

# Perseus series by Burne-Jones re-glazed for Southampton City Art Gallery with support from the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation

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The United Kingdom's Southampton City Art Gallery's (SCAG's) permanent collection has more than 3,800 works of art that spans eight centuries and includes paintings by Old Masters, French Impressionists, 19th and 20th century British artists, as well as contemporary British art. Among the highlights of the collection are the Perseus series (1876-88). Based on a number of Greek myths, it is a heroic tale of knight-errantry and the triumph of good over evil. These 10 exquisite, large, full-sized studies by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones were re-glazed in 2013 with support from the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation.



Renowned composer Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber's love for the Pre-Raphaelites is well known, as is his admiration of Burne-Jones. Webber owns more than 40 of Burne-Jones' works, paintings, gouaches, watercolors and drawings. He visited the SCAG in 1989/90 specifically to see the *Perseus* series.

Burne-Jones, along with many 19th century painters, preferred his work to be glazed. The *Perseus* series was glazed approximately 30 years ago and, over time, had unfortunately become scratched. To re-glaze all 10 full-size Burne-Jones' studies, Trustees of the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation awarded a one-time grant to the SCAG for the *Perseus* series. According to the Foundation, "The re-glazing will greatly enhance the aesthetic experience for gallery visitors and also will mean the works can be successfully toured to other galleries."

The *Perseus* series' large oil paintings were commissioned in 1875 for London home of the British statesman and arts patron, Arthur Balfour (1848-1930). The commission went through several revisions and eventually only four paintings were completed, which are now in the Staatsgalerie in

Stuttgart. The parts of the legend illustrated by Burne-Jones are the central episodes – Perseus' search for a victory over the Gorgon *Medusa*, and his meeting with his bride *Andromeda*. These symbolic images are reflections on the human condition and their strange quality is without parallel in Victorian art.

The legend has been popular in art since antiquity. Rubens, Titian and Delacroix all painted aspects of it. Burne-Jones' 10 *Perseus* studies in gouache were purchased for SCAG in December 1934 through the Chipperfield Bequest Fund, with the advice of Sir Kenneth Clark. They are on permanent display in The Baring Room, a wood-paneled room originating from Barings Bank.

In 2012, J.M.W. Turner's *Fishermen upon a Lee-Shore in Squally Weather* was re-glazed with Tru Vue's Optium Acrylic®. Very pleased with its aesthetic appearance, I looked in to the possibility of re-glazing the *Perseus* series with the same, low-reflective material. As the *Perseus* series are works of art on paper, Optium's UV protective qualities also enhance the works' longevity, thereby allowing the gouaches to be enjoyed by many future generations.

Local schools continuously use the series as Greek mythology is currently part of Key Stage 2 in the National Curriculum. I therefore liaised with the SCAG's education team to minimize disruption to their programming. One work of art by Burne-Jones was re-glazed per week over a 10-week period to maximize the availability of the works of art for teaching purposes.



This potentially unsatisfactory compromise managed to have a positive outcome, as the works of art glazed with Optium were hung adjacent to others glazed with the aged, scratched glazing. With this side-by-side comparison, one can appreciate that it was easier to see the studies once their glazing had been replaced with Optium Acrylic, which did not produce any reflections.

There are many appreciative comments in our Art Gallery Visitors Book specifically relating to the *Perseus* series. It is hard to quantify the difference that art can make to people's lives. With cuts in government funding, conservators may have to think laterally to fund projects and it seems inevitable that private philanthropy will become an increasingly prominent part of the arts landscape.



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On 30 September, Southampton City Art Gallery will host the South Conservation Network and share the beauty of the *Perseus* series and the benefits of using Optium Acrylic. Others interested in visiting the Gallery and viewing its collection, may find information at <http://www.southampton.gov.uk/s-leisure/artsheritage/sotonartgallery/>

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