

ALTHOUGH HIS REPUTATION HAD DECLINED AT APPROXIMATELY the same pace as his fellow Academicians' after 1900, Waterhouse's death during World War I only accelerated his disappearance from twentieth-century accounts of British art. Obituaries were scant owing to the war's distractions: Phillips described Waterhouse as a painter's painter who spent his life experimenting with technique, and Baldry mourned the loss of his 'wholesome and dignified sentiment'.¹ Most accounts conveyed indifference, but *The Times* declared that Waterhouse had 'raised expectations in his art which it did not completely satisfy; and a reason of this, no doubt, is ... his eclecticism ... He painted always like a scholar and a gentleman, though not like a great artist.'² This assessment reflected the incongruity of Waterhouse's Romantic narratives in an era of combat, and also modernists' disdain for the *ancien régime* that had started the war. In 1918, the same year Lytton Strachey published his debunking *Eminent Victorians*, the blind 82-year-old Poynter was pressured to resign his presidency of the Royal Academy, a move that anticipated the compulsory retirement of older Academicians.

Even within the official art world, Waterhouse had been enigmatic: in 1917, the curator of Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery, which had owned *Echo and Narcissus* since 1903, had to ask Draper to provide basic biographical facts about his deceased friend.³ Despite the influence Waterhouse was reported to exert on younger artists in 1895, few sustained his style. Byam Shaw and Draper came closest in this regard, yet their careers ended in early death, in 1919 and 1920, respectively. Late Pre-Raphaelitism survived primarily through book illustration by such artists as Eleanor Fortescue Brickdale and Charles and Margaret Gere, whose works vaguely evoke late Waterhouse scenes, such as *Fair Rosamund* and *Tristram and Isolde*.

In the absence of protégés and children, responsibility for Waterhouse's artistic legacy and unsold artworks fell to his widow, Esther, who could draw from his estate without formality. This may explain why, when her husband's will was finally probated in 1924, it yielded only £3,389, modest compared to the estates left in 1920 by the older Riviere (£33,385) and younger Draper (£23,364).⁴ As £500 per annum constituted a middling income in the 1920s, Esther lived under considerable financial pressure. At the Academy in 1925, she showed her own *Marigolds*; it is not clear whether she had continued painting after ceasing to exhibit in 1890.⁵

Her predicament is revealed by correspondence with Lord Leverhulme in 1922. If Esther would accept £400 for *The Enchanted Garden*, Leverhulme would give it to the gallery in his native town of Bolton. If she insisted upon £500, he would not bind himself to the picture's destination. Esther chose the larger sum because she needed the money. She even complained about Tooth's £25 commission for arranging this sale. Having bought Waterhouse's *The Toilet* via Agnew's in 1896, Leverhulme surely saw through Esther's claim that her husband had always sold pictures 'straight to the buyer'.⁶ The steady decline in Waterhouse's market value is confirmed by the fact that *The Enchanted Garden* brought £235 less than what Leverhulme had paid in 1916 for its pair, *A Tale from the Decameron*.

Esther remained at 10 Hall Road with two servants and a dog, selling pictures individually from the studio. She loaned *A Hamadryad* to Liverpool in 1922, the same year it appeared at Burlington House with 12 other Waterhouses in a memorial exhibition of recently deceased Academicians, including Bramley, Gow,

Hacker, Herkomer, Poynter, Riviere, Strang and Waterlow.⁷ At Liverpool, Esther asked £500 for *A Hamadryad*, £25 less than its original price there in 1893.⁸ It remained unsold until 1926, when it brought just £95.⁹

Esther scheduled the 100-lot sale of the studio contents at Christie's on 23 July 1926 in order to raise cash, before prices fell any further. One of many similar artists' sales held through the 1920s, it occurred in the same year that Dudley Tooth announced his firm would no longer handle 'academic works by dead masters of the British school'.¹⁰ It produced £3,135, and *The Times* reported that 'prices were unusually good for a sale of this character'.¹¹ Most lots consisted of groups of unframed oil sketches and drawings in folios. The few finished oils included *Apollo and Daphne* and the 1889 *Ophelia*, sold to the dealers Gooden & Fox for £480 and £450 respectively.¹²

The collecting of Victorian Academic art went underground in the 1920s as most critics, scholars and artists ignored or denigrated it. Malcolm C. Salaman's 1921 review of Leverhulme's collection was typically patronizing: 'All the traditional prescriptions for picture-making seem to be explicit here in the old familiar pictures.'¹³ This art appealed to a narrowing circle of older connoisseur-collectors, such as Cecil French and Gordon Bottomley; it was French who bequeathed Waterhouse's oil sketch for *Mariana in the South* to Leighton House Museum.¹⁴ The Waterhouse sale was attended by dealers who catered to this clientele. Chief among the purchasers was William Walker Sampson (1864–1929), who sold to the trade from premises in Haymarket. At auction, he often acted as 'ring-leader' of a group of dealers who refrained from bidding to keep prices low, and from whom he collected a commission. Sampson also attended the studio sale of the Pre-Raphaelite Arthur Hughes in 1921, and bought works by J.W. Godward after that classical genre painter's suicide in 1922. Another buyer was Croal Thomson who, by 1926, ran the Barbizon House Gallery near Cavendish Square. A third key buyer was Dr James A. C. Nicoll, the medical superintendent of a London mental hospital who frequented salerooms before retiring to Torquay.¹⁵ His stamp is found on many Waterhouse drawings, including those illustrated at Pls. 77 and 146.

Telephone directories indicate that Esther resided in Hall Road in May 1933, yet by November she had sold her house to the artist Lowes Dalbiac Luard (1872–1944). Luard appropriated its studios for himself and his sculptor-daughter, Veronica Mary; a niece recalled that the house was run-down when her family arrived.¹⁶ Esther moved to a hotel and was later cared for by Doris Somerville (1894–1986), daughter of May Waterhouse and wife of the vicar of Throwley, Kent. Esther died of a cerebral haemorrhage in a Faversham nursing home on 15 December 1944.¹⁷ She was buried with her husband at Kensal Green; the gross value of her estate constituted only £864.¹⁸

The Victorian art market had reached its nadir in 1942, when Christie's dispersed the important collection formed, with Agnew's assistance, by the mustard purveyor, Sir Jeremiah Colman (1830–98). Offered in the middle of World War II, these pictures could not have been less fashionable; Waterhouse's 1905 *Lamia* went unrecognized and Burne-Jones's *Love and the Pilgrim* (1897) brought £20.¹⁹

Since World War II, the slow rediscovery of Victorian art can be traced through prices brought by Waterhouse pictures. He sold the 1894 *Ophelia* to McCulloch for approximately £700, and in 1913 it left that collection for £472. In

1950 it brought just £20, by 1969 £420, and two years later it increased sevenfold to £3,000. In 1982 it cost £75,000, and by 1993 £419,500. Last sold in 2000, it fetched £1.6 million.²⁰ Prices soared most dramatically during the 1990s; the Waterhouse record set in 1996, when *Boreas* brought £770,000, was smashed in 2000 when the £6,603,750 paid for *Saint Cecilia* made it the most expensive Victorian picture ever sold.²¹ Both canvases were offered in the same saleroom at Christie's where Esther had dispersed the studio in 1926. Although collectors prize Waterhouse's mature style most highly, his less familiar works of the 1870s and 1880s are also growing in value.

Like auction prices, museum exhibiting policies have reflected the fall and rise of Waterhouse's reputation. Having loaned *Hylas and the Nymphs* to four world expositions, Manchester also displayed it at the 1925 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, a last gasp of official British art. The following year, *Hylas* was transferred from the main gallery in central Manchester to its Queens Park storage site, where it remained until the 1960s, except for six years (1928–34) at the gallery's Horsfall branch in the working-class district of Ancoats.²² During the 1960s, the Royal Institution of Cornwall sold several Victorian pictures including *Pandora*, which had been presented in 1922 by its first owner, the South African diamond merchant, Alfred Aaron de Pass (1861–1952).²³

Museum exhibitions focusing on Millais in 1967, Hunt in 1969, Rossetti in 1973 and Burne-Jones in 1975 paved the way for a Waterhouse retrospective organized by Anne Goodchild and Anthony Hobson in 1978 at Sheffield and Wolverhampton.²⁴ Steeped in modernism, most critics perceived Waterhouse as dextrous but insipid.

Commercial publishers took note, however; indeed they were last to abandon and first to rediscover Waterhouse. It is typical that a calendar manufacturer visited him in 1912 to discuss reproducing *Penelope and the Suitors*, and that he referred them to the new owner of both the picture and its copyright, the Aberdeen Art Gallery. Aberdeen declined to collaborate, an income opportunity seldom ignored by galleries since the 1960s, during which time Athena published a best-selling poster of *Hylas and the Nymphs*, the eroticism of which struck a chord in youth culture. Although this image has remained very popular, consumers have subsequently embraced the 1888 *Lady of Shalott* most enthusiastically; in 1999, Tate Britain sold 27,600 postcards and 6,500 pens depicting her haunted face. Museums worldwide now display their Waterhouses proudly; in 1997, the three-month absence of *The Lady of Shalott* provoked thousands of disappointed visitor enquiries at Tate Britain.²⁵

Such a response demands consideration of why Waterhouse's art is now so highly prized. Although admirers might not immediately identify this themselves, I believe that Waterhouse's exquisite colouring is a primary factor. In 1891, M.H. Spielmann argued that 'the subtlety and harmony of its beautiful colour declare [*Ulysses and the Sirens*] a masterpiece even in a country where colour has always been more appreciated than drawing.'²⁶ Spielmann recognized Waterhouse's innately English bond, through colour, with the Pre-Raphaelites and with Turner and Constable before them; it cannot be accidental that all these artists enjoy broad popularity today, disparate as their subjects are. A Romantic passion for colour even drove Waterhouse to experiment with the more expensive pigments found beneath the surfaces of several pictures. Spielmann's distinction of colour from draughtsmanship is revealing as well, for although Waterhouse's figures are

convincing they are without the rigorous anatomical precision that can make some Academic art intimidating.

Many viewers today praise the beauty and erotic allure of the 'Waterhouse girl', whose resemblance in physique and colouring to several of the waifish supermodels on modern catwalks is uncanny. Like Waterhouse's idealized nymphs, their delicacy reads as both quintessentially English and universally fashionable; thin without being sickly, fit without seeming muscular. It appears that the partial nudity of Waterhouse's women which suited Victorian audiences also suits modern viewers, but for different reasons. For our forefathers, who saw little flesh in daily life, partial exposure encouraged fantasy without forcing the male artist, critic and purchaser to defend the depiction of a completely nude figure.²⁷ Today, in contrast to the explicit erotica available on demand in Western societies, Waterhouse paintings offer viewers a reprieve, a fantasy of romance rather than of banal sex. His art appears to be especially popular among women, and it is logical that this audience would appreciate his deft balance of sensuality and decorum. Women are also likely to see much to admire in Waterhouse's fewer — yet no less beautiful — images of physically powerful women. Once read as sinister, Medea (to name just one figure) can today be as readily understood as a woman who has earned the control she holds over Jason.

Still another crucial factor in Waterhouse's appeal is his French-influenced technique. For much of the twentieth century, art enthusiasts have been told, explicitly and implicitly, that the art of late nineteenth-century France is worthy of the highest admiration. As discussed in Chapter Two, Waterhouse was relatively rare among Academicians of the 1880s in absorbing the Impressionists' lessons. Art historian Paul Barlow has noted that the modernity of Millais's brushwork in such pictures as *Esther* (Pl. 58) was inspired in part by Edouard Manet.²⁸ Millais and Manet both loomed large as Waterhouse developed his signature style, so Barlow's emphasis on the tension between fragmentation and solidity, between surface and form, is helpful in considering Waterhouse's facture: such tension clearly characterizes *Mariamne*, *Cleopatra* and the portraits of Mrs Newton-Robinson and Phyllis Waterlow, among other pictures.

It is a quirk of history that Millais's later œuvre, which shares so much technically with Waterhouse's mature work, has not reclaimed its former popularity, while Waterhouse's star continues to rise. The older man's emphasis on modern life contrasts with D.S. MacColl's characterization of Waterhouse's art as 'half-realism ... convincing neither as dream nor as daylight'. His presentation of imaginary subjects with a realist's brushwork may have discomfited MacColl and other contemporaries. Today, however, the emergence of computer-generated images in Western societies has increased viewers' interest in, and comfort with, Waterhouse's conjunction of fantasy and reality, of 'sharp-focus' figures and 'soft-focus' backgrounds. As such conjunctions become pervasive in contemporary art and advertising, Waterhouse's coincidental deployment of them may earn him still more admirers.

Waterhouse's appeal also derives, in large part, from his subjects. Whatever their literary sources, mystical experiences of emotional or physical transformation clearly moved Waterhouse, as they had Rossetti, Sandys, Burne-Jones and continental Symbolists. Tempting though it is to identify a single broad trend within his career, the artist seems to have revisited various kinds of transformations sporadically. The fatal charm of *Undine* (1872) resembles that of

La Belle Dame Sans Merci (1893) and *Lamia* (1905) more than it does the passive transfiguration of Pygmalion's statue painted a year later in 1873 (and still unlocated). Similarly, the latter relates more closely to *Apollo and Daphne* (1908) than to the miracle sought in *A Sick Child Brought into the Temple of Aesculapius* (1877). One shift is detectable, however, in regard to three relatively violent scenes of transformation: the high pitch of *Saint Eulalia* (1885) and *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891) lowered throughout the 1890s so that the impact of *Nymphs Finding the Head of Orpheus* (1900) is more lyrical than dramatic. Burne-Jones painted scenes of Phyllis and Demophoon as meditations on a failed love affair, but we do not know enough about Waterhouse's private life to guess what drew him to such passionate subjects year after year.

The recurrence of nymphs and fauns in Waterhouse's art also defies the urge to identify a trend. The pan piping for *A Hamadryad* (1893) appeared next in 'Listening to My Sweet Pippings' 18 years later, but not before he had been temporarily transformed into a cherub in *The Awakening of Adonis* (1899). The primeval aspect of lower gods is obvious when considering goat-legged boys, but demands closer scrutiny in relation to the nymphs. From *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* to the final Persephone picture, *Flora* (1914), their positioning in grass, water and trees suggests that Waterhouse valued their elemental beauty and simplicity. Even in traditionally misogynistic narratives, such as *Hylas and the Nymphs*, the neutrality of the figures' facial expressions reflects his endorsement of Shelley and Symonds's non-judgemental, amoral yearning for a pre-Christian Arcadia.

More conventional are Waterhouse's enchantresses — from *The Magic Circle* (1886) to *The Love Philtre* (1914) — and martyrs, from *Margaret, Scottish Martyr* (1875) to the 1915 *Lady of Shalott*. Through poses, props and expressions, Waterhouse inspired in his Victorian viewers an appropriate degree of mistrust or compassion, yet there is never, even with Medea or the Sirens, a trace of ugliness or abjection to inspire revulsion. The paintings of sorceresses have, understandably, developed a loyal following of modern witches. *The Crystal Ball*, for example, presents a beautiful sorceress who is strong but not threatening, a rare occurrence in both Victorian and contemporary art. Indeed some modern-day witches believe that such sympathetic images strongly encourage the likelihood that Waterhouse participated in ceremonial magic.

Many viewers take pleasure in the myths and poems that Waterhouse illustrated. Although a shrinking percentage of schoolchildren are taught mythology, the universality of human experience reflected by Greek myth reassures readers worldwide as it did Waterhouse. Moreover, the modern taste for sentiment must be feeding admiration for Waterhouse martyrs, such as the Lady of Shalott and Mariana. It is no accident that Tennyson's poetry, dismissed by many educators 40 years ago as high-end kitsch, is now taught seriously in a growing number of classrooms worldwide. The universally recognizable pathos of such pictures as *Ophelia* and *Echo and Narcissus* generates remarkably deep responses, even from viewers who do not know the specific narratives.

Setting these contemporary attitudes aside, Waterhouse's art is worthy of admiration and study in its own right. His colour, brushwork and composition coalesce to produce a beauty and mood which, once experienced, are never quite forgotten. This impact resonates whenever one encounters a Waterhouse, whether or not one recognizes the narrative depicted. Although detractors have called it a formula, the distinctive look of Waterhouse's mature pictures

underscores his heartfelt dedication to it. Rather than shifting from style to style, as some of his lesser contemporaries did, Waterhouse must have pursued this aesthetic relentlessly from the 1890s because he believed in its efficacy.

As historical documents resurface, there will be more research conducted on Waterhouse's life, and more to be said about the late phase of Pre-Raphaelitism in which he figures. Today eclecticism is readily discussed in regard to Victorian architecture, yet only one major exhibition (*The Last Romantics: The Romantic Tradition in British Art: Burne-Jones to Stanley Spencer*, Barbican Art Gallery, 1989) has addressed some of the artists, working at the same time as Waterhouse, who absorbed and mastered diverse influences to create their own unique art. These include Byam Shaw, Draper, E.A. Abbey, Maxwell Armfield, Kate Bunce, Frank Cadogan Cowper, Walter Crane, Frank Dicksee, T.C. Gotch and Arthur Hacker. Career by career, this imbalance will be rectified, at least if the growing market for pictures by these artists is any indicator.

Waterhouse's place in history is assured by the 'blue plaque' placed by English Heritage on 10 Hall Road in May 2002. His place in the history of art is guaranteed by his highly individual application of the Impressionist-inflected brushstroke to themes drawn from, or evocative of, the Pre-Raphaelite canon. This conflation had not been attempted before him, and no one has actually achieved it so successfully since he died in 1917. The field remains to him, and his prestige will surely grow in the decades ahead.