



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

JOHN WILLIAM WATERHOUSE

A BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

PETER TRIPPI

Although his paintings were widely known in his day, and although he joined numerous artistic societies of high prestige, the personality of John William Waterhouse (1849-1917) was rarely mentioned by his contemporaries in their correspondence. His papers remain unlocated, and his scarce surviving letters to others suggest a man of few words. Was he painfully shy, or disagreeable? Perhaps he stuttered, or had a hearing impairment that no one dared note in writing?

Whatever the case, Waterhouse's paintings have survived to speak for him, and together they reveal a man who *felt* very deeply. Coursing through the pictures, across five decades, are Waterhouse's fascination with melancholy, magic, and the thrilling dangers of love and beauty. Several contemporary observers called his pictures poetic, not only because they are scenes imagined from poetry, but also because they are lyrical in the truest sense of the word – imbued with the same hypnotic power possessed by the ancient poets who sang their stories. This was also a man particularly enthralled with *female* beauty and the power of women over men, over nature, over each other – no matter how sturdy or fragile they might appear physically.

These questions and observations must be remembered as we examine the plain facts of Waterhouse's life. In many respects, his biography resembles that of other leading Academicians of the Victorian era, so there were probably other factors at play that cannot be traced in conventional ways.

AN ACADEMY MAN

It is appropriate that the present retrospective of Waterhouse's paintings will make one of its three appearances at the Royal Academy of Arts, the institution that lay at the centre of this painter's life. Waterhouse created most of his major pictures for display at the Academy, where he intended their glowing colours and lively brushwork to delight collectors, reviewers, and the public.

It was perhaps inevitable that Waterhouse's career should focus on the Academy, as both his parents exhibited there and they may even have met in its galleries. He was born and baptised in 1849 at Rome, the first child of the Yorkshireborn painter William Waterhouse (1816-1890) and his second wife, Isabella Mackenzie (c. 1821-1857). The child was given an Italian nickname ('Nino', short for 'Giovannino', or 'little John') that stayed with him all his life. In 1854 the family settled in Kensington (London), where his mother and two brothers later died of tuberculosis.

Within a year of his father's remarriage in 1860, Waterhouse was at school in Leeds, where he relished Roman history and contemplated engineering as a career. Back in London, he assisted his father with portraits and entered the Academy Schools as a Probationer in sculpture in 1870, at the

age of 21. Six months later he was admitted as a Student, but soon began to exhibit paintings, not sculpture, at the Dudley Gallery, Society of British Artists, and elsewhere in London.

These pictures ranged from *Undine* (private collection), which showed the eponymous water nymph pinning by a fountain and was the first of Waterhouse's many female figures associated with water, to an Orientalist beauty in *The Unwelcome Companion: A Street Scene in Cairo* (cat. 1).

In 1874 an allegory with Roman setting, *Sleep and his Half Brother Death* (fig. 9), became the first work by Waterhouse accepted for the Academy's Summer Exhibition, where he showed regularly until 1917. Two years later *After the Dance* (cat. 4) hung 'on the line' there, the first of his entries accorded this honour. The classicised pictures of this period echo Lawrence Alma-Tadema in their archaeological accuracy, yet their scale is larger and their mood more melancholy. Waterhouse produced genre scenes of ancient and modern life in 1877 while visiting Italy, where he was enthralled by Pompeii.

Acquisitions by municipal galleries began in 1883, when the Art Gallery of South Australia at Adelaide purchased *The Favourites of the Emperor Honorius* (cat. 12), which perfected Waterhouse's emerging fascination with the physical and psychological distance between a single figure and a group. In 1883 Waterhouse married a woman eight years his junior, the Ealing flower painter Esther Kenworthy (1857-1944), whose father was an artist and mother a school mistress. Although he was married in the Church of England, Waterhouse's ongoing depictions of ritual magic suggest that he was interested in occultism. The childless couple rented rooms near 3 Primrose Hill Studios, which Waterhouse had leased in 1878. Neighbours in this studio complex included the Antwerp-trained English painter, William Logsdail, who posed the Waterhouses and their siblings for three of his London street scenes of the late 1880s.

Waterhouse's large, dramatic pictures of supernatural women in antiquity found buyers and plaudits at the Academy: *Consulting the Oracle* (1884, cat. 15) and *St Eulalia* (1885, cat. 16) were acquired by Henry Tate, and *The Magic Circle* (1886, cat. 17) for the nation through the Academy's Chantrey Bequest. Waterhouse sent smaller genre pictures, including some of Venetian life, to the Grosvenor Gallery, Institute of Oil Painters, and Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours; he became a member of the latter two institutions, as well as the Art Workers Guild and Arts Club. His much-noticed depiction of Eulalia's martyrdom ensured his election in 1885 as an Associate of the Royal Academy, where he proceeded to teach in the Life and Painting Schools intermittently from 1887 to 1908. Waterhouse must have enjoyed teaching generally, for he also served later as a 'Visitor' at the St John's Wood Art School, King's College School of Art for Women, and Baker Street School of Animal Painting.

TURNING POINTS

Waterhouse's prestige grew further after his enormous 1887 canvas of the Hebrew martyr *Mariamne* (cat. 18) earned medals at the world's fairs in Paris (1889), Chicago (1893), and Brussels (1897). Like the other women he painted in the 1880s, Mariamne is dramatic in her presence; even George Bernard Shaw perceived Waterhouse's fascination with the stage during this period, the heyday of Sarah Bernhardt and Ellen Terry. In 1887 the Waterhouses moved their workplace to the larger 6 Primrose Hill Studios. Through contact there with Logsdail and the Newlyn painter Frank Bramley,

Waterhouse experimented with the popular grey-toned painting techniques of the Frenchman Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848-1884). It is ironic that one of his few works in this naturalistic style, *The Lady of Shalott* of 1888 (cat. 20), has come to represent Waterhouse so prominently by virtue of its presence in the collection that Henry Tate gave the nation to form the National Gallery of British Art.

The Lady of Shalott constituted Waterhouse's first foray into Pre-Raphaelitism not only because it illustrates a scene from Tennyson's famous poem, but also because it demonstrates the powerful impact that John Everett Millais's drowning *Ophelia* of 1851-1852 (fig. 23) made when it was shown again in London in 1886. Under the spell of that meticulously detailed masterwork, Waterhouse suddenly saw that nature could – according to his 1909 biographer Rose E.D. Sketchley – 'hold out promise of an imaginative revelation to be won by sheer faithfulness of sight'.¹ Waterhouse clearly shared the widespread Victorian inter-association of water, women, and drowning: in 1889 he sent to the Academy his own naturalistic *Ophelia* (fig. 30), and ultimately exhibited two more treatments of *Ophelia* (figs 18, 39) and the *Lady of Shalott* (cats 30, 60).

Waterhouse's failure to sell the 1889 *Ophelia* may have persuaded him to try a different stylistic course. In 1890 his father died, and he did not exhibit at the Academy for the first time in sixteen years. Like so much of the artist's life, this hiatus is undocumented, but it seems to have encompassed a self-reinvention, possibly while visiting Italy: in 1891 he reappeared in the London exhibitions with a new fascination for classical enchantresses drawn from Homer and Ovid, and with a more jewel-toned palette.

This mature and very successful phase opened with *Ulysses and the Sirens* (cat. 22), acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne upon the advice of Academy President Frederic Leighton and other senior Academicians, who also recommended *Circe Invidiosa* (cat. 23) to the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1892.

THE HEYDAY

From this point, Waterhouse specialised in wistful, mildly eroticized maidens – their singular beauty both natural and unattainable – posed in timeless settings that evoke a vaguely melancholy other-world. Whether these women appear alone, supplicating or enchanting a man, or in pairs or groups, Waterhouse usually bypassed vigorous action for a stillness that conveys the stories' pivotal moments: *The Times* saw them as 'pre-Raphaelite pictures in a more modern manner' painted by 'a kind of academic Burne-Jones, like him in his types and his moods, but with less insistence on design and more on atmosphere'.²

A number of influential critics supported Waterhouse, especially at *The Studio*, which gave heavy coverage to *St Cecilia* (cat. 31), painted over a two-year period before it won acclaim at the Academy in 1895. Editor Gleeson White argued that this and other Waterhouse paintings were 'decorative panels of colour, less conventional than tapestry, less flat than if they were mural decoration, but all the same, not openings through a wall looking into the real world or the world of fancy, but panels self-replete with beauty of line, beauty of mass, and beauty of colour'.³

White deemed Waterhouse's 1894 *Ophelia* (fig. 39) 'wellnigh as typical of the forces that influence the younger school to-day as Millais' 'Ophelia' was in 1852. Then Pre-Raphaelitism was as much 'in the air', as decorative treatment has been for some years past.'⁴ Indeed, many commentators perceived such decoration as the latest phase of Pre-Raphaelitism, which in the 1890s saw such founders as Ford Madox Brown, Millais, and Burne-Jones pass. Along with Frank Dicksee, Arthur Hacker, Maurice Greiffenhagen, Frank Brangwyn, and others in their thirties and forties, Waterhouse was therefore championed by some conservatives as one of their natural successors, heterogeneous though these younger men were.

The critic Claude Phillips counted Waterhouse among 'the moderates of modernity', those who embraced 'the modern French standpoint' without disregarding 'the face of English art'.⁵ Harry Quilter hailed *St Cecilia* as 'one of the most brilliant and essentially modern performances of this eclectic age... Mr. Waterhouse has chosen, so to speak, a pre-Raphaelite subject, and yet has treated it in a way that is not pre-Raphaelite any more than it is impressionist, or touched with any other affectation'.⁶ Such allusions to individuality *and* eclecticism recurred throughout the 1890s; even today Waterhouse's mature pictures strike us as distinctive and yet somehow evocative of earlier masters.

Not everyone approved, however: The progressive D.S. MacColl attacked *Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses* as 'half-realism, which is convincing neither as dream nor as daylight'.⁷ A painter himself, MacColl overlapped with Waterhouse for two years in the decoration-minded Art Workers Guild, and it would be fascinating to know how they interacted there.

The sensation of the 1897 Summer Exhibition was *Hylas and the Nymphs* (cat. 32), in which *jeunes filles fatales* seduce a typically powerless young man. Its interlocking gazes, languid mood, moral ambiguity, and timeless setting mark it as one of Waterhouse's masterworks.

Because Waterhouse found beauty and emotional power in both classical and romantic literature, he could celebrate – within the same decade – Psyche, Ariadne, Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, Tennyson's Mariana and Lady Clare, and Shakespeare's Juliet. Although he is best known for Tennysonian scenes, he actually painted more episodes from Ovid's superbly pictorial *Metamorphoses*, including *Echo and Narcissus* (cat. 43). Like *Ophelia* and the *Lady of Shalott*, Ovid's characters act out the passionate awakenings, deaths, and transfigurations that elevate their tales into myths conveying a hopeful message of regeneration.

This openness was duly noted by Claude Phillips: 'For a cold pseudo-classicism, which to-day convinces neither the painter nor his public, Mr. J.W. Waterhouse substitutes a romanticism with which his own artistic temperament, as well as that of his [English] race, is thoroughly in accord.'⁸ Indeed, it would seem Waterhouse had found a way to please both the elite and the public: in 1895, another critic reported that, despite Waterhouse's status as 'a painter's painter, he has always enjoyed an astonishingly broad popularity'.⁹ That year, still basking in the fresh acclaim for *St Cecilia*, Waterhouse was elected to the status of full Academician, after annual nominations since 1892. He served on the Academy's governing council intermittently between 1896 and 1911, and in 1899 was invited to join the socially exclusive Athenaeum Club.

A PAINTER'S PAINTER

From the 1880s onward, observers noted Waterhouse's capacity to compose without the exhaustive studies used by many other academicians. His thirteen surviving sketchbooks (see seven of them at cats 92-98) contain studies in pencil and compositions tested from different viewpoints, only some of which led to finished canvases. In his studio with a model (usually female) and occasionally a lay figure, Waterhouse drew on sheets with pencil, charcoal, or chalk and made lively oil sketches on canvas, board, or panel.

Fortunately, Waterhouse scribbled the names of some models in his sketchbooks. Perpetuating an academic tradition, he transcended their particularities to create his own idealised, instantly recognizable type of female beauty. Scholars' attention has focused on the woman who appears in more than 60 paintings from 1889 to the artist's death in 1917. The search for her name has pivoted on a drawing for the 1905 *Lamia* (cat. 75) inscribed 'Miss Muriel Foster/ Buxton Rd/Chingford', but this annotation is problematic and the search remains open.¹⁰ Given their three-decade relationship, this 'Waterhouse girl' surely functioned as the artist's muse.

Waterhouse purchased primed canvases and brushed upon them the main lines of his composition with dark, flowing paint mixed with an easy-to-handle medium. He then laid in the basic tonal relationships as blocks of thinned, translucent colour, such as pale green or fawn. Unfinished oils reveal that he did not fully articulate figures that would ultimately be covered with draperies, and that he devoted his keenest attention to faces and hair.

Waterhouse worked intensively at the easel, applying as many as twelve layers of paint to achieve his desired effect. Microscopic sampling shows that he gathered up to six different pigments in one brushload: for example, the metalwork he loved to depict (e.g., cat. 47) appears brownish yellow to the eye, but actually contains ultramarine, viridian, yellow ochre, charcoal black, sienna, and prismatic lead white.¹¹ *St Cecilia* is one of at least four canvases containing verdigris, and it also has an interleaving of ground gold leaf. The presence of such expensive materials where they cannot be seen confirms that Waterhouse compulsively added layers to refine his vision, and indeed several major canvases contain pentimenti. We know that he altered several pictures even after they were purchased, and for at least two others he extended the canvas to complete the composition.

In view of such perfectionism, one understands why the collector James Murray complained that 'W[aterhouse] & his wife have no sense of time'.¹² Letters show that he rushed to complete works for the Academy's 'sending-in day,' and his failure to let paint layers dry may account for the distinctive crackling of many pictures' surfaces. Waterhouse knew of this problem: in 1899 he recommended filling cracks with watercolours to reduce its visual impact.

We still do not know why Waterhouse told a census-taker in 1891 that he was both a 'painter' and a 'sculptist.'¹³ He knew several of Britain's so-called New Sculptors, whose idealised images of women in contemplation resemble Waterhouse's both formally and in their Symbolist undercurrents.

Particularly similar are those of his fellow Art-Worker Harry Bates ARA (1850-1899), whose large studio house, at 10 Hall Road in the prestigious London neighbourhood of St John's Wood, was acquired by the Waterhouses in 1900. Equally intriguing is Waterhouse's sparsely documented friendship with George Frampton RA (1860-1928): by 1911 he owned at least two bronze heads by Frampton¹⁴ The relatively large delegation of New Sculptors at Waterhouse's funeral points to his continuing interest in this area.

LATER YEARS, AND THE AFTERLIFE

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.

His recognizable – if not progressive – style still attracted (conservative) buyers. Waterhouse particularly cultivated the financier Alexander Henderson, later first Baron Faringdon. Henderson's extended family socialized with Waterhouse from the 1890s – ultimately owning more than 40 pictures by him, including commissioned portraits. In 1912 the Aberdeen Art Gallery paid £1,400 for *Penelope and the Suitors* (cat. 58), and the next year *St Cecilia* brought a remarkable £2,415 at the mining magnate George McCulloch's estate dispersal. *The Annunciation* (1914, private collection), Waterhouse's only biblical scene, marked a renewed emphasis on narratives in historical settings closely associated with early Pre-Raphaelitism, and thus with Englishness. Other such themes included Shakespeare's Miranda from *The Tempest* (cat. 62), Tristram and Isolde from Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (cat. 63), and episodes from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Il Decameron* (cats 65, 66). Several of these late works were acquired by the soap magnate W.H. Lever: he later bought *The Enchanted Garden* (cat. 66), which was on the easel when Waterhouse died of liver cancer in 1917.

In retrospect, Waterhouse's passing 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 reputation¹⁵ Attending Waterhouse's funeral in St John's Wood were patrons such as James Murray and H.W. Henderson; the artists included Academy President E.J. Poynter, Herbert Draper, Briton Riviere, and William Strang.

He was interred at Kensal Green Cemetery in London, where his widow was also buried in 1944. Instead of receiving his own memorial exhibition at the Royal Academy, as Alma-Tadema had in 1913, Waterhouse was represented in a 1922 show of recently deceased Academicians. His widow held a 100 lot studio sale at Christie's in 1926, when Waterhouse's work was so unfashionable that the 1889 *Ophelia* sold for only £450. The nadir in Waterhouse's reputation actually came in the 1940s and 1950s, when two British galleries de-accessioned his works and a privately owned masterwork (cat. 46) went to auction unrecognised. Since the 1960s, more Waterhouses have been reproduced commercially, and the 1888 version of *The Lady of Shalott* has become Tate's best-selling postcard. An important advance was made by the scholar Anthony Hobson (1920-2000),

whose 1989 monograph is still in print, and who co-organized, with Anne Goodchild, the first retrospective at Sheffield and Wolverhampton in 1978-1979.

The revival of interest in Waterhouse moved to a new level in 2000 when headlines worldwide announced that the Andrew Lloyd Webber Art Foundation had acquired *St Cecilia* for £6.6 million, still the highest price known to be paid for a Victorian painting. Waterhouse would surely be pleased by the growing acclaim, and hopefully by the present retrospective, the largest gathering of his works ever.

¹ R.E.D. Sketchley, *The Art of J.W. Waterhouse, R.A.*, Christmas Number of *The Art Journal*, 1909, p. 15.

² *The Times*, 12 February 1917, p. 6.

³ Gleeson White, *The Master Painters of Britain*, London, 1898, vol. 4, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Academy* 1201, 11 May 1895, p. 407.

⁶ *The Times*, 4 May 1895, p. 12.

⁷ *Spectator*, 16 May 1891, p. 693.

⁸ *Academy* 1255, 23 May 1896, p. 432.

⁹ *The Art Journal*, June 1895, p. 176.

¹⁰ James K. Baker and Cathy L. Baker, 'Miss Muriel Foster: The John William Waterhouse Model', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 8, autumn 1999, pp. 70-82; and 'The Lamia in the Art of J.W. Waterhouse', *British Art Journal*, vol. V, no. 2 (Autumn 2004), pp. 15-22.

¹¹ Technical analysis was conducted for the author in 2000 by Libby Sheldon of University College London.

¹² Aberdeen Art Gallery Archive; annotation by Murray on a letter dated 25 December 1911 that he had received from Waterhouse.

¹³ 1891 Census, St Pancras parish, sheet RG12/118, 44 Chalcot Cres. Thanks to Michael Kelley.

¹⁴ *International Fine Arts Exhibition Rome 1911, British Section Catalogue* (London, 1911, 2nd ed.), p. 71. JWW lent these to the Sculpture section (cats. 1116, 1117).

¹⁵ A.L. Baldry, 'The Late J.W. Waterhouse, R.A.', *Studio*, Vol. LXXI, June 1917, p. 10; and *The Times*, 12 February 1917, p. 6.