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book review of

*J. W. Waterhouse* by Peter Trippi

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Peter Trippi

*J. W. Waterhouse*

New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2002

240 pp.; 200 color ill.; 20 b/w ill.; index; bibliography; index of works; \$49.95 (hardcover)

ISBN 071484232 (hardcover)

Peter Trippi's book, *J. W. Waterhouse*, is as lush and colorful as any of the paintings the author examines in his new monograph on the British painter. The reader will notice first the sheer number of illustrations, almost one per page, and then that almost all of them are in color. This is appropriate, given that the author encourages the view of Waterhouse as one of the preeminent colorists of his age, but hardly expected, given the high cost of printing in color nowadays. Another reason the paintings are well reproduced is that the author had very little additional evidence to work with. John William Waterhouse (even his exact birth date is in question) had no children, left no diaries, and is mentioned only rarely in the correspondence of the period. In his introduction, Trippi bemoans the lack of available archival material related to the artist, and yet out of this deficit comes the strength of the book, which is its primary focus on the paintings as source material.

The book, divided into four long chapters, follows in chronological order. The first provides what little biographical information is known pertaining to Waterhouse's family life and early training. Although he went to school in Leeds, Waterhouse spent nearly his entire life in London. Trippi points out that the relative wealth of the artist's parents allowed the young man a solid education in the classics, essential to his future artistic success. The author examines Waterhouse's first sketchbooks and paintings, which reveal a predisposition toward classical subject matter and composition. The artist's early work relates to the social and artistic climate of the 1870s, which afforded him an extraordinarily wide range of stylistic tendencies to choose from. Exhibition and sales records document the success of his choices.

Trippi compares Waterhouse's early depictions of languishing females to Jean Léon Gérôme's Oriental slaves and English "Keepsake" beauties. Discussing these paintings within the context of the aesthetic movement and comparing them to the art of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Sir Edward John Poynter, Trippi makes it clear that the commonality between these British artists is a persistent veiled allusion to sexuality. The author does not view Waterhouse as inferior to these painters or as producing pastiches of their work, but insists on his originality, praising his technical skills, especially his use of a more "modern," fluid brushwork.

Waterhouse's first few paintings to be hung "on the line" at the Royal Academy show figures in a nearly photographic, pseudo-antique background and demonstrate a marked technical improvement. These works established him as a member of the group of painters actively catering to the current vogue for genre scenes. Trippi is unable to establish a specific tie to Gérôme, but he posits a debt to the master. Of more interest is his suggestion that the success of this type of painting is related to Britain's fervent desire to view its own empire as rivaling that of ancient Rome's. This context could have been more fully elucidated.

The second chapter concentrates on Waterhouse's predilection for the dramatic, and details how many of his images were set up like stage productions carefully crafted to entice the viewer. It is at this point in the artist's career Gérôme's influence becomes more evident. As Trippi notes, contemporary critical reviews of his work often included references to the French Academician. By adopting Gérôme's stylistic manner in a way that conformed to English taste, Waterhouse carved out a niche for himself within the progressive school of British painters, leading to his election as an Associate of the Royal Academy.

Waterhouse's growing sense of the theatrical is apparent in his painting *The Magic Circle*. In his analysis of this work, Trippi refers to a cartoon from *Punch* that inserted Sarah Bernhardt for the central character of Waterhouse's painting, and also chronicles his artistic debt to Bastien-Lepage and Millais, whose theatrical depictions of Jeanne d'Arc and Ophelia were well known. According to Trippi, while the Newlyn painters borrowed both technique and subject matter from Bastien-Lepage (painting mainly peasants, for example), Waterhouse employed the French artist's technical approach alone to enhance his own more esoteric content.

A high point of Waterhouse's theatrical oeuvre is *The Lady of Shalott*. This work, of course, links the artist with the Pre-Raphaelites, but again Trippi points out Waterhouse's predilection for French painting technique. The author suggests that this borrowing caused the painting to be poorly received by the critics, thus positioning Waterhouse's works within the prevailing contemporary debate over the merits of English versus French painting, in which British critics not surprisingly argued for the superiority of the former.

In the third chapter, Trippi examines the paintings from the last decade of the nineteenth century. For these, Waterhouse more often turned to subject matter derived from legend and myth. Trippi elucidates the importance of the theme of transformation, whether spiritual or physical, in Waterhouse's work. He describes every nuance of the classical myths, and suggests how they were likely interpreted at the time. During this period, the canvases of Waterhouse become more decorative and Trippi argues for their placement within the symbolist camp. Again, he builds his argument by providing comparisons with paintings by other artists and by examining contemporary criticism and exhibition strategies. *Circe Offering the Cup to Odysseus*, for example, was the first Waterhouse painting exhibited at the New Gallery. Here he exhibited alongside George Frederick Watts and Sir Edward Burne-Jones, thus enhancing his reputation as a modern artist. Trippi shows that critics recognized the shift in Waterhouse's production away from academic realism, citing as a key example the commentary in the *Studio*, which described Waterhouse's paintings as "decorative panels of colour."

Most of the women in the paintings from this decade tempt and destroy, using their feminine wiles to overpower men. Trippi demonstrates that Waterhouse was fascinated by the hypnotic power of beauty from the beginning of his career. The artist's first female figures are likened to "Keepsake" beauties, then placed in much more complex stage-like settings and related to romantic literature. Finally, during the 1890s, his women inhabit a highly stylized landscape, taking their place within the symbolist tradition. Trippi remarks on the connection between the femme-fatale motif so prevalent in this period and the discomfiting notion of the "New Woman," but one wishes he had explored this further.

There is tantalizing mention of Dr. Charcot, his work with female hysterics, and "nouvelle psychologie," but these threads are left hanging. A more thorough analysis of Waterhouse's images in the context of the early stages of the women's movement and the attendant controversies it provoked would have been welcomed. Various social and political strategies were employed during the late nineteenth century to discourage and contain women's early strivings for equality. Did Waterhouse's images serve a similar function? Did the artist intend to offer an alternative female type to counteract the athletic, aggressive, and intellectual model of the "New Woman?" Did his beautiful heroines calm male viewers threatened by societal changes? Did his *femmes fatales* proffer a warning? Or, did his images function as pure escapism, offering a vehicle for male fantasy?

Chapter four covers the last phase of Waterhouse's career from 1900 until his death in 1917. Most scholars have dismissed the paintings from this period as less imaginative than those of the 1880s and 1890s, but Trippi takes a closer look. The principal interest here is in how Waterhouse's work functions as a last bastion of tradition against the growing forces of modernism. Critics judged these paintings of mystical sorceresses and helpless seductive women as feeble and hopelessly sentimental. However, while Trippi carefully documents the decline in the artist's critical fortunes, he asserts that Waterhouse retained his technical prowess even in these late works.

As the First World War ravished Europe, Waterhouse returned to images reflective of Britain's Middle Ages. Trippi views these paintings as playing on nationalist sentiments, as well as a longing for simpler times. Fortunately for Waterhouse, conservative patronage still existed for this type of work. Trippi includes sales accounts and photos of private collections, demonstrating how a collector like W. H. Lever would easily spend thousands of pounds on such outdated art. Here even Trippi cannot justify the continuation of romantic narrative paintings in the face of worldwide destruction.

In sum, Trippi's account of Waterhouse's career is comprehensive and thoroughly researched. It is driven, in part, by the resurgence in interest in Waterhouse's canvases that are selling for record prices. The subject matter of many paintings, some more obscure than others, is meticulously explored. Trippi allows us to read these striking images of female beauty with their themes of love, passion, seduction, and magic on multiple levels. He examines their stylistic influences and firmly places various paintings within the aesthetic camp in England and within the broader context of continental symbolism. He explains their relationship to the Pre-Raphaelites and provides ample evidence of their critical reception. Trippi presents Waterhouse much as he was seen in his own time, as one of the "moderates of modernity." Although Trippi's visual analysis is thorough and insightful, the nearly exclusive reliance on this methodology prevented him from pursuing some vital avenues of research. Waterhouse's languishing beauties were painted at a critical historical juncture for women and a more thorough investigation of the socio-political climate would have been valuable.

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