

Strand 1. Breaking the Art Nouveau Glass Ceiling: The Women of Art Nouveau

MARY SETON WATTS AND THE WATTS MORTUARY CHAPEL

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Abstract

This paper seeks to inform a wider audience about Mary Seton Watts who, if known at all, is generally regarded only as the wife of the great Victorian symbolist and portrait painter George Frederick Watts, and her masterpiece, the Watts Memorial Chapel in the cemetery at Compton, Surrey in southern England. It is remarkable because the whole concept for the design of the building and its interior and exterior decoration were all her own, as was the production of the terracotta panels outside and the gesso panels inside, aided by the villagers, whom she trained. The red brick structure is covered externally with symbolic terracotta panels done in an art nouveau Celtic strapwork style of her own invention. The interior is a riot of seraphs, cherubs and angels set against a blue-green background and interwoven with a meandering art nouveau Celtic tree of life. It is the marvelous creation of a true genius.

Key words: Mary Seton Watts; Watts Mortuary Chapel; terracotta; gesso; Celtic strapwork; art nouveau; symbolist;

Introduction

Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938) was born Mary Seton Fraser Tytler, third daughter of a Scottish Laird and civil servant in India. This meant that from a young age, Mary's family moved in superior social circles, and their connection to pioneer photographer Julia Margaret Cameron – who photographed the sisters - brought them into contact with various artists and writers, not least George Frederick Watts. Mary showed her early artistic talents in her illustrations for her sister Christina's collection of short stories, published in 1869. After spending time touring continental Europe, and visiting

many important art galleries in cities such as Dresden, Florence and Rome, Mary moved to London in 1970, where her father had taken a house. She began her artistic studies at the National Art Training School in South Kensington. At that time she first met Watts at the famous Little Holland House, a major artistic and literary hub at the time, and he remained at the centre of her life from then on.

She continued with her illustrations for various publications, and in 1872-3 attended the newly-opened Slade School of Art, where she studies figure painting and sculpture. Throughout this period Watts helped, guided and encouraged her work. In the 1880s Mary was involved in the Victorian philanthropic movements which took culture to the poor, running clay modelling classes. After becoming steadily closer over the years, Watts (aged 69) married Mary (aged 36) in November 1886. After her marriage, Mary spent more of her time on the decorative arts, particularly pottery, but also doing designs for Liberty's alongside the better-known Archibald Knox. She also became involved in the Home Arts and Industries Association which had been founded in 1884 with the aim of teaching decorative arts to the working classes for educational rather than commercial purposes.

However, to many outsiders she simply became the wife of a great painter. As Wilfred Blunt comments: "Mrs. Watts became at once his companion, his nurse, his slave; his guide, philosopher and friend; his watchdog, and finally by her biography of him, his advocate and publicity agent. She established him as a national monument.....Her own very considerable artistic gifts... (were)...willingly sacrificed." (*'England's Michelangelo': A Biography of George Frederic Watts, O.M., R.A.*(1975) London: Hamish Hamilton; pp xvii-xviii). But as we shall see this was only a very partial view of Mary Seton Watts.

The Watts Mortuary Chapel: Background

Let me say loud and clear out the outset that the Watts Mortuary Chapel at Compton in Surrey is one of the most remarkable Art Nouveau buildings in Europe and – quite remarkably!! – almost unknown. I first visited it in August 1977 after reading Elisabeth

Beazley's paper in the 1977 paperback reissue of Pevsner N & Richards J M (1973) *The Anti-Rationalists: Art Nouveau Architecture and Design*. London: The Architectural Press. Since then, I have only found it mentioned in two books: Benton T *Great Britain: Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau* in Russell F (Ed)(1979/1986) *Art Nouveau Architecture*. New York: Arch Cape Press (pp 23-4, 36) and in Blakesley R (2006) *The Arts and Crafts Movement*. London: Phaidon (pp 76-80) amongst the 700 or so books on Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts which I possess, British, American and from many European countries. A serious lacuna. The story of its design, construction and decoration is equally remarkable.

In 1891 the G F and Mary Watts moved into their new half-timbered house *Limnerlease* (designed by Ernest George) in the village of Compton, a short distance from Guildford. Mary did many symbolist interior decorations using gesso, the highlight of which was the reading alcove she designed for Signor (as she called Watts). It had a heaven full of symbols of the planets, the sun and moon, there are winged spirits, and knights, a version of Watt's painting *The All-Pervading*, all interlaced with and linked by Celtic scrolls. The whole was painted in wonderful colours: blue, crimson, silver and gold. This tour de force was made of gesso applied to perforated zinc sheets and painted in tempera onto white metal leaf which gave the paint an enamel-like quality. There were gesso panels for the ceilings, and terracotta panels for the fireplaces. Mary gave her artistic creativity full rein in her new home. And this was to stand her in very good stead for what was to come.

By 1895 the churchyard around Compton's beautiful Norman church of St Nicholas was deemed to be full, and so the Compton Parish Council bought a three quarters of an acre piece of land on the sloping Budbarrow Hill, not far from *Limnerlease*, for just over £74. GF and Mary Watts became involved as benefactors, with GF selling paintings to raise the money necessary for a mortuary chapel. But it was Mary who undertook and oversaw all stages of the chapel's design and building. In that year she made a cardboard model of the intended structure and discussed it with the architect George Redmayne, who had worked with Alfred Waterhouse. Her simple ground plan was a circle intersected by an equal-armed Greek cross, but like everything connected

with the building, this had a symbolic meaning: the Circle of Eternity and the Cross of Faith. It was also fortuitous that in 1895 seams of red clay were discovered in the grounds of *Limnerlease*; in November 1895, Mary started classes for local people in terra cotta work using this clay and a kiln in her garden, in the spirit of the Home Arts and Industries Association.

At first sight, the outside of the Watts Mortuary Chapel may come as something of a shock. Built in red brick, with terracotta decorations and red Roman roof tiles, it might strike the viewer as being very out of place in the rolling Surrey landscape. But also the style of the architecture is unfamiliar, something of a mixture between Byzantine and early Norman. That said, one soon becomes intrigued by its compactness and the complete unity of its structure and colour. There were precedents for Byzantine-influenced church architecture in Britain: St Catherine's, Hoarwithy, Herefordshire by John Pollard Seddon (1874-1903), Brighton St Bartholomew by Edmund Scott (1872-1902), Hagia Sophia, London by John Oldrid Scott (1877-82) and Westminster Cathedral, London by John Francis Bentley (1894-1902), for example. However, it seems highly unlikely that Mary Seton Watts had studied these buildings and others while designing her mortuary chapel.

The Watts Mortuary Chapel: Exterior detail

The building work was supervised by the local architect John Jakes and overseen by Redmayne. From the outside the structure is clearly expressed: the four arcs of the drum of a (non-existent!) dome (the circle) with the four arms of the 'transepts' between them (the cross). The immediate impression is of surprising height for the ground area covered. The interior diameter is actually 24 feet (7.32 metres); the 'transepts' project 6 feet 2 inches (1.88 metres) beyond the drum. A short belfry rises above the south 'transept'. Each arm of the 'transepts' has two tall, round-headed windows. The building is built using Roman bricks made from local red clay; the courses are therefore horizontally narrower than in traditional English brick walls, which makes for a different feel to the whole. [see Fig. 1]

On closer approach it is the terracotta decoration which takes the visitor's eye. Each section of the drum is supported by the same three large corbels, with angels holding symbols of The Way (a maze), The Truth (a sun boat) and The Life (a vine). Above them, on the drum, there are four large friezes under the roof of the drum depicting Hope, Truth, Love and Light. These are very intricately designed, but with a repeated frame of six sections with an angel in each, and surrounding decorative Celtic-influenced strapwork. The inner pair of angels have a composite of the Latin, Patriarchal and Tau crosses between them, and a pair of birds underneath: Hope – peacocks; Truth – owls; Love – pelicans; Light – eagles. The outer four angels - each carry one of four attendant spirits; Hope – spider (patience), lion (courage), hart (aim), dove (comfort); Truth – fish (liberty), scales (justice), seashell (unity), sun boat (law); Love – lily (purity), dove (peace), bell (joy), wheel (service); Light – moon/star (godlike), lamps (Godward), eyes (Godlit), twelve flames (Godship). Each of these is illustrated in the terracotta roundel held by the angels' wings, and has the word (in brackets) written on it. [see Fig. 2] It is a huge amount of symbolic detail to take in, and one really needs to be guided by the explanatory book Mary Seton Watts wrote about it in 1905 (*The Word in the Pattern: A Key to the Symbols on the Walls of the Chapel at Compton*; this was reproduced in facsimile form together with a set of essays: Bills M & Greenhow D (2012) *The Society for the Arts and Crafts Movement in Surrey*) or by Mark Bills's own book *Watts Chapel: A Guide to the Symbols of Mary Watts's Arts and Crafts Masterpiece* (2010, London: Philip Wilson Publications Ltd). However, each panel is a delightful art nouveau and symbolist work of art which can be enjoyed on the level of its design alone, combining as it does figurative, floral and faunal elements with the attractive interlacings of Celtic strapwork. One can also admire Mary Seton Watts's work as a designer, and the skill of the local potters she trained in reproducing her designs in terracotta. A magnificent amalgam.

A word about the Celtic basis which informs so much of the decoration of the Mortuary Chapel. Mary Watts's interest was based in the twin facts of her own Scottish roots, plus the renewed interest in all things Celtic at the end of the nineteenth century. She studied recently published books on the topic and visited various sites to see original carvings, and The British Museum to see the illuminated Lindisfarne Gospels. She also

recognized the roots of these Celtic decorations, and wrote in *The Word in the Pattern*: “Some of the symbols, however, are immeasurably older than any Celtic art, and have travelled here, and all over Europe, like the root-words of languages, from their birthplace in the East”. This universality was very important to her, and also reflected much of the philosophy that lay behind George Frederick Watts’s symbolist paintings.

On either side of the ‘transepts’ there are two sets of vertical decoration flanked by two columns topped with capitals showing the symbols of the four evangelists. There is a tiled shoulder to the buttress between each part. The paired pilasters are representative of The Tree of Life, from the ground up: lower section: flowers, fruit, shells, fish; upper section: serpents, birds, beasts, man and woman, the sun, the moon, the stars, angels. These designs are all woven together within Mary Seton Watts’s favoured art nouveau Celtic strapwork. The columns are decorated with wavy lines representing The River of Life.

Each of the four windows has three columns around two tall, narrow, round-headed lights. Only the capitals at the top are decorated, and those on the north and south ‘transepts’ are different from those on the east and west ‘transepts’ although they represent the Trinity – the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

And we should not forget the belfry, which houses a 79 cm bell. There are single large openings on the north and south sides, and with double openings on east and west. Each supporting column for the openings has a decorated terracotta floral or spiral capital. There is also decoration above the arches: the north and south sides have a frieze of doves holding olive branches, while the east and west sides have wings arising from seeds.

The west ‘transept’ contains the entrance to the chapel, and this is a quite superb piece of design. It is modelled on the Celtic Romanesque doorways found typically in Ireland, with three layers of mouldings around it. There is a rectangular spandrel above the round-topped arch which contains the same terracotta design of The Garment of Praise repeated, reversed in each half. It is filled with symbols from a passage from the Bible,

Isaiah 61. Topped by six angels, with the Celtic monogram for the Sanctus over the apex of the arch, there are four rows of symbols, with Celtic strapwork flowing around them. The arch mouldings are as follows: the innermost has angel heads alternately looking up in hope or down in sympathy, the central one has peacock feathers and eyes, the outermost has a Celtic knot made of four hearts. Finally, there are three supporting columns with terracotta decoration on either side of the door. The central column has the monogram of the words I AM amidst Celtic strapwork, while the two flanking columns have six symbolic images held by a kneeling figure, all of them to do with regeneration, equally wrapped with intertwining strapwork. The whole presents a stunningly beautiful way to enter the chapel.

The entrance door is yet another masterpiece of design and craft. Mary Seton Watts made the designs for the wooden part, based on pictures she had seen of Scandinavian carved doors in *The Studio* and a gravestone on Iona. The door has carved into it various intertwining wings, flames and rays of light and different crosses symbolizing “eternity, mystery, light, motion, spirituality, protection” (*The Word in the Pattern*, p 25), and in the lower part a defeated dragon. It was carved by the local wheelwright, Thomas Steadman. The metalwork was designed by the supervising architect George Redmayne, and was made by the village blacksmith Clarence Sex. Before being put in place, it was displayed in the 1898 Home Arts and Industries Exhibition at the Albert Hall.

The building was consecrated by the Bishop of Winchester on 1st July, 1898. At that time the interior decorations still remained to be done.

The visitor who has been amazed by the overall form and colour of the building, and also the terracotta decorative wonders found on the outside can now open the huge oak door and be prepared for another set of very different wonders inside.

The Watts Mortuary Chapel: Interior detail

Nothing really prepares the visitor for the interior of the Watts Mortuary Chapel. Even seeing photos only gives an idea of what might be expected, but the breathtaking vision

that meets the eyes inside is one of the greatest sights of European art nouveau. Standing in the centre, one is surrounded by a host of angels and cherubs, which soar around one's head in reds, gold and blue-greens, wrapped by never-ending swirls of art nouveau Celtic vines of mind-boggling complexity. It is a beautiful aesthetic experience. [see Fig. 3]

The basic form inside is of the crossing of four pairs of parallel arches which spring from capitals about halfway up the four windows. These meet leaving a square in the centre of the roof, four rectangles of roof above the four 'transepts', and four pointed and outward curving segments with pointed tops inside the drum sections. The decoration is patterned and repeated in these eight spaces, with slight differences of content. The central square has "the circle of the eternal" with gold, blue and red art nouveau forms around it. The four sections of exposed roofing have Celtic-influenced art nouveau decorations in browns and ochres between the beams.

The underside of all the vault arches have cherubs – child-like faces encircled by blue, pink and gold wings – spaced along them. Then the four vault-field segments have a red seraph at the top, hands raised in blessing according to the eastern and western churches, surrounded by symbols of the truths, with the Logos in a circle underneath; then below the gilt capitals from which the arches spring are the six angels of light and dark, paired facing towards and away from us, and carrying discs suspended on ropes, illustrating the dark and light aspects of the same actions; below this a gilt girdle with repeated emblems of the Trinity, and below this the roots of the tree or vine of life.

The whole background to these is done in a deep blue-green colour, and from the roots, the vine spreads upward through a flower garden immediately above the golden girdle, at the feet of the paired angels, around and behind them and up around the seraphs, and out onto the walls of the 'transepts' and the arches around the cherubs, uniting the whole design in a fantastic network of interlaced art nouveau Celtic-influenced plant life. It is mesmerizing in its beauty and intricacy, and awe-inspiring in its power.

As with the outside decorations, there is a complex system of symbolic decoration in the interior, which takes time to explore once the effect of the whole space has being

taken in. The arrangement from the floor upwards takes us from the earth to heaven, via a standard biblical hierarchy of angels. The discs held by the angels of dark and light are paired as follows: day-night; flow-ebb; growth-decay; life-death; good-evil; rest-labour; joy-sorrow; spirit-flesh; ideal-real; freedom-limit; union-conflict; stability-change. Each is illustrated by a jewel-like panel of people performing representative actions. These stand proud of the angels who hold them, as do the ropes by which they are held, and there are intricate asymmetrical art nouveau swirls around them. Then up around the seraphs are six circular discs which illustrate the symbols of the truths, with the word written: power-justice-truth-unity-order-law; faith-hope-love-innocence-obedience-intuition; mercy-sacrifice-balance-inspiration-aspiration-meditation; wisdom-peace-light-progress-patience-courage.

In the east ‘transept’ is the altar, which has a small, specially done version of the George Frederick Watts painting of *The All-Pervading* at its centre (the original is in the Tate Gallery). It is a typical piece of Watts symbolism, with a shadowy hooded figure holding a globe on its lap, with the book of life curling around its legs. The painting is surrounded by a gilt terracotta re-table which illustrates the so-called seven gifts of the spirit: wisdom, piety, fortitude, knowledge, understanding, council, fear of the Lord. And on the altar frontal – also gilt terracotta – are the four symbols of the evangelists and three larger panels illustrating the Way, the Truth and the Life. On the transept walls to each side are illustrations of seven-branched candelabras. In 1899 the altar design was exhibited in the annual Home Arts and Industries exhibition at the Albert Hall, which was also published in *The Studio* in July 1899.

The final element of the interior is the eight capitals from which the arches spring on each side of the transepts. These are coloured in gold and each one has words written on them which if read correctly round the chapel say: But the/ souls of the/ righteous/ are in the/ hand of God/their hope/is full of/immortality. These are two phrases from the book of Wisdom in the Apocrypha which are often used at memorial services.

The interior took several years to complete, with Mary Watts and her workers creating the panels of gilded gesso that cover the whole of the interior. They were attached to the

walls on metal laths which had been galvanized to prevent rusting. It was this work which her earlier experience of decorating the rooms at *Limmerlease* had paved the way for. The Watts Mortuary Chapel was officially opened, complete, in April 1904, just three months before the death of George Frederick Watts on 1st July 1904. The inscription on the altar reads: “This chapel designed by Mrs Watts, wife of G.F. Watts, OM. R.A. was built in 1896 by her and the people of Compton; it is dedicated to the memory of all who rest near its walls.”

The Graveyard

In 1900 Mary Seton Watts had founded the group of terracotta workers which became called The Potters’ Art Guild in 1904, inspired by the ideas of John Ruskin and William Morris in which workmen would enrich their lives through craftwork. The first evidence of the group’s production is in the terracotta work for the Watts Mortuary Chapel, but there are many other elements of the Guild’s work visible in the churchyard. We can start with the art nouveau bench against the wall of the Chapel itself – an elegant group of five seats curling round the drum, with a waving art nouveau line to it, and pierced Celtic art nouveau patterns in the backs and the two end supports. Then there are around 60 tombstones which were produced by the Guild throughout the graveyard. Some of the most interesting and attractive are the earliest, such as those for Julian Russell Sturgis (1904) [see Fig. 4] and Margaret Gillet (1907), both of which have upright headstones with, respectively, two and four art nouveau angels in Mary Seton Watts’s flowing designs upon them. They both have terracotta kerbs around the sides of the plot as these were for full coffin burials. Other graves have intricately designed Celtic crosses recumbent along the length of the grave, while some are relatively simple upright Greek crosses with Celtic art nouveau strapwork designs on them, where the grave was for a cremation.

In March 1896 Mary was given permission to sink a well at the northern side of the graveyard next to the road. This is now screened from the road by a three-sided yew hedge, and has a hexagonal terracotta well-head made by the Guild to her designs. An inscription runs around the lip: ‘And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden

and a river went out of Eden to water the garden' The two side panels of the wellhead which face the cemetery have figures of seraphs on them, one with a tree inscribed 'tree of life' and the other with a bowl inscribed 'water of life'. There are art nouveau Celtic strapwork patterns above and below the figures. On the side nearest the road is the metalwork structure which on which the pulley for the bucket was originally located, and which has the date 1906 pierced on a metal panel.

The final element which should be mentioned is the cloister, which Mary designed in 1906, but was not opened until 23rd February 1911, the 94th anniversary of George Frederick Watts's birth. It is a simple open brickwork arcade of interwoven round-headed arches forming a series of 'gothic' pointed arches. Outside the central opening is G F Watts's grave – very simple – while inside on the wall is the large white ceramic Renaissance-style memorial, with a statue of Watts lying on a draped bed and relief copies of two of his paintings (*Destiny* and *The Messenger*) on either side. Along the walls are thirteen other memorials to the local gentry and people associated with the pottery.

Conclusion

Mary Seton Watts died in 1938, and disappeared for a long time under the shadow of her husband, becoming merely the wife of a great painter. There have been two attempts to rectify this situation: in 1998, with an exhibition entitled *Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938) Unsung Heroine of the Art Nouveau* at the Watts Gallery and a book (Gould V F (1998)), and a further exhibition in the same place fifteen years later called *The Making of Mary Seton Watts* with a book by Mahon M (2013). However, even in 1975, in his biography of G F Watts, Wilfred Blunt was able to say: "The Watts Memorial Chapel is a creation of genius, unique in England....One may love the Chapel, or (as many still do) one may hate it; but no one can fail to be amazed that so complex, so *professional* a building could have been produced by a woman with no architectural training, assisted (as far as we know) only by the local builder and blacksmith and a handful of enthusiastic but ignorant villagers..." (*England's Michelangelo: A Biography of*

George Frederic Watts, O.M., R.A. (1975) London: Hamish Hamilton; pp224-6). I hope that this paper will spread the word about this marvellous woman and her beautiful Watts Memorial Chapel to a much wider audience.

The factual information given in this paper come from the two exhibition catalogues mentioned immediately above, and the two guides to the Symbols cited earlier. All other descriptions and opinions are my own, based on my four visits to the Chapel between August 1977 and October 2013, and the sequences of photographs I took on those occasions.