



MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS DE MONTRÉAL
THE MONTREAL MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

J. W. WATERHOUSE ***THE GARDEN OF ENCHANTMENT***

THE EXHIBITION'S THEMES

GARDEN OF ENCHANTMENT

The paintings of John William Waterhouse (1849–1917) are recognized by millions of people worldwide, yet his life, and the range of his production, remain unfamiliar. Born to British parents in Rome and educated in London and Leeds, Waterhouse was immersed in a tradition shaped by classical antiquity. From his first exhibit at London's Royal Academy in 1874, however, he pursued classical themes with an unconventional flair that embraced both melancholy and theatricality. Born the year in which Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt launched their "Pre-Raphaelite"* rebellion against the Academy, Waterhouse did not awaken to their emotional intensity until 1886, when he visited the mid-career retrospective of Millais. At the same time, he was a keen admirer of the pictorial innovations taking place in France. Qualified here as "The Modern Pre-Raphaelite," Waterhouse, more than any artist of his generation, united the immediacy of French naturalist techniques with the Romantic imagination encapsulated in the works of Shakespeare, Tennyson and Keats.

Beginning in the early 1890s, Waterhouse broadened his literary references to encompass Greek myths as retold by Homer, Ovid and other ancient poets. He devoted the rest of his successful career to a loosely interconnected series of tranquil scenes featuring his distinctive ideal of female beauty and subtle references to the special kinds of knowledge that women possess. Through their emphasis on magic and such occult icons as Circe and Psyche, these paintings parallel developments in Symbolism. Waterhouse's death from cancer during World War I coincided with the true end of the Victorian era; by 1925, his aesthetic was completely out of fashion. He left no children or archive. Almost a century later, when some of his paintings have become even more popular than during his heyday—for example, *The Lady of Shalott*, on special loan from the Tate, is that gallery's most widely reproduced work on postcards—this exclusive North American presentation of the first major Waterhouse retrospective allows us to appreciate the full scope of his work.

* Founded in 1848, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood opposed the Royal Academy's promotion of Raphael as the ideal artist. Their subjects, taken from literature and poetry, dealt mostly with love and death, and were treated with maximum realism.

WATERHOUSE AND COMPANY: THE DISCERNING TASTES OF MONTREAL COLLECTORS

The participation of J. W. Waterhouse in the annual Summer Exhibitions at the Royal Academy of Arts in London from 1874 to 1917 largely coincided with Montreal's golden age of art collecting. For the new category of collectors that emerged both in Great Britain and North America—middle

class by birth and aristocratic in fortune—the Royal Academy offered not only a readily available source from which to purchase paintings, but a means to shape taste, independent from preconceptions based on earlier art. Its juried exhibitions drew up to 400,000 visitors at the height of Waterhouse's career.

Founded in 1860, the Art Association of Montreal (now the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts), held exhibitions attuned to those of the Royal Academy. Many of the paintings that formed the nucleus of the Montreal's collection at the turn of the century were by artists who showed at the venerable London institution. The artists whose works are exhibited in this gallery—all from the collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts—bear some relationship to Waterhouse. Many share a history of exhibiting at the Royal Academy, or an affinity in style or subject matter. Others have a closer connection: for example, Briton Rivière and Benjamin William Leader were friends of Waterhouse as well as fellow Royal Academicians. William Etty was an early nineteenth-century English painter whose nudes Waterhouse surely admired. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' collection includes works by prominent figures in the Victorian art establishment in London, including Sir Frederic Leighton, President of the Royal Academy, and Sir Edward Poynter, Director of the National Gallery, both of whom had influenced the younger artist in his formative years. The classicized genre scenes of the Dutchman Lawrence Alma-Tadema also greatly influenced Waterhouse's early works.

Waterhouse differed from his Pre-Raphaelite predecessors in that he maintained a close association with the Royal Academy throughout his entire career, whereas the first Pre-Raphaelites railed against the institution because they opposed its academicism, which promoted the Renaissance artist Raphael as the ideal. Dante Gabriel Rossetti chose never to exhibit at the Royal Academy, and Edward Burne-Jones only ever exhibited one painting there, despite being bestowed the honour of associate member. The work of these progressive artists nevertheless drew the attention of one of Montreal's most astute collectors, Sir George A. Drummond, who was among the rare collectors of Pre-Raphaelite art in North America. When Drummond's collection was auctioned off in the early twentieth century, the only part that remained intact was acquired by Lord Leverhulme, the English soap magnate who was an important patron of Waterhouse. These acquisitions, which include paintings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and George Frederic Watts, are today among the holdings of the Lady Lever Art Gallery near Liverpool, along with masterworks by Waterhouse. Fortunately, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts was the recipient of several outstanding works donated by another prominent Montreal collector of the same era, Lord Strathcona, Canadian High Commissioner to Britain, whose collection included works by John Everett Millais, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, John MacWhirter and the Museum's famous *October* by James Tissot (on display).

YOUTHFUL EXPERIMENTS: SCENES OF ANCIENT LIFE

In 1871, Waterhouse was admitted to the Royal Academy Schools as a student of sculpture, but he soon began to exhibit paintings at the Dudley Gallery and other London venues. These small pictures ranged from an Orientalist beauty to the fountain nymph Undine, the first of many Waterhouse women associated with his namesake, water. Critics often compared Waterhouse's exhibits with those of Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912), the Dutchman who settled in London in 1870. Inspired by Pompeii, Alma-Tadema had pioneered a new approach to classical subject matter that focused on the lives of ordinary people and reanimated their rooms and streets on the basis of artifacts excavated in Italy.

Waterhouse followed in Alma-Tadema's footsteps by revisiting Italy in 1877. According to the first article published on Waterhouse, "his imagination was kindled by reading in the ruined streets of Pompeii the melodramatic romance of its last days," Edward Bulwer Lytton's bestselling novel of 1834, *The Last Days of Pompeii*. Waterhouse sketched the ancient town, which his paintings also repopulate with carefully researched Roman material culture. Yet Waterhouse was also developing his own approach. His scenes are more spacious and sparing of detail than Alma-Tadema's, and they address a more serious range of concerns; several represent childhood with a sense of wistfulness or melancholy. Moreover, they increase in scale, reaching genuine monumentality in *A Sick Child Brought into the Temple of Aesculapius*. Although Waterhouse seems to have been an unassuming man, he was already staking a claim to become one of his generation's leading painters. His talent was noticed early: in 1876, an Academy committee hung *After the Dance* "on the line," the first of his many entries to be accorded the honour of this prominent position.

WATERHOUSE, HISTORY PAINTER

Towards the end of the 1870s, Waterhouse embarked on a new series of paintings. While drawing on the archeological research that informed his scenes of ancient life, they depicted important events from Greek, Roman and Early Christian history. Waterhouse's complex and difficult historical subjects drew on erudite sources, and also involved powerful moral, psychological, political or religious issues.

Although history painting had been a longstanding continental tradition since the Renaissance, highly unusual in the British art world of the day. This was exactly the traditional range of subject-matter from which Alma-Tadema deliberately distanced his work. In this sequence of paintings, all of them unusually large in scale and ambitious in subject matter for the Royal Academy, Waterhouse honed his skill as a pictorial dramatist. The British art world was notorious throughout Europe for its literary predilections. Waterhouse occasionally included a reference to one of his sources, but he seldom quoted a lengthy passage, and for good reason: his paintings did not illustrate their sources with the minute fidelity of so much Victorian art. Instead, Waterhouse painstakingly invented a pictorial composition which, in each case, wholly transformed the literary subject into visual drama. *Mariamne*, the culminating work in Waterhouse's series of history paintings, is also the largest

picture he ever made. If the aim of the series was to establish Waterhouse's credentials as a worthy successor to the High Art tradition in European painting, it was successful: Waterhouse was elected Associate of the Royal Academy in 1885, immediately after the exhibition of *St. Eulalia*, at the age of only thirty-six.

TOWARDS A PICTURESQUE MYSTICISM

In contrast to the earlier vogue for spiritualism, a popular movement which emphasized contact between a living medium and the spirits of the deceased, the occult movements of the fin-de-siècle and early twentieth century tended to elitism and arcane learning, founded on a series of key literary texts extending from classical antiquity through to modern poetry in the Romantic tradition. Could the "distinct imaginative system" of Waterhouse's later work be attributed to a fascination with the occult? It is tempting to suggest that the strange dearth of surviving documentation on Waterhouse is evidence of a secret life, perhaps as member of an occult movement, but this must remain pure speculation; since occult movements are by definition secret, they are resistant to research. Perhaps the most that can be said is that Waterhouse's works consistently represent the same myths that were seen as especially revelatory in occultist circles of the same period. In that respect, it is important to emphasize that—despite the claims of the occult tradition to immemorial antiquity—this choice of subject matter marks Waterhouse's project as distinctively modern, and very much in keeping with the experimentation of literary modernism in the next few decades. W. B. Yeats explicitly avowed his devotion to the occult; other modernists, notably Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, incorporated elements of the occult tradition into their works.

Whether or not these writers, or Waterhouse, were actually initiates in the many occult societies that were thriving in London around the turn of the twentieth century, they drew on stories and motifs associated with the occult to powerful effect. Moreover, occultism in the strict sense was only one strand in a wider pattern of interest in pagan religion, comparative mythology, nature mythology, classical archeology and anthropology, which gathered momentum at exactly the same moment Waterhouse took up mythological subject matter. The use of circular mirrors, and of circles in general, is a recurrent feature of Waterhouse's scenes. In *Consulting the Oracle* and *The Magic Circle*, which stand out in their powerfully direct depictions of ritual magic, circles draw the viewer's attention to the centre of the composition. The Symbolists, interested as they were in all that was spiritual and occult, saw circles as the perfect form representing the cosmic supernatural power (God), in which spirit, intellect and the material world descended in concentric stages. Apart from the spiritual and symbolic meaning of the circle in these two paintings, Waterhouse presents us with a strong, independent and mysterious woman. These works did not fail to attract the attention of the press, and Waterhouse gained a reputation for ambition.

THE LADY OF SHALOTT

For the first time ever, all of Waterhouse's paintings of the Lady of Shalott are exhibited together. This propitious gathering provides a unique opportunity to contemplate the artist's exploration over a thirty-year period of the celebrated poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. The Tate's *Lady of Shalott* is the best known of all Waterhouse's works, a highly sophisticated piece of painting that evokes a magical world of dream-like romance. But the picture and its subject touch on a range of serious and

troubling issues, including female sexuality, gender politics, the relationship of the artist to society, as well as a ferocious contemporary aesthetic debate around naturalism and narrative. Waterhouse closely followed Tennyson's poem, which enjoyed enormous popularity through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. His verse treatments of the legends of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table were probably admired most of all. First published in 1832 and revised in 1842, Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott" was one of his earliest excursions into Arthurian myth. It was inspired not by Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *Morte d'Arthur*, but by *Donna di Scallotta*, an Italian fourteenth-century story.

In "The Lady of Shalott," a fairy woman is confined to a tower on an island up-river from Camelot. How she got there, or the nature of the curse which holds her prisoner, is never revealed. This curse forbids her to see the world other than reflected in a mirror, and she weaves "the mirror's magic sights." It is not until Lancelot rides by that, stricken with love and lust, the Lady turns, unleashing the curse. She embarks on a voyage down the river, and dies, the curse fulfilled. The taste for Arthurian subject-matter in the 1880s and 1890s can be related to social and political shifts in Victorian society, and Waterhouse was not alone in finding the Lady of Shalott's story attractive. This is now seen as connected with the shifting position of women in British society, and in particular, male concern about the growing economic and social independence of the "New Woman." The sexual and social dynamics of the story of The Lady of Shalott should not be underestimated. The story is an allegory of longing, repression, fear and punishment, and Tennyson's lyrical text adopts an erotic rhythm. The poem's image of the Lady in a tower was a traditional symbol of chastity and containment. Its appearance in Tennyson's poem can be seen as a metaphor for the constraints of nineteenth-century home life. The poem seems to warn of the consequences of acting on physical compulsion, while also recognizing the inevitability of giving in to such temptation.

DANGEROUS WATERS: NAVIGATING FEMININITY. MYTH AND MODERNISM

In 1890, for the first time since his debut, Waterhouse did not exhibit at the annual Royal Academy exhibition. When he reappeared the following year, it was to make a dramatic new departure. Decisively, he abandoned the series of subjects from ancient history with which he had made his reputation; now he embarked on a new project, centred on the myths and legends of pagan antiquity, which would dominate the rest of his career. Like so much in Waterhouse's biography, the reasons for this sudden shift remain mysterious. It is a small step from the reflection in the mirror—a recurrent theme—to one in the water. Waterhouse's obsession with water as a metaphor of danger, but also as an impenetrable, magical and mythical element, is obvious. Had Venus not risen out of the sea and was she not the pre-eminent symbol of woman? On the other hand, the unattainable water nymph or mermaid could lure a man down to her watery realm, and hence to his death. Many examples in Waterhouse's oeuvre deal with the fatal attraction of water.

Waterhouse's subjects were very similar to images of female temptresses by European Symbolist painters such as Franz von Stuck, Gustav Klimt, Fernand Khnopff and others. There are also similarities in the strategy of using traditional mythology as a way of articulating new concerns and anxieties. With the questioning of gender roles and calls for women to be socially and politically independent, alongside a demand for proper sexual fulfilment, the 1890s saw throughout Europe an

almost millennial male anxiety about their status and appropriate role. This was an issue of constant debate in England at the time, and opinions were sharply divided; the growing campaigns for women's property rights and women's suffrage within the British feminist movement, far ahead of those on the Continent, had both ardent supporters and vigorous opponents. Perhaps Waterhouse's women are not so much femmes fatales as wise sorceresses, with Circe as their archetype: often they are rebels who refuse to obey the men (or male gods) in authority.

IN THE STUDIO: DRAWINGS AND SKETCHBOOKS

Studying Waterhouse's drawings offers the pleasure of observing how he modified compositions in order to maximize their beauty and dramatic impact. These adjustments were sometimes considerable, though he usually found solutions on canvas that now seem inevitable. Several of the drawings in this section show signs of having once been bound into sketchbooks, and it is likely that Waterhouse himself removed specific sheets when he needed them. Most of these date from after 1900, when the Waterhouses relocated from Primrose Hill to St. John's Wood. Many drawings may have been discarded during that move. A fortunate survivor is *Study for The Magic Circle*, one of Waterhouse's few known works in sepia, a medium in which he exhibited occasionally early in his career.

Seven sketchbooks were passed down in Waterhouse's family and given to the Victoria and Albert Museum by his great-nephew, Dr. John Physick. One dates from the very beginning of Waterhouse's career, and includes fine-grained, painstaking drawings in hard pencil for a variety of subject types related to his student days and his earliest exhibited pictures: Orientalist figures, drawings from ancient sculptures (or casts) and studies of heads. The remaining six sketchbooks all relate to the final phase of his mythological and poetic subjects, from the late 1880s through to the end of his life, and they show how he developed several ideas for compositions simultaneously. Indeed, the sketchbooks provide evidence of the complexity with which the subjects of Waterhouse's later phase were intertwined not only intellectually, through their references to parallel or related myths and stories, but also visually. There is no predictable sequence to the pages in any sketchbook, as Waterhouse moved back and forth from one subject or motif to another, and he did not necessarily work systematically through the pages of the book. Although they are often attractive, the sketches are working drawings first and foremost.

Like Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and Albert Moore—to name just a few of his peers—Waterhouse transcended female models' particularities to create his own idealized, instantly recognizable type, varied primarily by hair colour. The drawings of women's heads gathered here were surely consulted by Waterhouse over the years, constituting a veritable archive of gazes and poses that he could orchestrate into new compositions. Even when Waterhouse produced commissioned portraits, the sitter essentially becomes a "Waterhouse girl."

THE ENCHANTED GARDENS OF THE LATER YEARS

Waterhouse's English woods and waters are haunted by naiads, dryads, satyrs and mermaids. Perhaps they offer routes to the underworld, through the depths of water, the forest undergrowth or the flowery meadow that (as in the story of Proserpina) may open up a chasm to the world below. In Waterhouse's mythological world, nature becomes primordial: in the later years, woodlands, flowery meadows, ponds and streams largely replaced the built environment. These are not pastoral landscapes or classical landscapes, but rather the magic forests and enchanted gardens of folklore or fairy tale. They participate in a widespread revival of interest in the rustic god Pan and his followers—fauns, satyrs, nymphs—as representatives of a universal nature mythology, explored in English and American poetry from 1890 onwards.

As critics turned against explicit narrative during the 1900s, Waterhouse painted more and more women seated by streams or picking bright flowers. Seemingly plotless, several of these canvases actually allude to the Ovidian abductions of Oreithyia and Proserpina. Having once enclosed his women in gardens and glades, Waterhouse now opened his pictures to expansive meadows drenched in silvery light. About 1914, Waterhouse returned to narratives in historical settings closely associated with Pre-Raphaelitism, and thus with Englishness. These themes included Miranda from *The Tempest*, Tristram and Isolde and Fair Rosamund from medieval ballads and romances, and episodes from Boccaccio's *The Decameron*.

Waterhouse's death in 1917 in the midst of a cataclysmic world war seems almost timely. In its memorial tribute, *The Studio* classed Waterhouse "among the best of our romanticist painters" for "the right atmosphere of poetic suggestion," yet *The Times* thought eclecticism had limited Waterhouse's originality—a modernist perspective anticipating the rapid decline in his reputation. The revival of interest in Waterhouse reached a new level in 2000, when headlines worldwide announced the acquisition of *St. Cecilia* for what remains the highest price known to be paid for a Victorian painting. Waterhouse would surely be pleased by the growing acclaim, and, it is hoped, by the present retrospective, the largest gathering of his works ever.

OUT OF OUR MINDS (OOOM)

**A FILM BY MELISSA AUF DER MAUR AND TONY STONE
(28 MIN.)**

Written and produced by Montreal musician Melissa Auf der Maur and brought to life by New York director Tony Stone (*Severed Ways*), this short musical film was a great success with critics and the public when it was screened at the last Sundance Film Festival. Auf der Maur, who finds great inspiration in Waterhouse's works, admits that she carried a picture of his *Lady of Shalott* around with her for years as a lucky charm when she was touring the world as a bassist with the rock bands Hole and Smashing Pumpkins. This is the Canadian premiere of *Out of Our Minds (OOOM)*, in which the past and the future collide. Parallel worlds meet in a forest. A Viking's heart is the central element of a story involving the fates of women from three different eras— intersecting in the same forest—where the trees bleed.