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Evelyn De Morgan

London 1855-1919

Blindness and Cupidity Chasing Joy from the City

Gold coloured pastel and black chalk on dark grey-brown wove paper contemporaneously laid down on backing board (likely by the artist or the artist's sister)

40 x 59 cm. (15 3/4 x 23 1/8 in.)

Executed c.1897



Provenance

Maxwell David Eugene Clayton-Stamm, from c.1950–2018.

Evelyn De Morgan was one of the most innovative and imaginative artists of the late 19th and early 20th century. She defied genres and gender expectations to forge a professional career and gain wide recognition over the fifty years she worked as an artist. She studied at the pioneering Slade School of Art before honing her craft by copying from Old Master paintings at the National Gallery and on her many excursions to Italy.

'Blindness and Cupidity Chasing Joy from the City' is a deeply symbolic allegory which the artist made towards the close of the 19th century and focuses on some of the social anxieties the politically engaged artist held. De Morgan was born to wealthy parents, and this afforded her a comfortable upbringing. As a young adult, it seems that she began to question the value of material wealth through her artwork¹. She was a religious and spiritualist young woman and the materialistic capitalist society which boomed throughout her life troubled her. In this composition she has personified material greed as the figure of 'cupidity', he is decked in dazzling robes of brilliant gold to reflect his complete preoccupation with money. He is shackled to the figure of 'blindness', who symbolizes those who have shut their minds to spiritual fulfillment in favour of material gains. Chained together, they are a force of evil in a capitalist system which forces joy from the city; a theme which De Morgan returned to at the end of her career in 'The Barred Gate' (c.1918-19). Through the allegorical figures of 'blindness' and 'cupidity', she critiques the negative impact of greed

¹ Hardy, Sarah. "Heaven on Earth: Evelyn De Morgan's Rejection of Materialism." In John Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Religious Imagination, edited by S. Beaumont and M.E. Thiele. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-21554-4_11.

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and wealth on modern life - an idea familiar to De Morgan who lived for her whole life in a rapidly industrializing London and saw the poverty and desperation forced upon those unable to attain material wealth.

This gold drawing was probably made in parallel with an oil painting from 1897 that shares the composition, now in the De Morgan Foundation Collection (fig. 1; object number P_EDM_0018; Evelyn de Morgan Oil Paintings, DMF, plate 35), one of many paintings in which she explores the idea of material wealth being a barrier to spiritual well-being. The painting was exhibited at the Walker Art Gallery in 1898, at Leighton House in 1902-3, and at Wolverhampton in 1907. Evelyn de Morgan's wealth of preparatory drawings give the viewer a fascinating insight into the workings of the artist's mind. Of particular interest here is the figure of Cupidity, who is clearly female in the drawing, but which has morphed into a very much more androgenous figure in the oil painting, with a still feminine figure, but more masculine features. The figures are obviously the artist's main preoccupation here, with the gate and vista to the right not yet delineated, the dynamic attitudes of the dogs yet to be worked out - their presence only alluded to in outline - and various architectural elements only sketchily outlined or absent. Indeed, this approach is typical of Evelyn's studies in gold; the background detail is pared away, and the figures, in all their beauty, come into stark relief.

The present drawing is one of a very small number of works by the artist executed in gold pigment on dark wove paper, demonstrating the artist's appetite for invention. Apart from one such study in Leighton House Museum ('Victoria Dolorosa'), almost all other known studies in gold pastel are held by the De Morgan Foundation, and only one, to our knowledge, has ever before appeared on the market and was sold by Agnew's, London, to the Art Institute of Chicago, 2019 (fig. 2). The idea for working in gold on dark paper was first conceived by the artist Edward Burne-Jones who had been enchanted by a medieval book of hours with deep purple pages and gold illumination². He began creating his own works in the unique style from the early 1860s and kept them in his studio. De Morgan, who was 22 years Burne-Jones's junior, was an art student by the time Burne-Jones was established. With many other young hopefuls she visited Burne-Jones's studio in the 1870s, seeking advice on her work. It was possibly on one of these visits she first encountered the gold drawings³.

² Horner, Frances. *Time Remembered*. London: William Heinemann, 1933, p. 139.

³ Fitzgerald, Penelope. *Edward Burne-Jones: A Biography*. Illustrated ed. Joseph, 1975, p. 203.

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Her exact method and recipe has been lost to time, but it seems likely she initially worked in 'shell gold', a commercially available pigment for illumination which took its name from the mussel shells it was sold in, before using dry 'cakes' of pigment purchased from the popular Artists' Colourman, Charles Roberson from the 1890s when he began selling it. She would have been required to grind the pigment to a powder and mix it with water and gum arabic to achieve a wet medium which she could manipulate to create a range of textures, as demonstrated in the folds of the fabric and delicate angel wings of this drawing.

Working in this gold material was a painstaking process. De Morgan's friend Emilie Barrington noted that in De Morgan's method 'no erasures could ever be made. The artist has to do each stroke correctly in the first instance'⁴, giving an idea of the skill and concentration required by the artist to produce these works. It is probably for this reason that the gold drawings were unique to Burne-Jones and De Morgan, no other artists daring to experiment with a tricky and expensive art form. 'Blindness and Cupidity Chasing Joy From the City' stands as a testament to De Morgan's unique artistic vision and technical prowess.

'Blindness and Cupidity Chasing Joy From the City' encapsulates Evelyn De Morgan's dual role as an artist and a socially conscious individual. Her commitment to pushing artistic boundaries and addressing societal issues through her work solidifies her legacy as a pioneering figure in the late 19th and early 20th century art world.

⁴ *Catalogue of Pictures by the Late Evelyn Pickering De Morgan*, 1919, Leighton House Museum, London, LH/7/1/3/1, 14 - 15

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Fig. 1: Evelyn de Morgan, *Blindness and Cupidity chasing Joy from the City*, 1897, oil on canvas, de Morgan foundation.

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Fig. 2: Evelyn de Morgan, *The Angel of death*, 1885, sold by Agnew's, London, to the Art Institute of Chicago, 2019.