

LAUS VENERIS IN 2050

Let's imagine it's the broken world of 2050. A Newcastle artist takes a group of students to see what's best of what's left after the dark time. The place they visit is the local Castle Keep. It's in this monument of pre-affluent architecture where the art that survived dark time is stored and displayed. Because so little of the regional collections did survive they can just be housed within the Castle Keeps four floors and fifteen feet thick walls. It's thanks to these walls that the treasures that do remain have already survived floods, civil war, arctic winters, drought and hurricanes. It's one of the few tall buildings left intact in the city and access is both limited and bureaucratic. In the dim but secure light of this chilly treasury over four thousand years of cultural gems struggle to get the attention they deserve.

On this visit the artist decides to begin her tour with a look at one of the Pre-Raphaelite survivors from the affluent age. *Laus Veneris* (1873-78) by Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898) once hung in the ruined Laing. As they gather around the painting in the cramped second floor space it looks almost undamaged in the everlasting gloom. The title simply means 'in praise of Venus' and tells the story of Tannhauser, a kind of European pre-affluent age hero figure. He was created in the same mould as the macho knights of King Arthur's Camelot round table fame. While on a mission to do good he loses it completely and falls for the ultimate sexy lady, the queen of Venusburg. Unable to resist her temptations he abandons his chivalrous life and surrenders himself to the mind bending sensuality she offers. After many years have passed he regrets his fall from grace and is filled with remorse. Tannhauser then decides to leave the queen and sets off afresh on a new mission to seek spiritual redemption. Sadly, this is eventually refused so Tannhauser ends the rest of his life in dark damnation, end of story. The painting shows the moment Tannhauser first catches sight of the glamorous queen as she listens to her musical handmaidens in the palace of Venusburg.

The best comments she'd read when herself a student artist describe the painting as depicting a 'claustrophobic chamber' with an overpowering 'air of malaise'. Behind and to the right of the 'languid, lovesick queen' we have the passing of Venus. She sits in what could be lyrically described as a kind of celestial appletart with supplicants holding up apples as offerings. The apple was a common fruit in the affluent age and symbolised temptation and sin. The scene of lavish abundance is a reminder of how they thought there would be apples forever. The apple features big in Milton's *Paradise Lost* where the fruit is tasted by Eve and we get kicked out of the Garden of Eden. Early in the affluent age there was even said to be a garden of apple trees on the top of the Castle Keeps thick walls. To the left of the painting Burne-Jones has depicted a siren luring a victim to their death in case we don't get the message. She can do no better than retell to her students what an affluent age critic wrote when he described the real subject of the painting as the 'addiction to sensuality'.

And by the end high art in affluent age culture was indeed thematically locked into a sensual self-obsessed cycle of dating, mating, sex and sin. *Laus Veneris* was well received at its creation exactly because it played into these affluent class obsessions. And it really is the case that Burne-Jones himself was supremely well qualified for the task. The young Pre-Raphaelites were predatory in their relation to women. They trawled the seedy streets of London to pick up 'stunners' who would eventually become the affluent age first celebrity supermodels. He later set himself a sin to catch a sin and suffered lifelong mental torture over his serial extra-marital love affairs. His paintings elevated these primate sexual obsessions into epic Arthurian dreamscapes of dating and mating that often as not end in his own tears or betrayal.

But she never got carried away at the thought of the Pre-Raphaelites as affluent class rebels getting in touch with their touchy-feely side. Nor with the knowledge that Burne-Jones was a lifelong friend and disciple of John Ruskin. Burne-Jones was just as capable of cognitive doublethink as any other member of the affluent class. Their enlightenment was, after all, our fall. While he painted his noble angst filled romances he had servants to wash his dirty underwear and cook his food. Like all his class he lived a life of unbelievable fossil fuelled conspicuous consumption. He could literally have whatever he wanted no matter how big the carbon footprint or the cost to us. Burne-Jones ended up a 'Baronet' high priest of the liberal arts in a British Empire that ran a global military dictatorship. He made his money selling romantic myths to the factory owning knights of industry and high lords of carboniferous capitalism. These were the people who yearned after the very things they themselves were destroying.

Yet her theme here today was not the one about art contaminated by moral evil. Nor was it the current controversy regarding new legislative control by the culture guilds. They had already looked at *Laus Veneris* as Burne-Jones intended. She accepted that most of her students really thought that he was just another phoney white man obsessed with his dick. Or that *Laus Veneris* was nothing more than 'naughty but nice' culture candy for the self-deluded industrial aristocracy. It disgusted them that while he was having histrionics over another extra-marital shag his government was gassing natives and burning forests. It's understandable her students hate the age that took away clean water and air. But it was wrong to think that there is nothing to learn from this painting. Great art can come from bad people.

Her theme today was more about whether this painting is bigger and better than the context of its creation. Burne-Jones thought he was painting affluent class myths of dating and mating for an over-educated super-rich. But she thought he was also creating a Hogarth like observational truth of his age? After all, it was the affluent age addiction to sensuality that did trash the future. The dream was to create a luxury brand metropolis of industrial artifice, in which organic nature was taboo. In a world gone mad it's as though the affluent class, as thinking apes, became ashamed of their Darwinian organic selves. The fantasy was that technology would bring an end to the human need to shit or die. That the affluent age was itself the end

purpose of four billion years of history and evolution. They obsessed over the sensuality of the industrial product, the engineered, the manufactured, the genetically manipulated, the risk free sanitised artifice of factory produced food and clothing. Trillions of tons carbon spewed forth as they created a techno-Eden in which evolution itself could be engineered in their own image. That was how the whole planet became a claustrophobic chamber with an air of malaise. The worse things got the faster they went and the more they consumed.

The painting also reveals the affluent age struggle to rebrand organic nature as taboo and contamination. She remembers a former student dismissing the painting as little more than 'an excuse for kitsch alpha males to kill their mother'. The only bit of real nature represented in the painting is a tiny hedge put there to symbolise a barrier, or obstacle, between the lovers. The rest of nature represented in the picture is a beautiful tapestry of woven artifice. This crafted tapestry of fake nature is to celebrate the idea that human nature would make evolutionary nature redundant. It's a psychodrama in which sexy romantic nature is more sensual than dismal organic nature. It's about the fake being more desirable than the real. But whatever the doublethink we know the result was organic nature as both mass extinction event and wildlife entertainment industry.

What she really didn't understand was why any student would prefer the frame to the painting. Yet that seemed to be what was going on. On her last visit over a third of the group thought they had come to see the frame, and not the painting itself. She told close friends it felt a bit like the barbarians at the gate. Maybe she was just getting too old, or maybe she was born too close to the dark time.

The broad frame is glossy dark blue/black with gold borders. Between the gold borders on the blue/black background Burne-Jones had painted, in gold, a freeform fish-scale pattern. Interspaced asymmetrically among this pattern were simple images of rabbits, hearts, fish, seashells and the like, also in gold. These images have a history linked to pre-affluent Christianity, orientalism, Islam, pagan iconography and the like. The students talked about the painting being the victim of its form while the frame radiated forceful spontaneity. They even waxed lyrical about the frames cross-cultural abstraction. The same student who had dismissed the painting itself as macho male matricide made a really memorable comment in praise of the frame. She said that with a few simple brushstrokes on the frame Burne-Jones had created more art than he had done in a lifetime of obsessively painting a square inch a day. It was only in the free form painting of the frame that Burne-Jones had really been able to let go of his pain and himself. For this student the frame had aged better than the painting because the frame spoke to both pre and post affluent age cultures. The painting spoke to neither.