**Mary Seton Watts**

For many British Art Nouveau lovers, the first time we came across the name of Mary Seton Watts was in Pevsner and Richards’ inspirational book *The Anti-Rationalists* (1977). It was a real “eye-opener” because we were unaware that there was something so riotously Art Nouveau in the England of beautiful—but-restrained Ashbee, Voysey and Baillie Scott. Her husband, George Frederick Watts (1817–1904), was well-known as an excellent portrait painter of famous Victorians, and also as the painter of the — for him more important, but generally much less regarded — symbolist and allegorical paintings. This lacuna has not been greatly improved in widely available British books on Art Nouveau since then, despite two exhibitions about Mary Watts being held at the Watts Gallery in Compton, in 1998 and 2013. And for the rest of the world, Watts and her fabulous chapel remain completely unknown. This is a great shame because it ranks among the best products of the age.

Mary Seton Fraser Tytler (1849–1938) was the third daughter of a Scottish Laird and civil servant based in India. Mary’s family moved in high social circles and came into contact with many artists and writers. In the period from 1869 to 1872, Mary illustrated various publications, visited Europe’s galleries and studied at the National Art Training School and the Slade School of Art. Most importantly, she met G. F. Watts, who helped and encouraged her. Eventually, in 1886, Watts (69) and Mary (36) married. She then spent more time on the decorative arts, particularly pottery, but also designing for Liberty’s. She became involved in the Home Arts and Industries Association and taught decorative arts to the working classes. However, to many, Mary simply became a great painter’s wife. Wilfred Blunt wrote in *England’s Masterpieces* that her work was only a very partial view of Mary. Watts: “Mrs Watts … became … his companion, his nurse, his slave; his guide, philosopher and friend, his watchdog, and finally by her biography of him, his advocate and publicity agent. She established him as a national monument … Her own very considerable artistic gifts … [were] … willingly sacrificed.” But this was only a very partial view of Mary.

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El 1891 la parella es va traslladar a Limerdourne, la seva nova casa a Compton, Surrey, al sud d’Anglaterra. Mary esdevingué interior símbolístic en gresó. Va dinar fluir la seva creativitat artística així, quan el 1895 el Consell Municipal va decidir crear un nou cementiri, Mary va planificar i supervisar tots els estuds del disseny i la construcció de la capella, tot i demanar consell a l’arquitecte George Redmayne. La planta, igual que tota la resta de l’edifici, era símbolica: una intersecció del cercle de l’Eternitat amb una creu grega de la Fe, amb tots els braços iguals. Fou també providencial el descobriment d’unes vetes d’argila vermella al seu jardí; el 9 de novembre de 1895, Mary va començar a fer classe de terracota als viatgers. D’entrada, el visitant pot sentir certa estranyaia davant la capella, tant a causa de la forma com per l’ús d’elements estrets molt poc anglesos de homes romans vermellos. En acostar-s’hi, crida l’atenció la decoració de terracota. La part central és superada per menesals amb àngels, i hi apareixen quatre ampolles frisos que representen l’Esperança, la Veritat, l’Amor i la Llum. Aquests panells intrincats presenten un pati de sis parts que es repeteix amb àngels, arrossit i discs voltats de l’acabament modernista d’influència cèltica. Hi ha gran quantitat de detalls símbolístics que fan necessari l’il·luminat de Mary The Word in the Pattern (1905: facsimile edition, 2012) per comprendre’ls. Cada parell constituït d’una obra d’art modernista deliciosa, simbolista i profundament espiritual, que poden guiar també si ens centrem només en el disseny, que combina elements figuratius vegetals i animals amb els fabulosesentrellats de l’acabament cèltic.

En 1991, el conjunt de l’edifici va ser consagrat el 1 de juliol de 1898, amb la interior decorada encara inclosa. El centre de la capella és la del Cap és el centre de la capella; la seva guardiana i, finalment, per mitjà de la biografia que va escriure sobre ell, la seva advocada i agènt publicitària. El va convertir en un monument nacional [...] Va sacrificar voluntàriament el seu propi talent artístic, molt considerable! Però aquesta és només una visió molt parcial de Mary.

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Nothing prepares the visitor for the interior of the chapel. It is one of the most beautiful Art Nouveau aesthetic experiences. The central roof square has gold, blue and red Art Nouveau forms around it. The vault arches have cherubs with blue, pink and gold wings. The four vault field segments have a large crimson seraph, surrounded by symbols of the truths. Below the gilt capitals from which the arches spring are six angels of light and dark, facing towards and away from us, and carrying discs suspended on ropes, showing dark and light aspects of various actions. Below is a gilt girdle with the Trinity emblems repeated, and the roots of the vine of life. The background is done in a deep blue-green, and from the roots, the vine spreads upward through a flower garden, around the angels and seraphs, and onto the walls of the transepts and the arches around the choir, uniting the whole design in a network of interlaced Art Nouveau Celtic-influenced plant life. It is mesmerising in its beauty and intricacy, and awe-inspiring in its power. On the east side is the altar, which has a small version of G. F. Watts painting. The All-Pervading at its centre, surrounded by gilt terracotta decoration. The interior was only completed in 1904, with Mary Watts and her workers creating the panels of gilded gesso that cover the whole of the remarkable interior.

From then until her death in 1938, Mary worked producing terracotta gravestones, garden pottery and many other kinds of hand-painted smaller pieces with her Potters’ Art Guild, which carried on successfully producing pottery until 1955. The Memorial Chapel at Compton remains her greatest achievement. As Wilfred Blunt pointed out: “…No one can fail to be amazed that so complex, so professional a building could have been produced by a woman with no architectural training, assisted (as far as we know) only by the local builder and blacksmith and a handful of enthusiastic but ignorant villagers. … Indeed, one can pause to wonder whether the world might not have been the richer had she devoted the best years of her life to her art [rather] than to her aged, ailing husband.”

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