

Illustrator Extraordinaire

Bechtel Fellow Enthralled by Arthur Rackham

BRIGID MANGAN



"He Could See Undine beneath the Crystal Vault."

"There, on my cousin's drawing room table I found the very book . . . which I had never dared to hope I should see, Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods, illustrated by Arthur Rackham. His pictures, which seemed to me then to be the very music made visible, plunged me a few fathoms deeper into my delight. I have seldom coveted anything as I coveted that book . . . I knew I could never rest until it was mine."¹

These are the words of a young C. S. Lewis, who was deeply impressed by the "tender, flickering light of imagination"² conveyed in the watercolor images by Rackham, the late nineteenth-century artist. Upon entering the Baldwin Library of Historical Children's Literature at the University of Florida, I felt the same anticipation and excitement. There was a shelf of first-edition books, some signed by Rackham himself, awaiting my perusal. As a recipient of the 2016 Louise Seaman Bechtel Fellowship, I had been awarded an exceptional opportunity to explore the works of one of the most admired and influential illustrators of all time.

Many of the books I reviewed were special editions that had been published to be given as gifts. These books contained a combination of black pen-and-ink drawings and color plates.

Color plates were printed individually, adhered to thick pages, and then covered with tissue paper. In the early twentieth century, color plates were printed using a new technique called the three-color process. Advances in photographic and printing technologies allowed a full-color original image to be separated into three images, each in a primary color, and then printed very much like the original by using ink in each color.

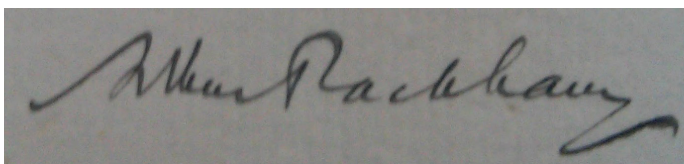
The first book I delved into was *Undine*,³ the tale of a water spirit living in the Danube who fell in love with a mortal. I had seen several of Rackham's illustrations from *Undine*, but never in their entirety. I was thrilled to be able to pore over this book, more than a century old, that had been signed by Rackham. As I gently turned the tissue paper pages that covered the color



Bridgid Mangan is a children's librarian who was employed by the District of Columbia Public Library until January 2017. This article is based on her March 2016 visit to the Baldwin Library of Historical Children's Literature at the University of Florida as part of winning the 2016 Bechtel Fellowship.



Rackham books.



Arthur Rackham's signature in a copy of *Undine*.

plates, it was hard to contain my excitement at seeing these illustrations for the first time. The images, drawn with fine black ink lines and painted with vivid watercolors, displayed such lively motion: Undine descending into the Danube, its cresting waves forming faces around her, and being welcomed back to her aquatic home by swirling fish.

The Rhinegold and the Valkyrie and *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods* were the next tomes I perused.⁴ This was the two-volume saga of the Rhinemaidens, who lost their gold to the Nibelung Alberich. The great god Wotan summons his daughter, the Valkyrie Brünnhilde, to reclaim the cursed ring and take it with her into an enchanted sleep, so that it may never harm another. Siegfried awakens Brünnhilde, and she falls in love with him.

Siegfried continues to seek adventure, and the ring remains with Brünnhilde. On his travels, Siegfried meets the compelling Gutrune. Upon discovering she has been awakened, a sister Valkyrie urges Brünnhilde to rid herself of the blighted ring. By now it is too late, and the ring has already doomed the lovers. Siegfried is killed, and Brünnhilde, mounted on her horse, throws herself on his funeral pyre.

As I completed my review of the book, I could see why it must have captivated a young C. S. Lewis. This thrilling story, with its elements of Norse mythology, contained matchless images of impeccable detail. I could understand Lewis's delight at being able to examine his cousin's copy at his leisure, and his quest to obtain a personal copy to have close at hand.

While at the Baldwin Library, I immersed myself in fifty first-edition books illustrated by Rackham. Some were popular titles, such as *Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, *Gulliver's Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*, *Aesop's Fables*, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Rip Van Winkle*,



"Soon She Was Lost to Sight in the Danube."

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, *The Romance of King Arthur*, and *Edgar Allan Poe's Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. Some lesser-known titles I contemplated were *The Allies' Fairy Book*, *Comus*, *Peer Gynt*, *Feats on the Fjord*, *Ingoldsby Legends*, *Poor Cecco*, and *The Zankiwank and the Bletherwitch*.

I pored over exquisite depictions of beautiful and grotesque creatures, majestic beasts, playful and proud fairies, and enchanted anthropomorphic trees for hours on end. I was utterly captivated by all of the works. Then I came upon the book I knew I must have as my own.

I have always loved William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.⁵ When its four human protagonists enter the forest and encounter Puck, the mischievous trickster, and the majestic Oberon and Titania, king and queen of the fairies, I yearn to follow into their enchanted realm. In their domain, fairies are always near, but they don't always let you see them. You have to look out of the corner of your eye, like looking at a star.



"Siegfried Hands the Drinking Horn Back to Gutrune and Gazes at Her with Sudden Passion."

As I examined these pictures, I perceived more and more fairies. They were peeking from behind trees and under tree roots, singing at the edge of a stream, gathering in a wind-swept field. I marveled over the scene of Titania cradling Bottom in her arms, the fairies lighting softly glowing lanterns at their feet, while she murmured, "Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms."

Gazing over the shimmering spectacle of Titania and Oberon's ball was like recalling a vision from a dream. The wonder I felt at being received into the fairies' dominion made me long for the book, so that I could join them whenever I wished. I have since

obtained my own copy, and I never tire of entering the extraordinary, wondrous world created by Rackham.

As a child, I spent hours looking at Brian Froud and Alan Lee's *Faeries*.⁶ Their "field guide" and history of the fae sparked my fascination with magical creatures and their worlds. It inspired me to read such fantasy classics as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *The Fellowship of the Ring*. I would play in the forest behind my house with my senses on high alert in order to catch a glimpse of a fairy or a snippet of her song. As an adult, I discovered the works of Arthur Rackham, and immediately saw how his illustrations had influenced and inspired Froud and Lee.

I was thrilled to have won the Bechtel fellowship, which would give me the opportunity to browse first-edition books illustrated by Rackham at my leisure. I would be able to see first-hand the works that had such a huge impact on Froud and Lee, whose own work had held me in thrall as a child. I was in awe at the fortuity of going to the source of my enthrallment with enchanted creatures and magical worlds.

During my time at the Baldwin Library, I learned that the preservation of historical children's books is a vital necessity. It enabled me, as the librarian I am today and as the child who searched for fairies in the forest, to see the strong interconnection between illustrations dating back more than a century and modern works. Rackham's illustrations, relevant after all these years, are still featured in many children's books in public libraries all over the world.

Today's children will become the new generation of readers who seek to immerse themselves in books that will transport them to enchanted worlds. They will walk in the forest, eager to hear a fairy's melody or see the flash of her glimmering wings. &

References

1. James Hamilton, Arthur Rackham, *A Life with Illustration* (London: Pavilion, 2010), 99–100.
2. Ibid, 79.
3. Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, *Undine* (London: Heinemann, 1909).
4. Richard Wagner (tr. Margaret Armour), *The Rhinegold and the Valkyrie* (London: Heinemann, 1910); Richard Wagner (tr. Margaret Armour), *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods* (London: Heinemann, 1911).
5. William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (London: Heinemann, 1908).
6. Brian Froud and Alan Lee, *Faeries* (New York: Abrams, 1978).