

J. W. Waterhouse by Peter Trippi

London: Phaidon Press, 2002. 251 pp., 211 illustrations, \$49.95 (hardback).

Review by Gail Leggio

Although a number of the sumptuous images in this handsome book already rank as icons of Victorian art, the revival of interest in John William Waterhouse (1840–1917) is still very much a work in progress.¹ The richness of Waterhouse's subject matter and the full virtuosity of his painting will come as a surprise to some readers. Author Peter Trippi's² crisply written text—rooted in thorough research, enhanced by judicious speculation, a good eye and a knack for description—finds the artist behind the pictures, delving into the curious byways of the late-nineteenth-century artistic milieu. Waterhouse immediately strikes the viewer as an important Pre-Raphaelite painter, albeit not a household name. Consider two versions of *The Lady of Shalott*, a canonical Pre-Raphaelite subject—Romantic, medieval and literary, drawn from Tennyson's Arthurian poems and implicitly raising issues about the process of artistic creation. Waterhouse's 1888 oil is reminiscent of John Everett Millais's *Ophelia*, in the distracted gaze of the red-haired girl whose boat drifts down a sedgy stream, a rich tapestry draped over the side. Waterhouse's 1894 vertical oil, set in the lady's claustrophobic chamber, owes more to William Holman Hunt's design for the 1857 Moxon edition of Tennyson. Waterhouse's lady rises from her chair, still entangled in the threads of her tapestry like a spider caught in her own web, and stares intently at the viewer. Lancelot is reflected in the round mirror behind her, suggesting the solipsistic dilemma of the artist. Other touchstones of Pre-Raphaelitism mark the two paintings: the preferred setting of nature or the enclosed bower, and a distinct physical type of woman, in Waterhouse's case characterized by a slight but decidedly feminine body, pale skin, red lips and psychological depth.

Trippi's art historical narrative, however, complicates the story. For example, Waterhouse's brushwork is looser than that of Millais or Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones experiment with flat, decorative spatial patterns; Waterhouse consistently maintains illusionistic recession. Born in Rome and familiar with Continental developments, a successful painter working within the establishment, Waterhouse, according to Trippi, embodied "Pre-Raphaelite intensity...in an Academic modification of Impressionism." Some very accomplished works show the influence of both Lawrence Alma-Tadema and the French Academics. The 1887 *Mariamme*, an archaeological recreation of the court of Herod the Great, flirts with the "white-picture" aesthetic popularized by Rossetti and James McNeill Whistler. Waterhouse, who converted to Pre-Raphaelitism after seeing the major Millais retrospective in 1886, belongs to the third phase of the movement.

Pre-Raphaelitism had its inception in the anti-grand style Brotherhood of Rossetti, Millais and Hunt, formed in 1848, and experienced a second flowering in the mid-1850s when Burne-Jones and William Morris, then Oxford undergraduates, fell under Rossetti's spell. Unlike some vapid fin-de-siècle imitators who turned fresh ideas into clichés, Waterhouse demonstrated the vitality of the half-century-old movement, treating "imaginary subjects with a realist's brushwork," in Trippi's words.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Waterhouse's iconography is the recurrence of occult themes, implicit in earlier Pre-Raphaelitism and full-blown in contemporary Continental Symbolism. Trippi's alert and far-reaching research is hampered here, as he readily admits, by lack of documentation, as most of the artist's records and correspondence were destroyed or discarded. Still, the author has pieced together a convincing picture of Waterhouse's cultural milieu, and the best evidence lies in the paintings themselves. In fact, if Waterhouse could be associated with one character type, it would be the enchantress, beginning with *The Magic Circle* (1886). Attended by ravens and carrying a crescent shaped boline, used by Druids to cut herbs, the young witch works in the open. Her skirt, decorated with archaic Greek warriors, hints at the eclecticism of occult disciplines. The seductive mermaid is another favorite figure, already popular from arresting images by Burne-Jones and Frederick Leighton. Like poet John Keats's serpent-goddess Lamia (whom Waterhouse also depicted), the mermaid is one type of the feminine angel/demon who proliferates through Victorian literature and art. Nina Auerback has remarked that "human moral categories are inadequate" when dealing with the "preternatural intensity" of these hybrids.³ Waterhouse's enchantresses, like those of Rossetti and Burne-Jones, are objects of desire, but they are also women with imaginative lives of their own.

Circe is central to Waterhouse's mythology—as vivid personality, literary exemplar and surrogate for the artist. Homer's sorceress resonated with artists, writers and philosophers over the centuries. She was imagined as a femme fatale, an archetypal witch and an allegory of Nature's transformative magic. She provoked the anxieties of men confronted with powerful women and reminded us that animal instincts are part of human nature, however much the rational mind may protest. As the "doyenne of metempsychosis,"⁴ she was celebrated by some late antique and Renaissance thinkers who saw her as representing the potential of the soul to evolve. Waterhouse presents two sides of Circe. The 1892 *Circe Invidiosa* depicts a vengeful sorceress working malevolent magic. Trippi describes the visceral impact of this dramatic composition adroitly, emphasizing the use of thick paint and a palette of unusual, "toxic" blues and greens. (He incorporates analysis of microscopic surface cross-sections to reconstruct the artist's painting methods.) In contrast, *Circe Offering the Cup to Odysseus* (1891) presents the enchantress as vital and self-confident, a shamanistic, pantheistic priestess. Her throne is decorated with lions, an



J. W. Waterhouse, *"I am Half-Sick of Shadows," said the Lady of Shallott*, 1916,
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allusion to the goddess as Lady of the Beasts and Seat of Wisdom; she brandishes the wand and chalice that are basic tools of ceremonial magic. Odysseus, reflected in the round mirror behind her, seems understandably both tempted and awed. She combines timeless authority with spontaneous freshness and beauty.

The wealth of insights in this book provides a rich historical context for these intoxicating paintings. For example, the bird-woman hybrids in Waterhouse's *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891) may have been inspired by the antique vase design reproduced in an article by Jane Harrison, a pioneer in the view of Greek religion as cult-driven and Dionysian, rather than philosophical and Apollonian. (Burne-Jones attended her lectures at the British Museum.) One of the most exciting dimensions of this book is how it opens up new avenues for exploration, throwing into relief the vital mix of traditional and progressive currents in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

By the time Waterhouse died during World War I, his mythopoeic way of painting had fallen out of fashion, and his period of obscurity has lasted longer than that of Rossetti or Burne-Jones. (In poetry, a measure of continuity between Victorian and modern was preserved, thanks to William Butler Yeats's acknowledgment of Rossetti's literary influence.) Trippi's fascinating book fills out the picture of a nineteenth-century renaissance, in which talented artists returned to ancient myths and medieval legends for insights into their own spiritual and psychological concerns, rethinking the perennial dramas in fresh visual terms.

NOTES

1. An important work in the Waterhouse revival was Anthony Hobson, *The Art and Life of J. W. Waterhouse RA 1849–1917* (London: Studio Vista, in association with Christie's, 1980).
2. Trippi studied at New York University and the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, before joining the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1998. He is founding Executive Editor of the journal *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*.
3. Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 94.
4. Judith Yarnall, *Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), pp. 75–76.