

Uncovering the secret life of artist Mary Watts

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Artist Mary Watts' life and work were overshadowed by those of her husband, the great Victorian artist GF Watts. A new gallery is devoted just to her...

Until recently, Mary Watts was barely known. If anyone remembered her name, it might have been as the second wife of GF Watts and the keeper of his flame.

Mary was 32 years younger than her famous husband; his first short-lived marriage was to the teenage Ellen Terry when he was 46. She managed Watts' affairs, sold his paintings, cared for him in ill health and oversaw the building of and management of the Watts Gallery.

Following her husband's death, she wrote a three-volume biography about his life and work.

Finding Mary

Mary Fraser Tytler was born in 1849. She went on to be one of the first women to attend the Slade School of Art and dreamed of becoming a portrait artist.

In the 1870s the student Mary was introduced to GF Watts, whom she came to regard as a teacher. The couple didn't marry until 1886, but it proved a turning point for Mary. Having married the leading portrait artist of the day, her own work as a portrait artist ceased.



Mrs G. F. Watts in a Straw Hat by

GF Watts

Then in 2011, the story began to change. Following a major National Lottery-funded restoration of Watts Gallery, the Wattses' nearby home, Limnerslease, came up for sale.

Plans were made to transform the east end of Limnerslease, where the Wattses' studios had been, into a new museum, Watts Studios.

As research continued, the more Mary Watts' name was heard. Through the support of the local community and a £2.4million grant from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, the studio of GF Watts was reinstated and the first permanent gallery dedicated to Mary's work was created.

Previously overlooked treasures now on display included:

- the sketchbook she kept during her travels in Egypt, Constantinople and Athens
- pieces of Compton Pottery
- a carpet sold at Liberty & Co
- the translation of three of her husband's paintings into bronze sculpture

Art for All

Key to Mary's life was the belief in 'Art for All' that she shared with her husband. She had previously held clay modelling lessons in London for the working classes. Not long after moving to Limnerslease she set up a terracotta evening class, which was held in her drawing room.

The Wattses offered to pay for the building of a mortuary chapel for the nearby church. In 1895 Mary began giving classes to local people, teaching them to make the decorative terracotta tile that would adorn the exterior of Watts Chapel.



Mary Watts and students decorating the Watts Chapel in 1902.

The exterior of the Chapel was completed in 1898. Mary then created a decorative gesso interior assisted by a number of local women. Today her rich designs incorporating the motifs of many different religions and cultures remain unaltered.

Seeing Mary today

Today, we can now see a marriage of equals emerging.

Without the funding from National Lottery players, Mary's work would still be in storage, in desperate need of conservation. Her story would remain untold and only a few people would have known the extraordinary range and ability of the wife of GF Watts.

Thankfully her work and life has been opened up for everyone to see.

Find out more

Read more about the work of Mary Watts on the [Watts Gallery website](#).

You might also be interested in...

Mary Watts and helpers preparing plaster panels for Limnerslease, the Watts' home and studio

News

[By George: Watts Studios opens to public for first time](#)

Today, for the first time, the studios of Victorian artist George Frederic Watts and his wife Mary Watts will open to visitors. An HLF investment of £2.4million has helped fund major restoration work to make this possible.

26/01/2016

News

[Good news for Watts Gallery's campaign to save Limnerslease](#)

Since 1938, Limnerslease – the only remaining artist's house and studio designed by Ernest George, celebrated Arts and Crafts architect and tutor to Lutyens - has been in private ownership. The property was divided and modernisation resulted in many of the original features being lost.

For the first

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