

## The Quest of Holy Grail Series, by Edward Austin Abbey (1852-1911)

### Originals in the Abbey Room of the Boston Public Library

In 1890, the year after Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* came out, Edwin Austin Abbey, an American expatriate painter, was commissioned to create a 15-panel mural for the Book Delivery Room at the new Boston Public Library. The subject he chose was "The Quest for the Holy Grail." Between 1919 and 1926, Emerson acquired reproductions in oil of this series. They were hung in the third floor hallway. Although the original oil paintings in the Emerson art collection are now in storage, this series will give the reader some idea of the type of artwork which hung in the halls of Emerson and to which students were exposed.

#### **Panel I: Vision, or the Infancy of Galahad**

The child Galahad, the descendant, by his mother, of Joseph of Arimathea, is visited, among the nuns who bring him up, by a dove bearing a golden censer and an angel carrying the Grail, the presence of which operates as sustenance to the infant. From the hands of the holy women the predestined boy passes into those of the subtle Gurnemanz, who instructs him in the knowledge of the things of the world, and in the duties and functions of the ideal knight. But before leaving the nuns he has performed his nightly vigil has watched alone, till dawn, in the church.



#### **Panel II: The Oath of Knighthood**

This ordeal of the vigil terminates in his departure. Clothed in red, he is girt for going forth, while the nuns bring to him Sir Lancelot, who fastens on one of his spurs, and Sir Bors, who attaches the other.



#### **Panel III: The Round Table of King Arthur**

The Arthurian Round Table and the curious fable of the Seat Perilous are here dealt with: the Seat Perilous – "Perilous for good and ill" – in which no man has yet sat with safety, not even the fashioner himself, but into which, standing vacant while it awaits only a blameless occupant, the young Sir Galahad, knighted by Arthur, has sworn a vow to be worthy to take his place. The Companions of the Order are seated in Arthur's hall, and every chair, save one, is filled. Suddenly the doors and windows close of themselves, the place becomes suffused with light, and Sir Galahad, robed in red (the color emblematic of purity), is led in by an old man clothed in white, Joseph of Arimathea, who, according to one of the most artless features of the romance, has subsisted for centuries by the possession of the supreme relic. The young knight is thus installed in safety in the Seat Perilous, above which becomes visible the legend, "This is the seat of Galahad."



#### **Panel IV: The Departure**

The knights are about to go forth on their search for the Holy Grail, now formally instituted by King Arthur. They have heard Mass and are receiving the Episcopal benediction, Sir Galahad always in red. Throughout this series he is the "bright boy-knight" of Tennyson, though not, as that poet represents him, "white-armored."



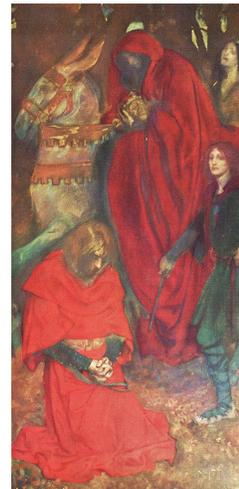
### **Panel V: *The Castle of the Grail***

Amfortas, the Fisher King, King of the Grail, as the legend has it, having been wounded several centuries before for taking up arms in the cause of unlawful love, lies under a spell, with all the inmates of the Castle of the Grail, into which the artist here introduces us. They are spiritually dead, and although the Grail often appears in their very midst, they cannot see it. From this strange perpetuation of ineffectual life they can none of them, women or men, priests, or soldiers, or courtiers, be liberated by death until the most blameless knight shall at last arrive. It will not be sufficient, however, that he simply penetrate into the castle: to the operation of the remedy is attached that condition which recurs so often in primitive romance, the asking of a question on which everything depends. Sir Galahad has reached his goal, but at the very goal his single slight taint of imperfection, begotten of the too worldly teaching of Gurnemanz, defeats his beneficent action. Before him passes the procession of the Grail, moving between the great fires and the trance-smitten king, and gazing at it he tries to arrive, in his mind, at an interpretation of what it means. He sees the bearer of the Grail, the damsel with the Golden Dish (the prototype of whom was Herodias bearing the head of John the Baptist on a charger), the two knights with the Seven-branched Candle-stick, and the knight holding aloft the Bleeding Spear. The duty resting upon him is to ask what these things denote, but, with the presumption of one who supposes himself to have imbibed all knowledge, he forbears, considering that he is competent to guess. But he pays for his silence, inasmuch as it forfeits for him the glory of redeeming from this paralysis of centuries the old monarch and his hollow-eyed Court, forever dying and never dead, whom he leaves folded in their dreadful doom. On his second visit, many years later, he is better inspired.



### **Panel VI: *The Loathely Damsel***

It is the morning after Galahad's visit to the Castle of the Grail. Awakening in the chamber to which he had been led the previous night, Sir Galahad finds the castle deserted. Issuing forth, he sees his horse saddled and the drawbridge down. Thinking to find in the forest the inmates of the castle, he rides forth, but the drawbridge closes suddenly behind him; a wail of despair follows him, and voices mock him for having failed to ask the effectual Question. He fares forward and presently meets three damsels; the first, the Loathely Damsel, is riding upon a pale mule with a golden bridle. This lady, once beautiful in form and features, is now noble still in form, but hideous in feature, and she wears a red cloak, and a hood about her head, for she is bald; and in her arms is the head of a dead king, encircled with a gold crown. The second lady is riding in the manner of an esquire. The third is on her feet, dressed as a stripling, and in her hand is a scourge with which she drives the two riders. These damsels are under the spell of the Castle of the Grail. Against her will, a magic power is used by the Loathely Damsel to tempt and destroy knights and kings. She, with her two companions, must continue to wander, doing deeds of wickedness, until the sinless Virgin Knight shall come to the castle and ask concerning the wonders he sees there. They now assail Sir Galahad with reproaches, cursing him for having failed on the previous day to ask the Question, which not only would have delivered them and the inmates of the castle, but would have restored peace and plenty to the land. The earth now must remain barren, and Sir Galahad, wandering



forth again, is followed by the curses of the peasantry, while war rages throughout the land. He must encounter many adventures, suffer many sorrows, and many years must pass before he returns once more to the Castle of the Grail, where, having through all ordeals remained sinless, he will finally ask the Question which shall redeem the sin-stricken land.

**Panel VII: *The Conquest of the Seven Deadly Sins***

Sir Galahad is here seen arriving at the gate of the Castle of the Maidens, where the seven Knights of Darkness, the seven Deadly Sins, have imprisoned a great company of maidens, the Virtues, in order to keep them from all contact with man. It is Sir Galahad's mission to overcome Sin and redeem the world by setting free the Virtues, and he accordingly fights the seven knights till he overcomes them.



**Panel VIII: *The Key to the Castle***

Having passed the outer gate of the castle, Sir Galahad encounters a monk who blesses him and delivers up to him the keys of the castle.



**Panel IX: *The Castle of the Maidens***

Sir Galahad's entry into the castle is here shown. The imprisoned maidens have long been expecting him, for it had been prophesied that the perfect knight would come to deliver them. They welcome him with shy delight, putting out their hands to be kissed. Having accomplished his mission, Sir Galahad passes on to other deeds.



**Panel X: *Galahad Parts from His Bride: Blanchefleur***

Sir Galahad has become wedded to Blanchefleur, but, sacrificing his earthly love, he leaves her that he may continue the Quest. The wounded and sin-stricken Amfortas can be healed only by a Virgin Knight, and only a Virgin Knight may achieve the Quest. A new-born knowledge has unsealed Sir Galahad's eyes, but with this knowledge is begotten the strength to overcome, and, renouncing finally every human desire, he resumes the Quest.



**Panel XI: *The Death of Amfortas***

Having passed through many adventures, Sir Galahad has here returned to the Castle of the Grail. The procession of the Grail has once more passed before him, and this time, grown wise by knowledge and suffering, he asks the Question, and thereby heals Amfortas, cleanses him from sin, and allows the old king to die. The Angel bears away the Grail from the castle, and it is not seen again until the day when Sir Galahad achieves it at Sarras. Having now accomplished his great task, he is guided by the spirit of the Grail toward the goal which shall crown his labors – the achievement of the Grail. He is directed toward the sea, to Solomon's Ship, which will bear him to Sarras, where he will be crowned king, and where the Grail itself will finally appear to him.



**Panel XII: *Galahad the Deliverer***

Sir Galahad, borne upon a white charger, and followed by the blessings of the people, is seen passing from the land, where peace and plenty once more reign.



**Panel XIII: *The Voyage to Sarras***

Sir Galahad is here in Solomon's Ship, which he found waiting to carry him across the seas to Sarras. The Grail, borne by an angel, guides the ship. Sir Bors and Sir Percival follow him. Having sinned once, they can never see the Grail themselves, yet, having persevered faithfully in the Quest, they have acquired the right to accompany Sir Galahad and witness his achievement. Resting upon a cushion in the stern of the ship are three Spindles made from the "Tree of Life" - one snow-white, one green, one blood-red. When Eve was driven from the Garden of Eden, she carried with her the branch which she had plucked from the "Tree of Life." The branch, when planted, grew to be a tree, with branches and leaves white, in token that Eve was a virgin when she planted it. When Cain was begotten, the tree turned green; and afterward, when Cain slew Abel, the tree turned red.



**Panel XIV: *The City of Sarras***

The city which is the destination of Galahad's Quest.



**Panel XV: *The Golden Tree and the Achievement of the Grail***

Sir Galahad is now King of Sarras, and upon a hill he makes a Sacred Place and builds a Golden Tree. Morning and evening he repairs thither, and from day to day he beautifies the tree, and, finally when it is complete, Joseph of Arimathea (with a company of angels) appears with the Grail. As Sir Galahad gazes upon it, crown, sceptre, and robe fall from him. He no longer needs them. He thanks God for having let him see that which tongue may not describe, nor heart think. Having now beheld that which is the source of all life and knowledge and power, his spirit can no longer remain in the narrow confines of his body. The Grail itself is borne heavenward, and is never again seen on earth.



Emerson third floor Study Hall, showing the Holy Grail Series on the wall.