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from

THE FRICK COLLECTION

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Victorian Fairy Painting

**OPENING AT THE FRICK COLLECTION,
BRINGS NEW YORK AUDIENCES AN UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITY TO
EXPERIENCE THIS CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED EXHIBITION**

October 14, 1998 through January 17, 1999

Attracting record crowds in British and American venues, the exhibition **Victorian Fairy Painting** comes to The Frick Collection, extending its tour and offering New York audiences an unexpected opportunity to view this unique presentation. **Victorian Fairy Painting**, on view October 14, 1998 through January 17, 1999, represents the first comprehensive exhibition ever devoted to this distinctly British genre, which was critically and commercially popular from the early nineteenth century through the beginning of World War I. The paintings, works on paper, and objects, approximately thirty four in number, have been selected by **Edgar Munhall**, Curator of The Frick Collection, from the original, larger touring exhibition, which was organized by the University of Iowa Museum of Art and the Royal Academy of Arts, London.

Fairy painting brought together many opposing elements in the collective psyche and artistic sensibility of its time: rich subject-matter, an escape from the grim elements of an industrial society, an indulgence of new attitudes towards sex, a passion for the unknown, and a denial of the exactitude of photography. Drawing on literary inspiration from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, as well as the theater, the dance, and music, fairy painters exercised their magic with the precision of the Pre-Raphaelites, aided too by experiments with drugs and spiritualism. Artists represented in the exhibition include such acknowledged masters of fairy painting as **Richard Dadd**, **John Anster Fitzgerald**, **Daniel Maclise**, and **Sir Joseph Noël Paton**, but also such surprises as **Sir Edwin Landseer**, **Sir John Everett Millais**, and **J. M. W. Turner**. The works are drawn from private collections, museums, and other institutions throughout England and the United States.

LITERARY & THEATRICAL INFLUENCES

Although fairies made frequent appearances in British literature from as early as the 14th century, it was the writing of Shakespeare that provided the richest source of subject-matter. His plays *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* both figure into the exhibition's many examples of Shakespeare-inspired paintings. Spenser's *Faerie Queen* (1596), Pope's *Rape of the Lock* (1714), Drayton's *Nymphidia* (1627) and Shelley's *Queen Mab* (1813) served as other sources of the genre.

While literature provided much thematic material, the visual impact of contemporary pantomime, theater, ballet, and opera was paramount as well. The early 1830s to the late 1840s in London saw the emergence of the Romantic ballet, a most influential source of imagery to the fairy painter. Romantic ballet was in itself a revolt against the stiff classical ballet's obsession with form. One of its main themes was the supernatural, in which a spirit forms a relationship with a mortal, with dramatic consequences. *La Sylphide* was one of many popular ballets based on such a story and densely populated by nymphs, sylphs, dryads, and naiads. Its ballerina was a vision, draped in white and gliding gracefully across the stage in defiance of the laws of gravity. Indeed, stage productions in the 19th century were truly spectacular, owing much to startling effects, the splendor of the scenery, as well as to the new gaslight. As early as 1823 prancing steeds and cascades of real water were not uncommon. One of most memorable productions was of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, starring the eight-year old Ellen Terry as Puck, making her debut on a mechanical mushroom. The production ran 250 nights. A version of *The Tempest* featuring Kate Terry (Ellen's sister) sailing on a dolphin's back and riding on a bat, also stunned audiences. In response to such popular productions, artists were quick to imbue their pictures with a heightened ethereality and graceful movement.

A PASSION FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among various forces at work on the Victorian psyche was the awareness of an emerging industrial society. Confidence in the continuous economic expansion and scientific and technological progress of the century existed alongside an anxiety over the rapid changes brought by the very same developments. Prompted by a desire to escape this conflict, there flourished a passion for the unknown. Spiritualism was one powerful and widely influential trend of the period. Modern spiritualism was born in the 1840s with the remarkable publicity attending the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York. The sisters posed questions to an unseen "raper" and received apparently cogent answers. Shortly thereafter, the sisters embarked on careers as mediums. In 1852, the first American medium arrived in England and the new interest became a rapidly spreading craze, and one that offered

much ground for artists and public alike to explore. Also expressed in Victorian fairy painting were allusions – overt at times -- to changing attitudes about sex and to the contemporary use of drugs such as opium and laudanum.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE EXHIBITION

One of the greatest masters of the genre was **Richard Dadd** (1817 – 1886), whose work *The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke* is arguably the most well-known of the paintings in the exhibition, owing to the circumstances of its creation. As a promising young artist Dadd toured Egypt and the Near East and returned in a state of madness, with the delusion that he was descended from the Egyptian god Osiris. Believing himself under the instructions of this deity, Dadd murdered his father. He was found to be criminally insane and spent the rest of his life in mental hospitals, where his doctors encouraged him to paint. This work of nine years, though not entirely finished, is one of his extraordinary achievements. An extremely disturbing image, its static, close-up view of the natural world is painstakingly filled in with color, and its quaint figures are almost invisible to naked eye.

Well known, but not as a painter of fairies, was **J. M. W. Turner** (1775 – 1851), whose only excursion into the genre is *Queen Mab's Cave*, one of a number of pictures in which he explored the world of the imaginary and supernatural. It was described by a reviewer at the time as a “daylight dream in all the wantonness of gorgeous, bright, and positive color, not painted but apparently flung at the canvas in kaleidoscopic confusion.” Indeed, a “daylight dream” is a perceptive description, as the work may have, in fact, no literary source. No cave is mentioned in standard literary references to her, such as Shelley’s poem *Queen Mab* and Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

Legends of fairy abductions and sightings lingered on longest in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, and it is no coincidence that several of the best painters of the genre came from those countries. **Daniel Maclise** (1806 - 1870) was a portrait and historical painter and an illustrator. In *The Disenchantment of Bottom* (1832), Maclise adopted Fuseli’s device of weaving episodic vignettes into a larger composition, which was based on a Shakespearean theme. As noted in the catalogue, the choice of subject at this early stage in his career “reflects Maclise’s decision to establish himself as a history painter in the new style.” In *The Faun and the Fairies*, painted before 1834, the central Pan-like subject, with “his hair transformed into fruiting vines,” plays his pipes and presides over a cave inhabited by grotesque goblins. The outer border is formed by a rainbow, probably magically significant to this Irish-born artist.

The Scottish painter **Sir Joseph Noël Paton** (1821 – 1901) was known as much for his melodramatic paintings on religious themes as for his fairy subjects. For the fairy realm, Paton drew frequently upon Walter Scott’s

Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders and well as *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. Companion pieces *The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania* (included in the exhibition) and *The Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania* of 1847 were highly acclaimed, the latter establishing his reputation when it took a prize in competition. Notes Jeremy Haas in the catalogue's introduction, the two works are "quintessential fairy pictures on the grandest scale, linking the Romantic world of Fuseli, Etty, and Frost with the as yet unborn Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood."

John Anster Fitzgerald (1823 – 1906), also of Irish descent and a specialist in the genre, was referred to by friends as "fairy Fitzgerald" for his obsession with the subject. Visitors to the exhibition will find on view more works by this little-known artist than by any other hand, in fact. His works are characteristically small, detailed scenes, usually painted in bright colors and often depicting what might be called the "domestic life of the fairy." The painting *Fairies in a Bird's Nest* (c. 1860) appears to be, itself, located in a bird's nest. The work is nestled in an unusual and intricate frame of twigs designed by the artist. Among the other five featured works by Fitzgerald are *The Fairy's Funeral*, *The Captive Robin*, and *The Chase of the White Mice*. From Fitzgerald's series of dream paintings two are featured: *The Nightmare* (c. 1857-58) and *The Stuff that Dreams are Made Of* (1858). This series of works in which sleepers are plagued by hideous creatures from fairyland is overtly reflective of drug-induced hallucinations, particularly in the former, earlier painting. A female figure writhes in anguish amidst ghostlike visions of her dreams. Beside her are two medicine bottles and her brilliant sash falls on the bed, looking like a wound and a pool of blood.

CATALOGUE

A fully illustrated scholarly catalogue complements the exhibition. **Victorian Fairy Painting** features essays on the fairy phenomenon by several authors, including the late Jeremy Maas, Charlotte Gere, and Pamela White Trimpe. Topics include fairies in literature, music, the theater, and the nineteenth-century study of folklore and fairytales. The catalogue describes the painters and their work and examines the reasons for the Victorian fascination with fairyland. Published by Merrel Holberton, the catalogue will be available in the Museum Shop of The Frick Collection in softcover for \$29.95.

ORIGINAL ORGANIZATION OF THE EXHIBITION AND ITS SUPPORT

The original exhibition was curated by Pamela White Trimpe, Curator of Painting and Sculpture and Assistant Director, The University of Iowa Museum of Art; Jane Martineau, Curator, Royal Academy of Arts; and Charlotte Gere. The late Jeremy Maas was deeply involved in the planning of the exhibition. The exhibition was organized by The University of Iowa Museum of Art and the Royal Academy of Arts, London. Edgar Munhall, Curator of The Frick Collection, is coordinating the exhibition's presentation at The Frick Collection. *Support for the*

*exhibition comes in part from the National Endowment for the Arts, United Airlines, and United Airline World-Wide Cargo. Presentation of **Victorian Fairy Painting** in New York is made possible, in part, through the generosity of the Fellows of The Frick Collection.*

VICTORIAN FAERIE GALA: A BEGUILING BENEFIT TO PRESERVE THE MANSION
Tuesday, October 13, 1998, from 8:00pm to midnight

In an event unlike any through the fall season, **A Victorian Faerie Gala** will allow guests to revel in the Victorian passion for legend, folklore, and the supernatural. To celebrate the opening of the special exhibition, the 1914 mansion of The Frick Collection will be transformed for a fanciful sylvan evening and guests will be encouraged (but not required) to arrive in costume. Taking inspiration from the special exhibition, an array of song, dance, and theatrical effects will be featured, and whimsical desserts, hors d'oeuvres, and cocktails will be offered in fantastic settings. A banquet precedes the gala, which is a benefit to raise funds to preserve the buildings of The Frick Collection. For further information, please call Samantha Reifler at (212) 288-0700, ext. 307.

FREE PUBLIC LECTURE

Wednesday, December 2, 1998, 5:30pm
Sex, Drugs, and Death in Fairyland
Speaker: Charlotte Gere

Where did the Victorians find their fairyland? Offered in conjunction with the special exhibition, The Frick Collection presents a lecture by **Charlotte Gere, London Author and Nineteenth-Century Specialist**. This lecture looks at art, science, dreams, hallucinations, opium addiction, and the newly revealed realms of spiritualism to discover the sources of Victorian fairy painting. *This lecture is made possible through the generosity of the Fellows of The Frick Collection and other donors.* This lecture is open to the public without charge one half-hour before the event. If those planning to attend arrive earlier, they are expected to pay the regular gallery admission fee.

ABOUT THE FRICK COLLECTION

The Frick Collection is an anthology of some of the most distinguished works of Western art from the early Renaissance through the late nineteenth century, including masterpieces by Bellini, El Greco, Rembrandt, Titian, Turner, Vermeer, Whistler, and many others housed in one of the great mansions remaining from the Gilded Age. These paintings are complemented by one of the world's finest collections of Renaissance bronzes and by great French sculpture of the eighteenth

century. These treasures are surrounded by outstanding furniture and decorative art works from the ateliers of Riesener, Lacroix, Boule, Carlin, Gouthière, and Sèvres. Each year more than 250,000 visitors from New York, across America, and around the world come to the Collection at 1 East 70th Street, once the residence of Henry Clay Frick (1849-1919). Designed by Thomas Hastings of Carrère and Hastings and constructed in 1913-1914, the building was changed after Mrs. Frick's death in 1931, with alterations and additions made by the architect John Russell Pope. In 1935 the Collection opened to the public. A new Reception Hall built in 1977, was designed by John Barrington Bayley, Harry van Dyke, and G. Frederick Poehler, in addition to two additional temporary exhibition galleries.

The Frick Collection also operates the Frick Art Reference Library at 10 East 71st Street, both a research library and a photoarchive. The Library is one of the world's great repositories for the documentation and study of Western art and has served the international art world for more than seventy-five years.

BASIC INFORMATION

General Information Phones:

Collection (212) 288-0700

Library (212) 288-8700

Website: www.frick.org

E-mail: info@frick.org

Where: The Collection is located at 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue.

The Library is around the corner at 10 East 71st Street.

Museum Hours: 10am to 6pm Tuesdays through Saturdays, and from 1pm to 6pm Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, December 24, and December 25. Limited hours (1:00 to 6:00pm) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day.

Library Hours: 10am to 5pm, Monday through Friday; 9:30am to 1pm on Saturday.

Closed August and on Saturdays in June and July. Please call for holiday closure schedule.

Museum Admission: \$7, general public; \$5, students & senior citizens. See updated "Tour Information."

PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection, and those under sixteen must be accompanied by an adult.

Library Admission: free.

Subway: #6 local (on Lexington Avenue) to 68th Street station

Bus: M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

Tour Information: now included in the price of admission is an Acoustiguide INFORM® Audio Tour of the permanent collection, provided by Acoustiguide. The tour was introduced to the public initially in English and as of the beginning of October 1998, it will be available in French, German, Japanese, and Spanish.

Museum Shop: the shop closes at 5:45pm, and is open otherwise the same days and hours as the Museum

Group Visits: Please call (212) 288-0700 for details and to make reservations.

Public Programs: A calendar of events is published regularly and is available upon request.

8, September 18, 1998

For further press information, please contact Heidi Rosenau, Communications Officer

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