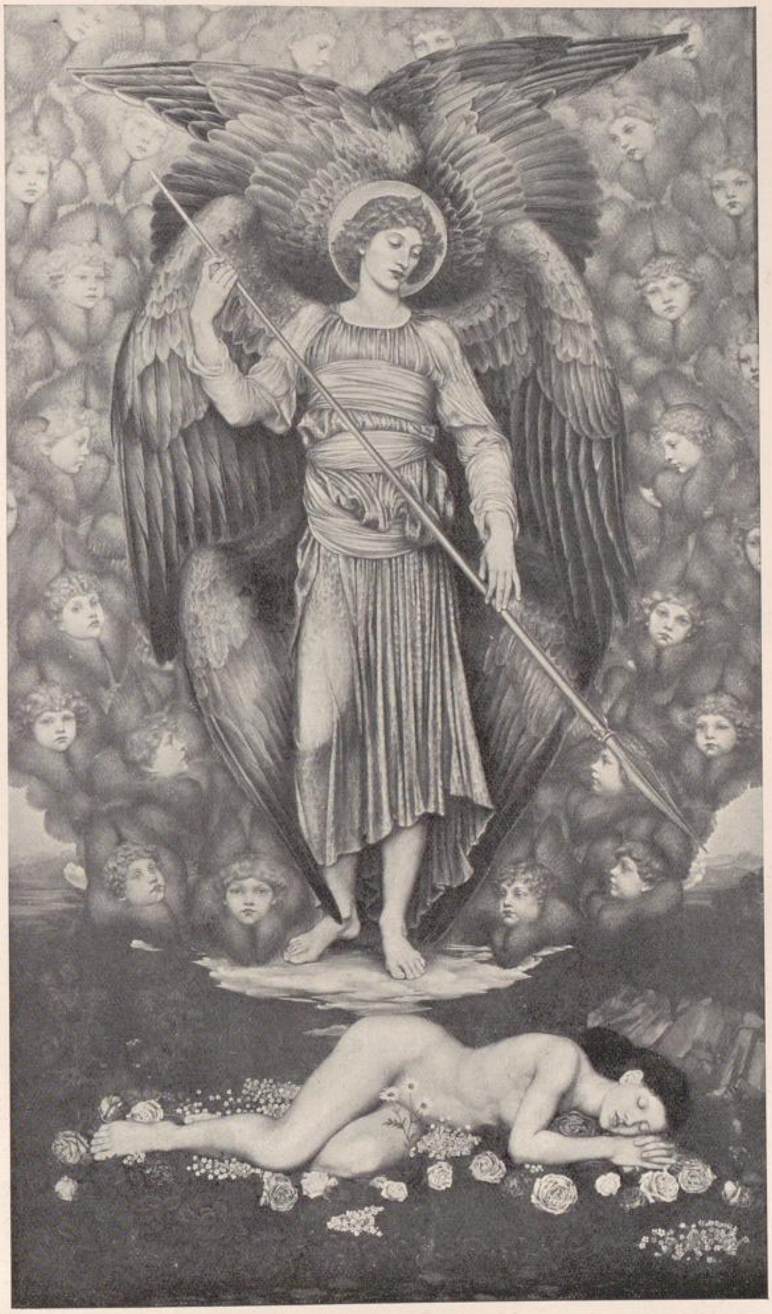
"Ithuriel, and Zephon, with winged speed
Search through this garden, leave unsearched no nook,
But chiefly where those two fair creatures lodge,
Now laid perhaps asleep, secure of harm.
This evening from the sun's decline arrived
Who tells of some infernal Spirit seen
Hitherward bent (who could have thought ?), escaped
The bars of Hell, on errand bad, no doubt ;
Such, where ye find, seize fast, and hither bring."
So saying, on he led his radiant files,
Dazzling the moon ; these to the bower direct
In search of whom they sought. Him there they found,
Squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve,
Assaying, by his devilish art, to reach
The organs of her fancy . . . .

Ithuriel, as represented by Mrs. De Morgan, has just found Eve and the tempter. He is accompanied by cherubs, whose threefold azure wings are as a blue cloud surrounding him. He wears a soft raiment, bright with mother-of-pearl tones. The draperies round the waist and body are rose-coloured, and so are the sleeves. The three pairs of wings, very well poised and admirably handled, are crimson-hued, with touches of grey-green here and there. Ithuriel has light hair, is pale-faced, and the well-drawn hands are as delicate as they could be. It may be thought that this Ithuriel is too mild—too much like Shakespeare's Oberon—to be in keeping with the terrific tragedy depicted in the first four books of the "Paradise Lost." Eve, too, lovely as she is, seems to bear no likelihood of resemblance to Milton's superb mother of mankind. But the picture has a sweet serene grace which should make us glad to accept from Mrs. De Morgan another Eve and another Ithuriel, true children of her own fancy.

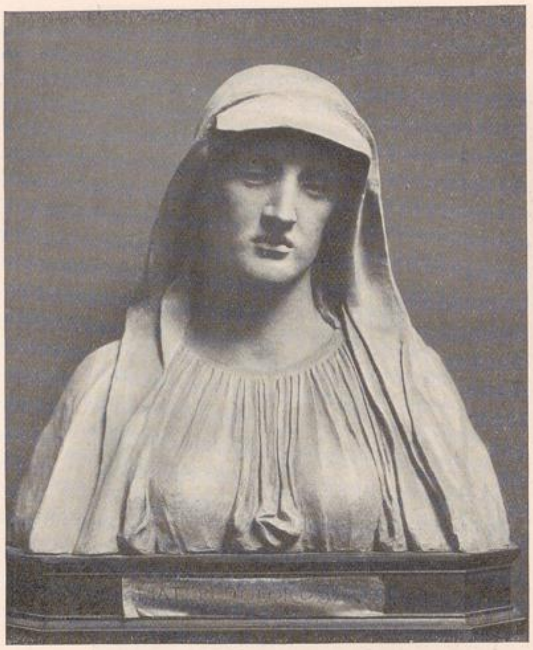
Nor is this all. An artist, when inspired by a great poem, ought always thus to give his or her own interpretation of the spirit of the text, however opposed it may be to the one commonly recognised to be right. This is a wise and necessary thing to do, not only because artists should avoid all moods for which they have no gift, but also because painting and poetry are so different, in many ways, that it is well-nigh impossible to make



"EARTHBOUND" FROM A PAINTING BY EVELYN DE MORGAN



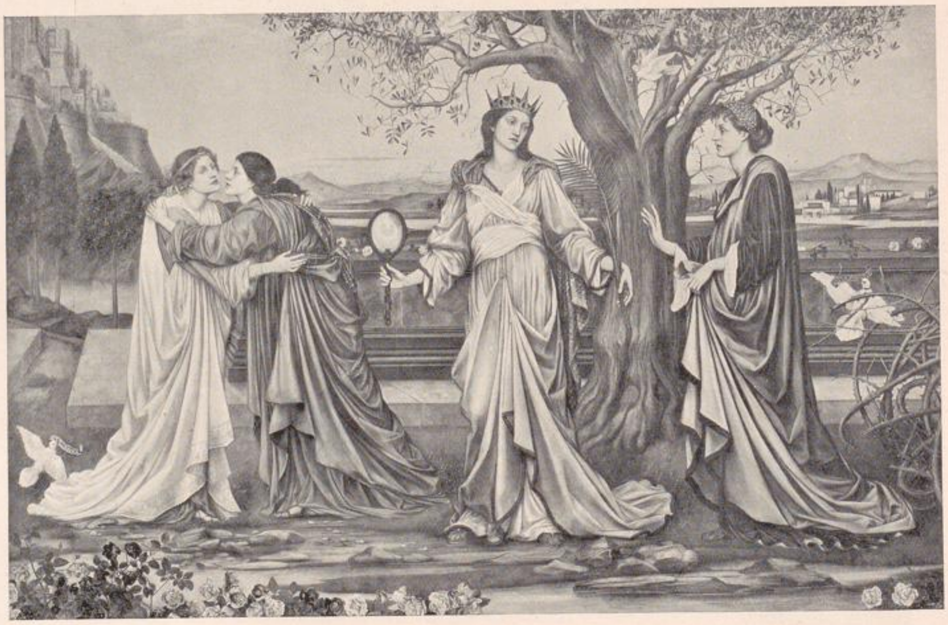
"ITHURIEL" FROM A PAINTING
BY EVELYN DE MORGAN



"MATER DOLOROSA"

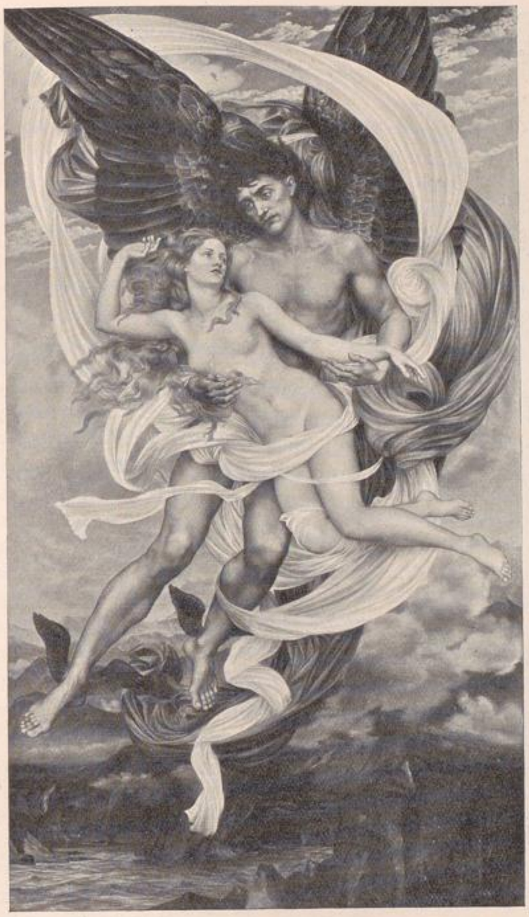
BUST IN TERRA-COTTA
BY EVELYN DE MORGAN

real on canvas those subtle characteristics which give to a great poem its peculiar distinction. For example, every line of "Paradise Lost" has a rare manliness, while a sense of illimitable vastness reigns through the whole poem; but who, labouring within the four sides of a canvas, could do justice to these things? Why, the very act of trying to draw one of Milton's angels is in absolute antagonism with the Miltonic method of description, for Milton impresses us by leaving his supernatural creations indistinctly shadowed forth, so that the imagination may be stirred by a vague idea of such a presence as should excite awe, wonder, or amazement. A painter, on the other hand, cannot thus escape from the limitations imposed upon his means of description by definite outlines and exact details. Hence, no doubt, when thinking seriously of Milton's angels, fallen or other, he must come to one of two conclusions: either he may regard them as being above and beyond the sphere of pictorial representation, or else



"Mercy and Truth have met together,
Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other"

FROM A PAINTING BY EVELYN DE MORGAN



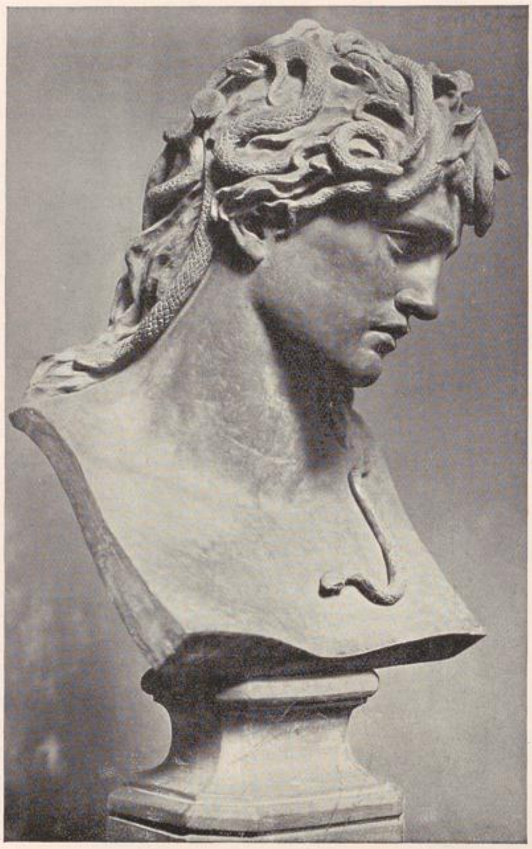
"BOREAS AND ORITHYIA" FROM A PAINTING BY EVELYN DE MORGAN

he may believe—certainly with perfect justice—that he has a right to translate into the language of his own form of æsthetics the inspiration he has received from Milton's "dim intimations" of glorious or tremendous beings. This is what Mrs. De Morgan has done, and art and we gain a great deal. Milton, too, did something akin to it, for did he not transform the traditional poetry which had grown about the story of Adam's disobedience, and the loss of Paradise?

Another phase of Mrs. De Morgan's art may be studied in the illustration reproduced on this page. Here the subject is taken from the mythological story of Boreas, the wind from the N.N.E., and Orithyia, daughter of Erechtheus, King of Athens. Mrs. De Morgan has represented Boreas in the act of flying with Orithyia towards Thrace, where they begot the Boreades, Calais, Zetes, and Cleopatra. This myth seems to exemplify the soul of good in things sometimes evil, Orithyia personifying that eternal fruitfulness of Nature, the corn and flower seeds of which are so often sown in waste places by the most boisterous of destructive winds. But, however this may be, the picture has a fine significance of its own. It has faults, no doubt. The modelling is somewhat "tight," and there is also a want of proportion between the torso and the legs of Boreas. On the other hand, when viewed as a whole, the picture is noteworthy for the excellence of its decorative conception and treatment.

In "Earthbound" (p. 228), where the artist tells what she thinks of the world's engrossing pursuit of wealth, there are merits of a quite different kind, often described as art-literary. The story told runs as follows: In a desolate country an aged king broods over his hoard of gold, while the dark Angel of Death approaches, a cloud-like mantle floating around her. It is strewn with stars, and a moon shines dimly in the angel's dusky wing, all typical of the elements into which the earthbound miser will soon be resolved. Away in the distance a freed spirit rises into the sky. Allegorical pictures of this kind give to Mrs. De Morgan's art a certain resemblance to that of Mr. G. F. Watts; and I do not feel called upon to break a lance with those who object to allegories in painting. They are free to think as they please, but their criticisms are certainly futile, inasmuch as all true artists do as they must—not as they will.

To this fact Milton draws attention in his great essay on "The Reason of Church-Government urged against Prelaty." Here, rising suddenly into verse, he says: "But when God commands to take the trumpet, and blow a dolorous or jarring blast, it lies not in man's will what he shall say, or what he shall conceal." This view of genuine inspiration applies to all forms of imaginative expression, and hence one is glad to accept in pictures all allegories which are deeply felt, as is



"MEDUSA." BRONZE BUST BY EVELYN DE MORGAN

the case with all of those which Mrs. De Morgan has painted.

It must not be thought, however, that the foregoing pictures, varied as they are in style, give the full scope of Mrs. De Morgan's work as an artist. She has produced in black and white many studies so excellent that they could not well be bettered, and she has recalled to our minds the fact that gently imaginative painters often develop unexpected strength when they turn for recreation to sculpture, and enjoy the realistic exercise of modelling in clay. To this exercise we owe the great contrast which exists between Leighton's dream-like paintings and his masterful, virile *Athlete;* and a similar contrast will be found when you turn from Mrs. De Morgan's *Ithuriel* to her *Medusa*, an impressive bust in bronze, as largely handled as it is strong and noble in conception. And the other piece of sculpture, the *Mater Dolorosa*, though naturally conceived in a milder spirit, is no less remarkable for the uncommon beauty of its type and the reticent character of its fine pathos.

SOME WORK BY THE STUDENTS OF THE GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART.

THE analogy between a school of art, equipped as it should be to deal with art as expressed in any material, and the *atelier* (*bottega*) of a thirteenth century Italian artist, is much closer than at first sight would appear. In the latter a master craftsman surrounded himself with a crowd of workers and apprentices, to whom he stood in the relation not merely of supervisor, but of a master mind whose directions gave bent to the whole outcome of the studio, and the stamp of whose workmanship appeared upon every article issuing therefrom.

In a school of art, given a certain character of work proceeding from it and the cause will not be far to seek in the work of the staff, or of their head under whose direction the school is organised and conducted. And, as in the case of the artist's *atelier*, it was not in the preliminary work that any distinctive characteristics were to be looked for, but rather in those essays which called for personal effort; so in a school, its disciplinary work cannot differ in much from that given to any beginner, and it is only when the student is able to express his ideas clearly, and in artistic language, that any "egoism" or assertion is possible. And the analogy can be pursued farther; for the output of the artist's studio did not consist entirely of pictures, as our modern twentieth-century idea of an artist's studio would lead the "man in the street" to imply, but work was executed and material dealt with that lent itself in any way to explain the thought of the designer and the handicraft of the worker. From a banner to a piece of tapestry, from a signboard to an altar-piece, from a ring to a chalice—any method in any material; nothing came amiss, all were attempted. So in a