G.F. Watts
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Religion and Spirituality in the Art of George Frederic Watts
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Introduction

Watts's childhood experience of religion was not happy. It is surprising that he became one of Victorian England's most profound religious painters, whose work remains thought-provoking today. This exhibition explores how his upbringing shaped his outlook and influenced the subjects of his religious art. It shows how his chosen style of painting gave him an expressive language for conveying his religious and spiritual ideas. This side of his art reached its culmination in the late nineteenth century as his sense of spirituality deepened at the end of his life. The exhibition is held in St Paul's Cathedral and the essay also includes an outline of Watts's forty-year involvement with St Paul's.

A Christian childhood and its Legacy

Watts was born in 1817. His background was difficult and in his childhood religion gave him little comfort or consolation. His melancholy and temperamentl father's piano-making business was a failure, his own health was fragile, two younger brothers died of measles when he was small, and he lost his mother to tuberculosis when he was nine. The family were members of the Church of England, but their beliefs were of a narrow puritanical austerity. (Fortunately for their talented son, they did not condemn the arts or his artistic vocation.) At home the Sabbath was kept with oppressive strictness and church services were 'bare and dreary'. Even more problematic was the family's belief in an all-seeing, judging, vengeful God. At church, the preacher 'spoke of the wrath to come', shocking Watts. He was told, as a child, of a man who had neglected to read the Bible during the week. Taking it on Sunday, 'he was suddenly struck dead as a just retribution for his sin'. The sensitive boy, already familiar with death, reacted with horror.

A necessary inner dissociation from such beliefs probably gave him a lifelong wariness of institutional religion and of dogma, although he retained a sense of the importance of life's spiritual dimension, which deepened as he grew older. His wife Mary, more conventionally devout, terrorised problems in their marriage because of his unorthodoxy. His family and religious background probably permanently coloured his mind with fear. The grim vision of Time, Death and Judgement may owe much of its power to the emotional residue of his early experience. But Watts's upbringing on the fringes of the great Evangelical movement of the nineteenth century left more positive legacies to shape his personality and his art. His wife Mary suggested that its 'puritanical austerity' was valuable as a discipline, helping him develop a 'power of self-control' rare in so sensitive and artistic a temperament. It also gave him a deep knowledge of the stories of the Bible, but its effect on him was probably even more profound.
Typically the evangelical approach within Christianity stressed salvation by faith in the atoning death of Christ. It emphasised preaching and interpreting the will of God through the Bible. It cast daily life as a dramatic and risky battle of the soul against temptation, emphasising individual responsibility and laying great stress on right and moral conduct even in the face of opposition and adversity. It also emphasised the individual Christian's duty of charity towards the poor and justice towards the oppressed. Adherents of the Evangelical movement, including Wilberforce and Lord Shaftesbury did much to ameliorate the human consequences of a rapidly urbanising, industrialising, laissez-faire society.

Watts lacked the personal faith in Christ and a conviction of the literal truth of the Bible, but other aspects of Evangelicalism remain central to understanding him. For him, art occupied an analogous role to preaching. He believed art should be socially engaged and foster political, moral and spiritual change even though he rejected narrow didacticism. He had developed the strength of will to stand by his convictions, even though they conflicted with alternative Victorian views. Watts rejected the popular materialist stance that art was a pleasing or just luxury; the Impressionist view, that paintings should depict the visible world and no more; and the Art for Art's sake ideal, that art should concern itself with beauty alone. He opposed the latter publicly in the 1880s, even though it was advocated by his great friend, and President of the Royal Academy of Arts, Sir Frederic Leighton.¹

The dramatisation of choice and personal responsibility on the journey through life is seen most clearly in The Two Paths (cat.no.1). The painting was
inspired by a vivid dream in which the downward path left a "terrible impression" on the artist's mind. The image is based partly on Jesus' words, 'Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction ... Because strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life.' (Matthew 7:13-14) It also draws on the imagery of Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, central to Watts's restricted childhood Sunday reading.

Occasionally, Watts used his art to draw attention to social injustice directly. The Song of the Shirt (cat. no. 18) depicts the plight of poor needlewomen, whose piecework rates for sewing shirts were so low that even after long working hours, they faced the choice between starvation and prostitution. Admittedly their cause had already been taken up by Government investigation, crusading journalists and Thomas Hood's popular poem of the same name, Watts differed from other painters of the subject because he avoided the temptation to prettify it to make it attractive and saleable.

Watts also used his high abilities as a portrait painter to publicize crusaders for social justice, although detailed treatment of this lies outside the scope of this exhibition. His Hall of Fame was a collection of portraits of famous contemporaries presented to the National Portrait Gallery. It included politicians, writers and artists, but also such figures as John Stuart Mill, Josephine Butler and Lord Shaftesbury.

More often Watts advocates right conduct and social justice symbolically by representing literary or historical figures as heroes and role models. In Jesus' parable, the Good Samaritan tended to the traveller who had been robbed, when other had passed by, even though the Jews and Samaritans were traditionally enemies (cat. no. 19). Watts intended such works to have direct contemporary relevance. The first version was exhibited with an inscription to Thomas Wright of Manchester, who gave employment to ex prisoners. Watts presented it to Wright's home city, Manchester, and it is now in the Art Gallery. He also suggested right should be done whatever the difficulty. Lady
Godiva could only repeal an unjust local tax by riding naked through the streets of Coventry. In the sketch exhibited here (cat.no.20) Lady Godiva is shown on her return exhausted by the experience she has passed through. The religious dimension of her actions is suggested by visual echoes of paintings of martyrs and even of the deposition of Christ from the cross. The painting is also a protest against titillating treatments of the subject and other exploitative pictures of nude women shown at the time.

Despite the Evangelical legacy in his work, and despite his spiritual and religious awareness, which grew stronger as his life progressed, Watts was not a conventional Christian. Alongside his mastery of portrait painting, in his twenties he chose to take up the most prestigious tradition of art available to him, History Painting. This used grand generalised figures and a style derived from Renaissance artists like Michelangelo, Raphael and Titian. Its subject matter aimed to ‘instruct or delight’. It is hard to determine whether this choice is an aspect of that Evangelical legacy or an emotional substitute for it.

In fact Watts may sometimes have chosen religious subjects for artistic reasons, particularly in the 1860s. Then he was very close to Russet, Leightum and other founders of the Art for Art’s sake tradition which he later rejected.
They wished to reclaim art from narrow Victorian morality, story telling and realism in favour of beauty and grandeur. Watts helped them to pioneer revivals of classical subject matter and paintings of the nude, but they all produced some religious works. Religious paintings were prestigious as Art, because of their importance among Renaissance masterpieces and the scope they gave for dramatic subjects. Their figures could be heroic and grandly draped rather than realistically clothed. This may be Watts’s original impetus for representing Noah’s Sacrifice, a design of 1862–3 (cat. no. 1), which contrasts the patriarch with the reactions of his family to the rainbow behind him. Watts produced particularly delicate preliminary drawings for this design (cat. no. 2). When Watts painted Jacob and Esau (cat. no. 2) the heroic figure of Esau is clearly his main interest. Yet Esau is a minor figure in the Bible and Jacob is the most important in religious terms.

**Sin, Death and Redemption**

Watts’s Christian upbringing had left him with a strong sense of sin, and, as the memories from his childhood suggest, an enduring image of a frightening, judgemental God. His interest in biblical subjects reached its height in the second half of the 1860s. He treated some topics he first took up then in later versions right to the end of his life. Many of these paintings deal with sin and judgement. Perhaps because of his deep seated emotional engagement in this area, they are some of his most powerful works.

The archetypal stories of sin in the first chapters of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, lend themselves best to Watts’s dramatic and expressive approach. He uses the emotional potential of the human body, accessible via the
Renaissance-based art tradition he preferred to suggest the inner experience of anguish and remorse. Most nineteenth century art is realist and can deal only with the externals of feeling. It was twentieth century art that reinvented art's expressive potential at the cost of rejecting realism and traditionalism.

Watts uses dynamic and extreme poses and eliminates inessentials in background and clothing. He painted the penitent Magdalen at the foot of the cross (cat.no.7) and the Prodigal Son (cat.no.19) but more suitable for his approach were the stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel. Watts suggested the emotions of Eve Repentant (cat.no.8) by her body alone – her face is hidden. He depicts the Damnation of Cain for the murder of Abel (cat.no.9) where the wrath of God descends on the twisted, shadowed figure of Cain in a blast of fiery light. The power of the descent is emphasised by the dynamic flight of muscular, wingless angels. Although God intervenes directly in human affairs in these stories, Watts almost never paints Him nor the person of Jesus. The religious tradition he came from typically rejected the figurative representation of God the Father and the God the Son because of the second commandment's prohibition on making or worshipping graven images, although Watts does represent angels as divine messengers.
Sin and repentance dominate in Watts’s earlier work. It is only later in his life that he develops an inner understanding of divine forgiveness and the redemption of the repentant sinner, movingly shown in a subject of his own invention, the *Death of Cain* (cat.no.10), where an angel sweeps away remorseful Cain’s curse. Particularly beautiful is the wonderfully fluent and dynamic drawing for the angel (cat.no.14) suggesting the power that can bring peace even to a murderer.

**The Mystery of Existence**

Watts’s spirituality deepened in his last decades. His painting *In the Land of Weisnichtwo*, meaning ‘I don’t know where’ (cat.no.21), suggests the close relationship between the body and the soul or the material and spiritual in human nature, with the soul playing the leading and guiding role. The dark haired twin stuffs grapes into his mouth. The fair haired, winged twin puts a hand round his brother’s shoulder and stretches out his other hand for a butterfly, emblem of the soul. Awareness of time and his own mortality played its part in the change, so did his
marriage in 1886. His wife, Mary Seton Fraser Tyler, was a devout Christian with an interest in world religions. She designed the new cemetery chapel for the village of Compton in Surrey where the couple made their home.

Watts was also influenced by the mood of the late nineteenth century. The turn of the century approached, which is always a time of reflection. A world-wide economic down-turn brought social problems and unrest in its wake. The confident materialism possible in the mid-nineteenth century no longer seemed enough. Many began to seek deeper meanings in life. In tune with his time, Watts found himself at his most popular.

Watts’s late religious art explores the mystery of existence. A new emphasis on symmetry and formality harks back to the devotional art of Byzantium and the Middle Ages and suggests the presence of the sacred in contrast to the unied asymmetry of the mundane. The artist represents powerful angelic beings who are now winged. He draws, to a certain extent, on non-western spiritual traditions. Above all, his earlier emphasis on death and sin is replaced by a new understanding of the power of divine love.

These qualities can be seen in The All Perceiving who sits like a powerful guardian with the ‘Globe of Systems’ in her lap. A version was used as the Watts Chapel Altarpiece. The Recording Angel (cat.no.22) continues Watt’s old themes of divine judgement, but with a new sense of benevolence. Because of its evocative meaning and gorgeous colour, the artist always kept this painting beside him in his studio. It helped to inspire one of his very last paintings, the huge Destiny (cat no 73), produced when he was 87. In this the angel hovers behind an innocent, infant child, recently arrived on the shore of life. The background is an infinite, empty sea and sky.
Watts and St Paul’s Cathedral

St Paul’s Cathedral, which in the Victorian period still dominated the London skyline, as Wren intended, can seem like a symbol of the Church in Britain. Watts used it as such, in a critical spirit, when he painted the down-and-out woman in Under a Dry Arch (1850, Watts Gallery, not exhibited). The distant silhouette of the dome in the shadowed background locates the scene in London and implies that for all the standing of the church, Christian Charity is ineffectual in this instance. But St Paul’s was undergoing a renewal. The mid-nineteenth century Bishop of London wanted it to play a greater part in the lives of members of the Church of England. Under Henry Hart Milman, Dean of St Paul’s from 1849 and F C Penrose, Surveyor to the Fabric from 1852, a campaign to decorate and beautify the building began, in the service of this vision.

Watts already had a deep interest and considerable experience in mural decoration. He offered his services to the Cathedral in 1861 in a letter to the Dean. This began an involvement with the building of over 40 years. He was one of only four artists invited to submit designs for the decoration of the apse in 1863. The subject was to be Christ as intercessor with flanking figures of Moses and Elijah. Watts’s elaborate design of the Transfiguration (cat.no.23) is surely the finished presentation drawing for this project. The scheme did not go ahead.

Perhaps as compensation, Watts was asked to design figures of the four Gospel writers or evangelists for the eastern spandrels of the dome. St Matthew was translated into mosaic by the Venetian firm of Salviati and installed in 1866. The others were much delayed. St John, designed by Watts and enlarged by W E F Britten, was entrusted to Salviati in 1889. The cartoons for St Mark and St Luke were despatched in 1891 although for these Britten made extensive adaptations to Watts’s designs. Watts Gallery holds a large group of drawings for these spandrels, exhibited here for the first time. In these one can see Watts’s ideas evolve from the first scribbles on scrap paper to finished designs. The sequence for St John is especially interesting (cat.no.27).

By the 1890s, Watts focused on easel rather than mural painting. His support for St Paul’s continued when he presented the 1884 version of Time, Death and Judgement to the Cathedral in 1898. He planned to paint a large version of Love Triumphant as a companion to it, but his death intervened. In this painting a winged figure of Love rises over the fallen figures of Time and Death. Three years after Watts’s death, his widow donated a version of Peace and Goodwill in 1907 at the instigation of Canon Scott Holland. These two paintings are re-united in their original positions in the Cathedral on the occasion of this exhibition.
Conclusion

Watts’s relationship with religion was not conventional. His paintings and his beliefs do not engage with the central Christian concept of Jesus as a personal Saviour, as his younger contemporary, Holman Hunt, does so powerfully in The Light of the World (designed 1852–4, St Paul’s cathedral has a later version). But in a materialistic age, Watts held strongly to moral and social values which had been shaped by his Christian upbringing. Increasingly he developed and expressed an awareness that the spiritual dimension of life was crucial if humankind was not to sink into confusion and conflict. (Love steering the Boat of Humanity, cat.no.24.)

His close friend Burne-Jones once declared that the more materialist science became, the more angels he would paint. Watts’s spirituality has little of this tinge of escapism, because it engages directly with the uneasy complexity of contemporary thought. This includes fears of a meaningless materialistic universe in Time and Death and Evolution (Watts Gallery, not exhibited). It also addresses issues of evil, wrong-doing and conscience in the paintings of sin and forgiveness. It is not a deeply intellectual engagement. Watts was no intellectual. But it is the response of a creative artist, whose medium is the visual image and the expressive potential of the human body.

Watts’s religious and spiritual imagery is rarely comfortable or simplistic. In Peace and Goodwill for instance (small version cat.no.16), Peace is a wandering and outcast queen, her feet bound with rags and her hand too tired to raise its sprig of olive leaves. Goodwill is an innocent but vulnerable child on her lap. Peace turns towards a light on the horizon, but as the artist said, “Is it dawn or conflagration?” As a religious or spiritual artist, Watts avoids both comforting dogmas and attractive escapism. He conveys a reality which is complex and uncertain but never entirely pessimistic. In this lies his importance, both in his time and today.