



**the yellow nineties online**

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

### **SIDNEY HAROLD METEYARD (1868-1947)**

Sidney Harold Meteyard is a good example of how late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century regional British artists absorbed and reworked aesthetic ideas generated in London earlier in the century. Born in 1868 in Stourbridge, West Midlands, Meteyard became a designer, illustrator, and painter in the Birmingham Group, an Arts and Crafts Movement in the 1890s. He was first a student at the Birmingham School of Art and then one of its prominent and enduring instructors in design on flat surfaces and in gesso, leatherwork, and lettering. In Birmingham, the tenets of Pre-Raphaelitism blended with those of John Ruskin into a school that emphasized visual intensity, elegance of design, and the aesthetics of everyday life, in which functional objects could work to beautify the world. Meteyard's interest in working in a wide range of varied media, including stained glass, jewelry, enamel, and illustration, demonstrates his support for the movement's breakdown of traditional hierarchies between high and decorative arts.

His own teacher was genre and landscape painter Edward R. Taylor, the headmaster and driving force behind the Birmingham School. He promulgated William Morris's and John Ruskin's ideals of authenticity in labour and beauty in craft by writing art manuals and, in 1898, founding the Ruskin Pottery with his son. In addition to Taylor, Meteyard also studied with the painter of rural English scenes, James Valentine Jelley, and the genre and portrait painter, Edward Samuel Harper. As with other Birmingham School artists such as Kate Bunce, Meteyard was inspired by Pre-Raphaelite Edward Burne-Jones, who was born in Birmingham. As a teacher for 45 years, Meteyard provided instruction in design, life drawing, and a number of traditional crafts. His best-known work is the 1913 "*I am Half Sick of Shadows," Said the Lady of Shalott* (fig. 1).



Sidney Harold Meteyard, *“I am Half Sick of Shadows,” Said the Lady of Shalott*, 1913. Private Collection.

Meteyard’s first contribution to the Birmingham Group was his collaboration with fellow students, including Kate Bunce and Charles Gere, in one of the Group’s earliest major projects, mural painting in the Town Hall in 1890. For this commission, he contributed the *Laying of the Foundation of the Guildhall* and one of the panels framing the Town Hall organ, *Instrumental Music*. Meteyard exhibited oil paintings at the Royal Academy three times from 1900 to 1903, but preferred the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists, of which he became an associate in 1902, full member in 1909, and eventually vice president (1932-1934) and honorary secretary (1935-1947).

The primary themes of his fine art are mythological, allegorical, and poetical. For example, Meteyard’s *“I am Half-Sick of Shadows...”* is a languidly haunting scene showing the Lady of Alfred Tennyson’s poem asleep at her accursed task of reproducing

in tapestry all that she sees from her tower window via a mirror reflection. This subject proliferated among the Pre-Raphaelites and later nineteenth-century British painters, but Meteyard distinguished his version by replacing the usual loom with a piece of embroidery, on which we see the lady working in parts rather than producing the sequential imagery of a weaving. This enhances the image of the Lady as a creative artist able to revise and edit her work rather than being constrained merely to reproduce the narrative as she sees it pass by her window; in this light she is more of an agent, perhaps even a generator, of her own destiny. The Lady's slumber conflates the mirror with her dreams, suggesting that her pining for a mate is the catalyst that will lead to the moment of her story more often portrayed, when she looks directly at the beauty of Lancelot riding into her reflected view. This defiant act brings down her curse, and she dies while floating down the river to Camelot in her boat; there, reversing the act of looking, Lancelot gazes at her now-dead body.

Meteyard collaborated on several stained glass projects with Kate Eadie, a long-term acquaintance, former Birmingham art student, and fellow member of the Royal Birmingham School of Artists. Eadie was an established jeweler who produced Limoges enamel plaques based on Burne-Jones paintings. As a model, Eadie appears in several of Meteyard's works, including the drawing *Jasmine*, and she eventually married him after the death of his first wife. One of the pair's most impressive stained-glass works appears in St. Paul's, Cookhill. Completed in 1933, the large memorial window commemorates the Forster family with the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the archangels Gabriel and Michael. Meteyard's funeral was held under this window in 1947, and he is buried in Brandwood End Cemetery, Birmingham.

Other works by Meteyard can be found at St Alban's, Birmingham; Darby End near Dudley; St. Mary's Church, Moseley, Birmingham; the Church of the Holy Nativity, Knowle, Bristol; St. Winifred, Holbeck; St. Peter's, Maney, Sutton Coldfield; and St. Saviour's, Scarborough. He also completed stained-glass commissions for the Bromsgrove Guild. After World War I, Meteyard applied his talents to a number of war memorials, including the Roll of Honour of the fallen from Birmingham, now in the Hall of Memory; a similar scroll for the Royal Engineers in St Paul's Cathedral, London; and

a Memorial Tablet in Lichfield Cathedral. The Holy Trinity Church, Wordsley, also holds an enameled plaque by Meteyard (c. 1907).

A photo-engraved image of Meteyard's *Cupid* appeared in Volume 9 (April 1896) of *The Yellow Book*, an issue that focused on the arts of the Birmingham Group (in which Meteyard's first name is spelled "Sydney"). Kneeling hidden behind a tree, the title figure pulls his bow taut, about to loose an arrow at a man in the background just as the latter exchanges glances with a young woman. Cupid's pose owes something to the archers from the Pediments of the Temple of Aphaia, Aegina, at the Glyptothek, but the depiction of Eros as an adolescent boy with powerful wings belongs to a lineage in British art related to works such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Dante's Dream* (1871) and Burne-Jones's untitled gesso and gold panel (1880) depicting a nude Cupid shooting arrows. Meteyard was fond of this popular allegorical subject for the way it served as a nexus of ambiguous symbolic meanings. In *Eros* (c. 1897), he portrays a sensuous Cupid lounging on a marble bench, cradled by his own wings and gazing longingly at grapes and melon. *Hope Comforting Love in Bondage*, exhibited at the Royal Academy Exhibition in 1901, shows the youth clad only in strips of fabric that hold him fast. Meteyard's cupids may owe a debt to Simeon Solomon's homoerotic figures, although the artist might also be referring to his own complicated personal relationships. He was married to Elizabeth (Lizzie) Fairfax Muckley from 1892 to her death in 1939, but promptly wed Eadie in 1940. Genealogical message boards suggest possible liaisons with other women, perhaps even resulting in offspring.

Meteyard also contributed illustrations to the magazine of the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft, *The Quest* (1894-96), and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Golden Legend* (1910).

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*London* (Yale UP, 2012) explores constructions of metropolitan imperialist modernity in fine art. A new project considers Victorian representations of fire in paint and print.

Stephen Wildman is Professor of History of Art and Director of the Ruskin Library and Research Centre at Lancaster University, and was formerly Curator of Prints and Drawings at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. His publications include *David Cox* (1983), *The Birmingham School* (1990), *Visions of Love and Life: Pre-Raphaelite Art from the Birmingham Collection* (1995) and, with John Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (1998).

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