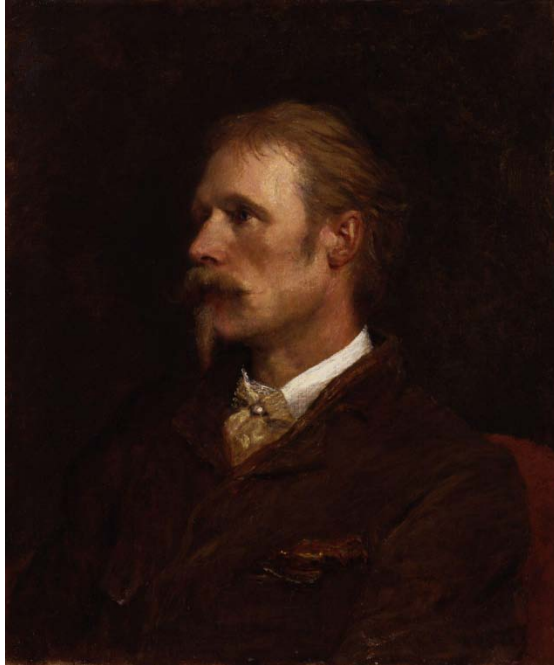


## the yellow nineties online

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### WALTER CRANE (1845-1915)



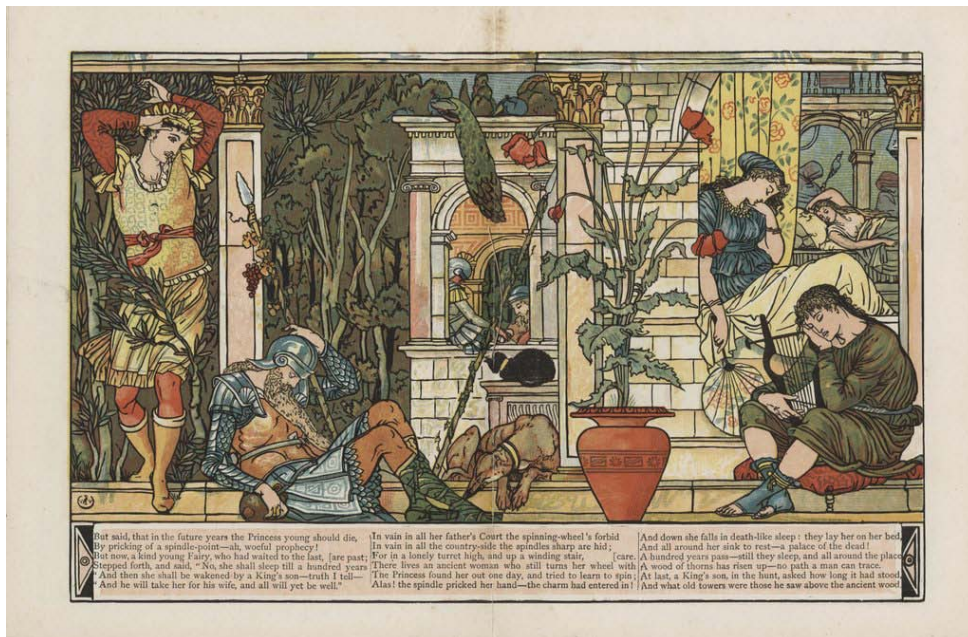
G. F. Watts, Walter Crane. 1891. National Portrait Gallery, London. Public Domain image. Wikipaintings. Web.

For his contemporaries, Walter Crane's artistic practice embodied the ethos of Arts and Crafts eclecticism. As the painter William Rothenstein recalled in 1931, Crane "was illustrator, painter, designer, craftsman, and sculptor by turn; he poured out designs for books, tapestries, stained glass, wall-papers, damask, and cotton fabrics . . . he could do anything he wanted, or anyone else wanted" (292). H. M. Hyndman, founder of the Social Democratic Party, named Crane "the Artist of Socialism" (351) for his seminal contributions to the visual culture of the movement. He was a painter, decorative artist, illustrator, art theorist, and active Socialist.

Born in Liverpool in 1845, Crane studied oil and watercolour painting from an early age with his father Thomas Crane, who trained as a painter at the Royal Academy schools. The family relocated to London in 1857 and, the following year, Crane began an apprenticeship with the politically radical engraver William James Linton. He trained as an engraver's draughtsman, whose responsibility it was to draw an artist's sketch onto the engraver's end grain wood blocks. Later in life, he would hail Linton as both a political and artistic mentor.

Upon the completion of his apprenticeship in 1862, Crane advanced his artistic training while supporting himself, his widowed mother, brother Thomas and sister Lucy as a

freelance illustrator. He continued this work as an illustrator for book publishers and periodicals throughout his long career, although he sometimes expressed misgivings at the volume of work. His success as an illustrator led to a commission and subsequent vocation as a designer of wallpaper. These designs garnered praise for their graceful patterns and rich colouring. Likewise, Crane's illustrations of children's books revolutionized the genre in treatment and technique, especially in his innovative use of colour printing through his work with the entrepreneurial printer Edmund Evans. Their collaboration on the "Toy Books," printed by George Routledge and Sons, infused traditional tales with a new elegance and introduced the young reader to the Aesthetic movement. For example, in the centerfold illustration to *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* (1876), Crane furthers the identification of the sleeping maiden ("Beauty") with the category of "Art" through the inclusion of a peacock in the illustration, perched above the hound. The peacock—in particular, the tail feathers—came to symbolize the Aesthetic movement. Yet this icon of the exotic made famous (or infamous) by J. A. M. Whistler's *Peacock Room* was also a traditional symbol of eternal life and, in early Christian tradition, resurrection. Like the other slumbering creatures in the illustration, the peacock will awake alongside the princess.



Walter Crane, centerfold illustration to *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1876), Beinecke Library, Yale University. Print.

A founding member of both the Art Workers' Guild (1884) and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society (1888), Crane was a principal theorist of that movement and a close friend and colleague of William Morris and C. R. Ashbee, espousing the union of art and design in simple construction, the creation of handmade objects, and attention to materials. Through this work, Crane maintained a public profile as an influential teacher, author, and theorist. His roles as Director of Design at the Manchester School of Art (1892-95) and as President of the Royal College of Art (1899-1900) led to the popular and widely translated design primers *Bases of Design* (1898) and *Line and Form* (1900).

These decorative practices allowed Crane to explore the relationship between narrative and decoration, an interest that also emerged in his paintings. Crane exhibited a number of works at the Dudley Gallery in London, and critics considered him a member of the so-called "Poetry without Grammar" school along with other latter day Pre-Raphaelites such as John Roddam Spencer Stanhope and Simeon Solomon. The appellation "Poetry without Grammar," which comes from the 1869 review "Contemporary Literature: Art," summarizes two essential aspects of Crane's paintings: an interest in the Aesthetic movement's concern with "art for art's sake," especially the experiential relationship between art and poetry, and the rejection of academic convention, or academic "grammar," in their work. Crane continued these interests and achieved his greatest success with the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery in London in 1877 where, for the next 10 years, he exhibited works drawn from mythological subjects.

This approach is evident in his only contribution to *The Yellow Book*: a photograph of his painting *The Renaissance of Venus* (Vol. 2). Since Crane's innovative use of outline and his incorporation of forms drawn from Japanese art invigorated book illustration in the 1860s and 1870s and influenced Aubrey Beardsley and other designers, it seems strange that Beardsley selected a painting for inclusion in *The Yellow Book*. Crane recalled that the young designer came to visit him in 1893 to solicit a contribution to the journal, and he selected a photograph of Crane's earlier painting for that "short-lived but remarkable quarterly" (*Artist's Reminiscences*, 416). Crane would later praise Beardsley in his history of book illustration entitled *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New* (1896), a revised and expanded version of his Cantor Lectures to

the Society of the Arts given in 1889. Although Crane disagreed with Beardsley's use of line as a way to delineate large areas of black and white on the page, he nevertheless called him a "very remarkable designer" (*Of the Decorative Illustration*, 218).

*The Renaissance of Venus* was first exhibited at the Grosvenor in 1877 and later purchased by the artist G. F. Watts and given by his widow Mary Seton Watts to the Tate Gallery. Against the crimson damask of the gallery's walls, *The Renaissance of Venus* must have exuded the cool, chalky blue hues of a Renaissance fresco. Venus stands at the edge of a rocky inlet shore, ankle deep in clear water. Her pose is contemplative, recalling that of the ancient *Venus Esquilina* (rediscovered in 1874), while her flowing blonde hair and prominent position bring to mind Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (c. 1485; Florence, Uffizi Gallery). *The Renaissance of Venus* thus represents Crane's continued engagement with themes drawn from classical subject matter. After his marriage to Mary Frances Andrews in 1871, the couple took an extended honeymoon in Rome, which played a powerful role in Crane's artistic development. Although this painting was not his first work to address a mythological narrative specifically, it is unusual as a story of his own devising. As the title suggests, this is not the birth of Venus, but the "renaissance" or rebirth of Venus. Crane's depiction references Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), his collected meditations on the place of beauty in art that signaled the rebirth of Botticelli's own *Birth of Venus* as a source of inspiration for British artists.

The freedom with which Crane can reinterpret and, quite literally, reformulate this myth raises important questions about the relationship between narrative and meaning, questions that were a leading preoccupation of this moment. As William Michael Rossetti observed, "we suppose [the title] to signify substantially 'The Re-Birth of Beauty;' Venus, as the symbol of beauty, re-born at the period of art and culture" (Rossetti 390). Thus *The Renaissance of Venus* is not simply an Aesthetic movement painting; it is a painting about the Aesthetic movement itself. It expresses the renewal of beauty and points toward the renewal of society, and the concomitant rebirth of art envisioned by Crane. In this sense, he acknowledges the possibility that the work of art could have meaning beyond itself. In the following decade, the Aesthetic "renaissance" would crystallize, for Crane and others, into the hope for society promised by socialism.

The artist became a socialist in 1884, after more than a decade of active interest in radical politics. This socialism evolved from the visual and the aesthetic; William Morris and John Ruskin provided the political vocabulary for what Crane was already painting. For the artist, his paintings represented the “search for a new harmony, a higher sense of beauty” that would elevate humanity (*An Artists’ Reminiscences*, 390).

Even as he became more outspoken in his political views, Crane’s interest in mythology and legend led to his renewed prominence in Symbolist artistic circles, where he was already held in high regard as an illustrator. He participated in numerous international exhibitions, and awards and accolades followed, such as a gold medal at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900, honorary memberships in the Munich and Dresden Academies of Fine Art, and an Italian knighthood. In 1911, he received the prestigious invitation from the Uffizi to submit a self-portrait to their gallery of foreign artists. He died at Horsham Cottage Hospital on 14 March 1915.

Morna O'Neill is Assistant Professor of Art History in the Department of Art at Wake Forest University. She is the author of *Walter Crane: The Arts and Crafts, Painting, and Politics* (Yale UP, 2011) and “Art and Labour’s Cause is One:” *Walter Crane and Manchester, 1880-1915* (Whitworth Art Gallery, 2008). She is the co-editor, with Michael Hatt, of *The Edwardian Sense: Art, Design, and Performance in Britain, 1901-1910* (Yale UP, 2010).

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