

This story is about identity, recreation, and some might argue, reincarnation. It is about the many random series of events that come into our lives and shape who we become. But above all, it is about the desire to resurrect the past, and mend old wrongs. This is the story of artist Margje Bijl and her famous doppelganger Jane Burden Morris, the preeminent Pre-Raphaelite muse of both William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Jane Burden Morris has one of the most recognizable faces on the planet. Paintings of her hang in the world's greatest museums, and define one of the greatest moments in art history. But very little is known about her. Unlike other famous muses, Jane never had the privilege of a medium through which she could express her own feelings and creativity. From within the confines of her canvas frame, she has been silently staring back at us for nearly two centuries, beckoning us to reach past the paint and Pre-Raphaelite symbolism, and search for her. The real her. But for us, Jane was gone forever, silenced by time and the shadow of the great men that painted her.

Then, something miraculous happened.

Imagine if one day you happen to stumble upon a dusty old photograph of a woman from another time who looks just like you. As you look at the image, you are dumbfounded for a moment to be staring at your very own face. Is it you from another life? Is it a Photoshop trick? You could have been twins had you not been separated by over a century of time. This is exactly what happened to artist Margje Bijl, who discovered her Pre-Raphaelite doppelganger quite by accident. "An artist friend gave me a framed print on which she had written the words 'previous life'" explains the artist, "At first glance I thought that she had secretly snatched and digitally edited a self-portrait I had just made. When I realized it was another woman altogether she became something to marvel at."

At first, Margje didn't know who the woman in the picture was, but as the years passed, she found herself

growing increasingly fascinated by the mysterious woman who bore her face. "As there were no details written on the photo I often wondered who that woman was and what was behind her gaze, so identical to mine. It was only five years later when I arranged a visit to the archives of the Victoria and Albert Museum, that I learned who she was. I was in awe as I browsed the pages, but when I came upon that first picture, the one I had received, seeing this particular photograph in such vivid detail hit me hard. It was a direct assault on the nervous system to me, I was literally blown to the back of my seat and couldn't help myself, and started crying."

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Suddenly, a strange new prospect presented itself. Here was an opportunity to give someone pushed aside by history, the voice she so deserved. Here was a chance to give Jane her moment in the spotlight, not as a muse, but as a flesh and blood woman. And so, Margje set out to turn a faded myth into a breathing story, using herself as Jane's surrogate.

"Jane owed her public existence to Rossetti's view," Margje explains, "She inspired Rossetti to create a new beauty ideal of which she became the embodiment. He did not paint her natural beauty, however, but imagined her as a mythical goddess. The difference between the image of Jane Morris in the photos and the paintings is so extreme that my photos resemble her more than her painted resemblance. It is therefore my underlying intention to free Jane Morris of the myth that has been created around her."

As Jane's physical double, Margje found herself in the unusual position of being both the observer and the

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observed – both the artist and the muse. She could simultaneously admire the many paintings featuring Jane Burden, at the same time remaining conscious of the fact that she was looking at her own face. It would be a strange experience for anyone, but it was especially strange considering that this wasn't just any look-alike, this was a woman who set the standard for female beauty for a whole generation, and defined the look of an entire school of art. For some, that realization might be extremely flattering. But for others, it is a burden. Because there is no separating the fact of your resemblance from the reality that Jane's exterior appearance was her one and only contribution (as far as we know) to the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Who she was, her voice, her talents and desires simply didn't matter to the history keepers, or art admirers for that matter. To the world at large, she was just a pretty face.

This realization gave Margje a solid standing to reinterpret history, and put some wrongs to right. "I have created a role for myself based on Jane's history to complement and modernize her persona," explains Margje, who created a series of staged photographs in Jane's former home featuring herself as the Pre-Raphaelite muse. "I transformed her world into my own. Decorating a room in the William Morris Gallery with these pictures, I created a place in which Jane could be remembered without being overshadowed by William Morris and Rossetti."

Beyond their physical appearance, there were some strange coincidences between the two women that served to shift the boundaries of identity. "When Jane was 17 and I was 16 we were both in the company of our sister when we were spotted by an artist who was





exactly 11 years older," Margje notes, "Both Jane and me became muse and lover of this artist."

It was an interesting parallel: Margje transforming herself into Jane, who had in turn completely transformed herself in the months leading up to her marriage to painter William Morris. Over the course of a few months, the poor and uneducated Jane turned into someone so refined and well-read, her contemporaries described her as "queenly." In fact, the transformation was so profound, she is said to be the inspiration behind the character of Eliza Doolittle in George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, later turned into the film *My Fair Lady*. "She was able to transform her life into something much bigger than what was to be expected from a girl with a humble background. This is a beautiful reminder for me that I can also free myself of the 'myth of the suffering artist,'" Margje explains. "I treasure having found a soul mate and it reassures me that she will always be there wait-

ing on my bookshelves to inspire me."

As Margje continued her work drawing modern audiences to an all but forgotten muse, a strong bond began to develop between her and her subject. And at times, the lines of Margje's very own identity started to blur: "I had an inner dialogue with her as she appeared in dozens of my dreams," Margje recalls, "It ended with me sitting opposite to her as I gave her a booklet I had made. I watched her as she discovered the photo of her double. She was silent for a while and then whispered to me that I could simply be myself."

It was a turning point for Margje, who began to realize that in order for her work to flourish, she had to nurture her own identity. "Now that the spell of the Pre-Raphaelites is gone and the intensity of my feelings for Jane has been subdued," she reflects, "I noticed that I am more able to express my feelings like I used to do with my previous works that didn't circle around a single theme for so long, and which were more spontaneous, expressive and experimental."

In person, there was something electrifying about Jane that swept up anyone that met her. And yet, even to those who got to meet her in the flesh, she was something of a mystery. Playwright Bernard Shaw observed that Jane was "the silentest woman" he had ever met. During her life she had refused to write a memoir, and the many letters between Jane and her famous lover Rossetti have all mysteriously vanished. Beyond the paintings themselves, Jane barely left a trace. Her entire significance has been filtered through the eyes of the men she loved. Until now. Until Margje.

But Margje Bijl did more than simply resurrect an old ghost. She reinterpreted the past, and in the process she redefined her own significance as an artist.

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For more information about Margje's work visit her site reflectionsonjanemorris.com. To learn more about Jane Burden Morris, pick up Wendy Parkins' book "Jane Morris: The Burden of History" as well as "Rossetti's Obsession: Images of Jane Morris" by Jan Marsh. But if history books are too dry for you, check out the novel "The Wayward Muse" by Elizabeth Hickey.



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