



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

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

J. W. WATERHOUSE: THE ARTIST SEEN FROM ALL SIDES

The four co-curators of the exhibition, Peter Trippi, Patty Wageman, Elizabeth Prettejohn and Robert Upstone, the collectors Linda and Stephen Waterhouse, and J. W. Waterhouse's great-nephew, John Physick, share their perspectives on various aspects of the artist's oeuvre and this major retrospective.

Peter Trippi, Editor, magazine *Fine Art Connoisseur*

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. The exhibition seeks to show visitors how this artist developed over five decades, even as they enjoy an unprecedented gathering of his richly coloured creations.

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. The subtitle of the exhibition catalogue, "The Modern Pre-Raphaelite," underlines how 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.

From 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, and is rarely mentioned in his contemporaries' correspondence. Ninety-two years after his death, when his paintings have become even more popular than during his heyday, this exhibition allows Waterhouse's finest works to speak for him

Patty Wageman, Director, Groninger Museum

Waterhouse's paintings often feature beautiful women – alone, supplicating or enchanting a man, in pairs and groups. Natural-looking yet unattainable, their melancholy mood, timeless setting and interlocking gazes characterize Waterhouse's mature style. In his day he was sometimes criticized for overreliance on a single type of female beauty, usually a very young woman or a girl on the threshold of adulthood. Today this type is admired worldwide, even by those who cannot name the artist.

Although these images are often perceived as serene, they actually betray a Romantic fascination with intense female passions. In this exhibition are compelling images of the Lady of Shalott, Saint Cecilia, Mariana, Cleopatra, Circe, the Sirens tormenting Ulysses, Fair Rosamund, Miranda, Isolde and other notable women from myth and literature. Together, they constitute a veritable pantheon of female archetypes that must have mattered very deeply to Waterhouse.

Elizabeth Prettejohn, Professor of History of Art, University of Bristol

As far as the academic practice of art history in the twentieth century has been concerned, Waterhouse simply did not exist. His work does not appear in any significant survey of nineteenth-century or modern art, and only sporadically in surveys of British art. Contrast this absence with what we see in the wider world today: museums that own Waterhouse paintings regularly find large crowds gathered around them. Books on Waterhouse, as well as reproductions of his work on posters, prints and greeting cards, are invariably bestsellers, and now there are dozens of Web sites devoted to his art.

How can we account for this striking discrepancy between popular celebrity and academic oblivion? It would be easy enough to classify Waterhouse as a popularizer, an artist whose work is superficially appealing but not sophisticated enough to earn a reputation in the highbrow world of art-historical scholarship. Yet it is clear that, in his own lifetime, Waterhouse's work was regarded unequivocally as high culture. For the critic J. A. Blaikie, writing in 1886, "his work has ever been distinguished by qualities that appeal more to painters than to popular tastes," and an 1897 article in the art magazine *The Studio* declared that "he has never given way to the temptation by which modern artists are beset, to gain popularity by concessions to the general demand for triviality of subject and showy cleverness of technical expression."

I believe that it is Waterhouse's special skill at creating pictorial drama that makes his paintings so compelling to audiences, as much today as at the time of their original creation, a hundred or more years ago. Moreover, this exhibition reveals that Waterhouse is a more important artist than the art-historical community ever imagined – that he deserves to be studied alongside the great Pre-Raphaelite masters.

Robert Upstone, Curator of Modern British Art, Tate Britain

The modern hunger to classify, categorize and enumerate sometimes struggles to define precisely what sort of painter Waterhouse was, or with which stream of British nineteenth-century art he should be aligned. His work has different phases that subtly shift and morph, while retaining a highly individual character and identity that is immediately recognizable. There is a certain temptation to identify him as some species of “Academic” painter. This is a comfortingly broad class of categorization, and seems to be supported by Waterhouse’s enduring commitment to exhibiting at the Royal Academy over a lifetime’s career, and also by his tendency until the later 1880s to select primarily subjects derived from ancient Greek and Roman myth or history.

But the somewhat reductive connotations of “Academic” give no sense of his originality and invention, or of his transgression of Academic typological conventions. The frequently dark undercurrents that underpin Waterhouse’s work can be investigated rewardingly by viewing him in context with the pan-European phenomenon of Symbolist painting, and again this weighs against any straightforward categorization as simply an “Academic” painter.

Perhaps the most common description of Waterhouse is that he is a certain variety of “high” Pre-Raphaelite. This is a classification that has been supported by his occasional inclusion in modern books and exhibitions about the Brotherhood and their successors. In its obituary, *The Times* was quite clear in how it defined Waterhouse: “He painted Pre-Raphaelite pictures in a more modern manner. He was, in fact, a kind of academic Burne-Jones, like him in his types and his moods, but with less insistence on design and more on atmosphere.” This assessment still has merit, but the present exhibition sets out to look more closely at what it means.

John Physick, Waterhouse’s Great-nephew

My twin brother and I have always lived in the shadow of J.W. Waterhouse, as we were born in 1923, only six years after his death in 1917. His stepsister Mary (1866-1953) was our grandmother, and in the 1930s she told us that she had been painted by her brother as *The Lady of Shalott* (1888), seated in the boat. My father, Nino William Physick (1890-1946), was Waterhouse’s godson and namesake. As I grew up, I realized that Waterhouse’s reputation was at a low ebb. When I donated several of his sketchbooks to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1949, James Laver, Keeper of the Print Room there, told me that within another thirty years or so, appreciation of Waterhouse would have risen enormously. Laver was right.

Eventually, there were small exhibitions of Waterhouse’s art in 1978 at Sheffield and Wolverhampton, followed by monographs by Anthony Hobson in 1980, Peter Trippi in 2002, and Aubrey Noakes in 2004. In 2002, English Heritage bestowed a Blue Plaque on Waterhouse’s home in Saint John’s Wood, London, which I unveiled. His star was certainly now high in the sky. Today I know that the large exhibition on tour to Groningen, London and Montreal will ensure Waterhouse is never again relegated to the shadows of art history.

Nathalie Bondil, Director of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

“An excellent example of professional French painting. The drawing is planned out geometrically, the modelling is built up mechanically. The brush, filled with thick paint, works like a trowel... How cosmopolitan and pedantic is this would-be romantic work!” wrote the critic George Moore of Waterhouse’s *Circe Invidiosa*, exhibited in 1892 at the Royal Academy. A late Pre-Raphaelite and associate of the Aesthetic Movement, the Victorian painter John William Waterhouse, a very young and so very English member of the Royal Academy, had had the audacity to introduce into the Holy of Holies “the mechanical art which has spread from Paris all over Europe, blotting out in its progress all artistic expression of racial instincts.” The new Naturalist French school of Bastien-Lepage, his near contemporary, influenced his palette and brushwork, as did modern Impressionist painting, a heresy at the time but revered today. His art is particularly fitting for our Museum, founded in 1860 at the time these two cultural identities, English and French, converged. I soon realized that this apparent duality represented a sufficient reason for mounting this exhibition, with the help of our curators’ great expertise and infectious enthusiasm. Above all, this was a unique opportunity to include the first international Waterhouse exhibition in its only North American appearance in our programming. It was time to shed light on the paradox of a painter whose work was loved by the public but whose name is all but forgotten today.

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