always working at a great many things at the same time.

Miró was always absolutely clear in his sense of artistic purpose. It was the opposite of the museum culture which Picasso has come to symbolize and that Sert condemned in the quotation with which this article began: ‘It does not matter if the picture is destroyed’, Miró said. ‘Art can die. What matters is that it should have sown seeds on the earth.’


There are compositional analogies between Guernica and Miró’s original picture for Harvard. These links are also apparent through the relationship between the Harvard picture, Miró’s earliest Bullfight of 1945, which he presented to the Musee d’Art Moderne, and Picasso’s early drawings for his picture. See also n. 17.

Catalogue Notebooks, p. 120.

Catalogue Notebooks, p. 108.

In conversation with the author.


Joan Miró, Je ne transaille comme un jardiniere, Conversation with Wey Tanssalland, German edition (Paris 1964), p. 47.

Ibid., p. 48.


Ibid., p. 29.

I.-L. Sert, in conversation with the author.

Ibid.


Private information from J. G. Artiges.


Miró, Lettres à des Amis, p. 113.


I.-L. Sert, in conversation with the author.


Jones, The Grammar of Ornament, Propositions 6, 7, 11, 12.


Ibid.

Ibid.


For further discussion of this point see Joseph Rykwert, On Adam’s Hut in Paradise and Duncan Macmillan, Painting in Scotland, the Golden Age, Oxford, 1986, Chap. 3, 4 & 5.


Miró, Lettres à des Amis, p. 159.


Miró, Lettres à des Amis, pp. 73, 121, 191.

Ibid., p. 121.


Crane, Bases of Design, p. 250.

‘La peinture est en décadence depuis l’age des cavernes’, signed Joan Miró, Miró, Lettres à des Amis, p. 159.

Ibid., p. 140.

Checklist of Miró’s principal public works

Barcelona
Airport mural in ceramic tile mosaic, with Llorens Artigas, 1970, 5 x 10 m.
Ramblas pavement, vitrified brick, 1976.
Escorxador Park, sculpture, concrete decorated with ceramic, with Joan Gardy Artigas, approx. 10.9 m high.
IBM building, ceramic wall with Llorens Artigas, 1976, 8.7 x 2.8 m.
School of Architecture, temporary painting on windows, 1969.
Fondation Miró, architect J. L. Sert, various works including monumental tapestry with Josep Royo, 1974, 7.5 x 5 m, and painted sound-board in auditorium, 1974, 0.7 x 0.7 m.
Caixa de Estalvis, Barcelona, monumental tapestry with Josep Royo.

Cincinnati
Terrace Plaza Hotel, now Cincinnati Museum, oil on canvas, originally mounted in a quarter-circle, done with architects Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, 8 ft. 6 ins. x 30 ft. 8 ins. (2.6 x 9.3 m).

Chicago
Public sculpture, Miss Chicago, bronze and concrete, with Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, 1967–81, 39 ft. (12 m) high.

Cambridge, Massachusetts
Harvard Graduate Centre Mural, oil on canvas, 1950–1, 19 ft. 6 ins. x 6 ft. 3 ins. (5.9 x 1.9 m), now MoMA, New York, replaced by ceramic wall with Llorens Artigas, 1960, 19 ft. 8 ins. x 6 ft. 6 ins. (6 x 2 m).

Houston
Public sculpture, Personnage aux Oiseaux, steel and bronze, in collaboration with I. M. Pei, 55 ft. x 35 ft. (16.8 x 10.7 m).

Ludwigshafen
Hack Museum, ceramic wall with Llorens Artigas.

Madrid
Palais des Expositions, ceramic mosaic wall with Joan Gardy Artigas, 1980, 60 m long.

New York
Guggenheim Museum, Ceramic wall, Alicia, ceramic wall with Llorens Artigas, 1955–7, 18 ft. 8 ins. x 7 ft. 10 ins. (5.7 x 2.4 m).
Portico, ceramic with Llorens Artigas, 1956, 11 ft 9 ins. (3.6 m) high.
World Trade Center, monumental tapestry with Josep Royo, 1975.

Paris
Spanish Pavilion, World Fair, Il Segador, oil on Celotex, 1937, 5.5 x 3.7 m.
UNESCO, ceramic walls with Llorens Artigas, Wall of the Sun and Wall of the Moon, 1957–8, 15 x 3, and 7 x 3 m.
Parc Desnos, Rue Blomet, Oiseau Lumineux, bronze, Susse Foundry, 2.3 x 2.1 x 1.5 m.
La Defense, Couple Amoureux aux Fleurs d’Amandier, 1975, with Joan Gardy Artigas, painted synthetic resin, approx. 9.1 m high.

Osaka
Osaka Exhibition, ceramic wall with Llorens Artigas, 1970, 5 x 10 m, now Osaka Museum of Folk Art.

St Gall
Handelshochschule, ceramic wall with Llorens Artigas, 1964, 30 x 1.5 m.

St-Paul-de-Vence
Fondation Maeght, ceramic wall with Llorens Artigas, 1968, arch, concrete, 5.8 x 6.15 x 2.15 m; ceramic circle with Llorens Artigas, 3.5 m diameter.
Labyrinth sculpture garden with various sculptures, monumental tapestry with Josep Royo.

Senlis
Church of St-Fambourg, stained glass windows.

Victoria, Spain
Ceramic wall with Llorens Artigas, originally for Paris Cinémathèque, 1972, 4.5 x 4 m.

Wichita
University of Kansas, glass and marble mosaic wall with Atelier Jacques Loire, 52 ft. 6 ins. x 26 ft. 3 ins. (16 x 8 m).

Washington
National Gallery of Art, monumental tapestry with Josep Royo, 1975, approx. 36 ft. 1 in. x 9 ft. 10 ins. (11 x 3 m).

Zurich
Kunsthalle, ceramic wall with Llorens Artigas, 1971–2, 7.8 x 2.8 m.
Theosophy and Abstraction in the Victorian era

The paintings of G. F. Watts

DAVID STEWART

The paintings of G. F. Watts occasionally the approach the abstract, a quality that reflects his interest in the esoteric fabulations of Theosophy.

Disorientating colour and dissolvent form make The Sower of the Seeds (1902; Watts Gallery, Compton, Plate I) a striking example of Symbol painting, but the sources of George Frederic Watts’s symbolism appear almost as evanescent as this painting. Since Watts was an active member of the Royal Academy, academic sources have been proposed; but Watts violates both academic style and sources in his Symbolist work. With the benefit of the Watts Gallery archives it is possible to see that Watts used Eastern religion, Theosophy and nineteenth-century philosophy to justify the development of his Symbolist vocabulary. Watt abstraction and prismatic colour derive from his esoteric studies and his style carries esoteric meanings. It is a remarkable fact that Watts anticipates early twentieth-century artists, such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, who also used Theosophy to make visual their notions of the spiritual in art.

Watts’s use of dissolved form helps express his highly modern belief that man makes reality as he interprets nature; this outlook finds a stylistic expression in Symbolist paintings which invite the viewer to define dissolved forms and interpret what is vaguely suggested. Watt’s belief that reality is a function of man was not eccentric as it might seem; it was the belief of many of the leading thinkers of the day. Thomas Carlyle stated, ‘The world is Nature, for everyman, is the Phantasy of himself; this world is the multiplex “I” of his own Dream’.

In his studies Watts read Carlyle, ca to know Carlyle and painted three portraits of him. He also became an amateur scholar of religion and philosophy, owning...
introduction to Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, and frequently reading and discussing works in Theosophy, Brahminism, Buddhism, Chaldeanism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Judaism. On 25 October 1895 Mary Watts made an entry in her diary which sums up a variety of religious and philosophical entries on Watts over the years: “Signor is quite a Brahmin!”

For Watts (“Signor”), the world existed as an extension of the self, and he believed that the great flaw of materialists is that they demystify the world, taking it as something outside the self. For Watts, materialists fail to acknowledge that their ideological biases are inextricably embedded in their claims to objectivity. They fail to see that demystification can only be remystification.

The most concrete and easily understandable expression of Watts’s modern approach to the history of thought is found in his painting, *The Genius of Greek Poetry* (Fig. 1) in which he attempts to capture the anthropomorphic essence of Greek thought. In the sky of this painting Watts places a long arc of wispy paint which nearly takes on the form of a human figure at one end. In the sea and on the shore are more figures which are almost indistinguishable from the surrounding water and air. He places, behind the arc and above the sea, another three to five human forms which echo the warm pinkish tones in the clouds above the horizon line. What Watts has done is to dissolve human forms into his landscape so that the two could not be visually divided. Describing the central figure in the painting, Allen Staley correctly points out that there are ‘echoes of Michelangelo’ and the Parthenon. In this respect Watts is indeed working from conventional sources, in his handling of form and colour he is anything but conventional. Even the most shimmering and evocative painting of the Venetian Renaissance rarely, if ever, approached the obliterations of the human form found in this painting: in Venetian paintings gaseous effects were reserved for clouds and light, not for solid objects and especially not for the human form. For Watts, painting clouds as men, and men as clouds, was an effective way to make visually explicit his belief that it is human culture that frames the way we see the world: in this case, Greek culture. Watts believed that there is more genius in seeing the sun as a man-like god riding a chariot across the sky than in seeing it as a hot rock or ball of gas that has been objectively understood.

On 13 November 1894 Watts made the following statement of his spiritual beliefs:

> There you see Nature has no outline, but I cannot do without one & that is just what happens in the spiritual worlds. To give anything form you must have bounding lines which do not

states of the world in such a precise way that they could distinguish, by colour and form of aura, the mental states in others. In this theory of spiritual perception, colours seen by the adept have specific contents: ‘A faint violet, mist-like form represents the Astral Man with an oval form bluish circle, over which radiate in ceaseless vibrations

Watts believed the world has meaning only through people who define it; by painting works that seem raw and undefined Watts believed he was painting the ‘real’ world

2 She shall be called Woman, 1878. Oil on canvas, 259 x 116 cm. The Watts Gallery, Compton, near Guildford

really exist without the definite personal idea, one cannot well grasp it, do what you will the idea slips.

For Watts, being spiritual simply meant defining the world and thereby creating the world, and being materialistic simply meant failing to understand that the world is defined and thereby created by humans.

Hegel’s and Carlyle’s spiritual theories were not readily adaptable to painting, but Theosophy was. Its visual descriptions and illustrations of the spiritual world became a source book for artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian who wished to express the spiritual in art. To state the matter simply, Theosophists believed that all the world is spiritual. They believed that clairvoyants could see coloured auras surrounding organic and inorganic matter which indicated its spiritual makeup and that, as Madame Blavatsky wrote in 1890, the ‘Spiritual man is free during sleep... and lives... in realms which are the land of reality, called dreams on our plane of existence.’ By interpreting the colour of auras, clairvoyants claimed to see the spiritual

the prismatic colours.” This passage from the *Esoteric Instructions* of the Theosophical Society of 1890 is but one of numerous written descriptions of the spiritual content of colours. These *Instructions* also included several colour tables spelling out the spiritual correspondences of colours, as well as colour diagrams representing the various spiritual emanations of man such as the Auric Envelope. In the yogi: ‘Neither Red, Green, Red-Violet nor the Auric Blue of the Body are to be seen; nothing but hardly perceptible vibrations of the golden-hued [life-currents] principle and a violet flame streaked with gold rushing upwards from the head...” As an artist devoted to the visual representation of the spiritual nature of the world, it would be hard to imagine that Watts had not taken a close look at Theosophy. Time and place were right for such a connection.

Madame Blavatsky, the spiritual leader of the Theosophists, moved to London in May of 1887 while Watts was on his honeymoon in Egypt. Shortly after his return to London, Watts began to investigate Theosophy. As early as January of 1889 Mary Watts records that he was discussing it. On 13 July 1890 he said that Theosophist ideas were “far more Christian than many.” On 5 September 1891 Mary Watts writes that her husband “is interested in what Mrs Besant says of Theosophy.” On 6 September 1891 she writes, “We read together Sinnet’s “Esoteric Buddhism”... just now Mrs. Besant’s conversion to Theosophy makes one feel interested.” On 19 December 1891 she comments on
Watts’s respect for the father of Theosophy, Emmanuel Swedenborg, writing that Watts has much sympathy with Swedenborg, who no doubt was the parent of much of this 19th Century thought.” On 19 November 1892 she writes:

Speaking of the theosophical & other so called miracles of today he [Watts] said ‘... The longer I live the more the spiritual conditions of humanity becomes interesting to me – so much so, that though I wont [sic] say they extinguish other interests they do overlie them. For the time the scientific seems at war with & overpowering the spiritual but they must ultimately be found to be irreconcilable for men cannot get on without them.’

The entry for 27 December 1892 reads simply ‘Indian religion – all religion science,’ after which numerous direct references may be found to Buddhism and Brahminism.” On 29 January 1893 she writes ‘Of all the early conceptions – so far as I know Brahmanism [sic] seems the loveliest & most reasonable’ On 20 February 1893, she quotes Watts, ‘The older I grow the more I am aware that the only reality that exists is the spiritual.’ On 2 December 1893, Mrs Watts reveals that Watts was a member of the Psychical Research Society and mentions a discussion, that day, on the latest conclusions upon ether, which are very like the old Brahminical conception of God being clothed with illusion.” On 11 March 1894, Mrs Watts records Watts’s conversation on brain aurocles with the artist Hubert Herkomer: ‘He told us that they have now discovered that it [the brain] produces from itself a phosphoric light – it stirs my imagination – darling nature what it after all in her silent God like way she has given us the nimbus & the Aureole!’ Shortly before Watts’s death Christopher Tumor, who had just designed the Watts Gallery at Compton, wrote:

I was surprised to find how intimately he [Watts] knew the teachings of the Theosophists. I... found he was quite as deeply versed as the ardent young Roman Theosophist I had lately been having conversation with."

Mary Watts’s diaries also indicate that Watts applied occult, spiritual notions in his art. On 12 April 1891 Mary Watts records that Watts’s assistant, Andrews, believed that Watts ‘is inclined to over do Symbolism in his pictures & lose repose by it’ but she comments defensively that ‘the minds that are disturbed by the occult meaning may ignore them altogether if they like.’ Watts wrote, ‘My desire is not to make the thing seen but felt, not an existence but a consciousness. A great work of art should seem to be an emanation rather than a construction.” He hoped to transcend the impression of material existence in favor of spiritual consciousness through his use of colour. Mary Watts quotes her husband on 14 July 1897, ‘... Splendour of colour itself lifts you away from the mere material.” Not only does Mary Watts see her husband’s art as related to things Theosophical, she finds a parallel in Watts’s associates such as Burne-Jones. On 24 January 1893, Mrs Watts discusses the figural type in Burne-Jones’s paintings as ‘an astral body’ not the God like, but spirit like rather.

Theosophy fits perfectly with the iconography of She shall be called Woman (Fig. 2) in which the material world is shown as a spiritual emanation, and Theosophy also agrees perfectly with what Watts said of his art as relating to things Theosophical. She shall be called Woman is a remarkable expression of the spiritual Watts. This painting presents a full-length woman whose body is blended in with the grass, ground, flowers, birds, clouds, and sunlight. There are numerous passages in which her form blurs so completely with the enveloping natural forms that distinguishing between the two is impossible. Colour is not used simply to define form, but rather to break down outlines in some places and define them in others. The painting makes sense only when the viewer defines forms which are not defined in Watts’s painting. The artist paints the woman’s face as little more than a glowing smear of colours, her entire right hand as crusty patches or blotches and her upper torso as an undifferentiated block of brightly coloured flecks. Yet the viewer is able to read the colours that Watts puts down as tangible forms despite the fact that, in the paintings, these forms are simply not defined. The viewer creates fingers, breasts, birds and flowers, just as, iconographically, Eve is creating the world that explodes from her body.

Quite significantly, on 12 November 1894 Mary Watts records in her diary the following description of She shall be called Woman: ‘Thoughts [sic] power a material existence.” The explosion of matter, in the form of birds, flowers, clouds and light, in Watts’s paintings is indeed an emanation from Eve. This is not simply Eve newly created, as it is often described, but a modern spiritual Eve. Mary Watts quotes Watts as saying: ‘It is not so much, or rather not all, the Eve of Genesis, nor Milton either. It is an incarnation of the spirit of our time, and a hope for the future. It is intended to suggest the very essence of life – ...of the spiritual...” This ‘newly created woman or mind of modern times” Watts described her as a ‘figure not so much to stand in the light as to emit light.” Watts’s image of a modern woman emitting her own light is deeply indebted to Theosophy both formally and iconographically.

It is also interesting that the painting that exists today was reworked in ways that make it understandable as a Theosophical work. Mary Watts’s diaries show that Watts altered the painting between 1890 and 1892, at precisely the time his Theosophical interests reached their peak. The original version, documented in a photograph taken before the painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1892, shows Eve without
a surrounding cloud of gases, without dissolved body parts and without light streaming from her head. What Watts adds is the ‘golden-hued [life-currents] principle and a violet flame streaked with gold rushing upwards from the head...’ and the surrounding aura of the Theosophical Astral Man (see Plate II) taken from H. P. Blavatsky. Collected Writings 1889-1890.

Watts’s Endymion of 1902 (Fig. 3) displays a Theosophical reworking of his Endymion of the late 1860s. In his earlier treatment of the theme, Diana was a sensually charged form hovering above the impotent form of Endymion. In this, the later version, no such contrast exists. Diana is a projection of Endymion, the 'image of his dream', a spiritualized vaporous arc or aura that completes a circle raising from Endymion's body. The spiritual and the material merge as the boundaries between dream and reality disappear. The composition replaces the once-human form of Diana with that of a thought-form; more real, for Watts, because it is more spiritual.

Watts’s virtually non-representational painting of 1902, The Sower of the Systems (Plate I), is appropriately interpreted as Theosophical. This painting is so close to being a non-representational painting that it was published upside down in the Brooklyn Museum's Victorian High Renaissance exhibition catalogue of 1978. Shortly after painting this work, in a letter dated 23 June 1903, Watts wrote, 'I want you to come and see some things which probably suggest the outlook of the future, as far as Art is concerned.' This explosion of blue and gold and dissolved forms is a painting of the creation of the world, a world that by the twentieth century could no longer be limited to simple objective representation. For Watts the spiritual in art was the way of the future.

Watts was not a practising Theophist: he was so opposed to rigid metaphysical theories that he could not have been one, but his style is strikingly theosophical. Fragmented colour, dissolved forms, and shimmering haze give his paintings a glowing attraction and a sense of mystery. As in the works of Odilon Redon, mystery conveyed through fragmented colour and obscured form is used to bring the imagination into action. The viewer is called upon to formulate his own interpretation rather than being presented with anything objective. Watts's interest was to make paintings that would be interpreted differently by different people. Oddly enough, Watts's approach can be seen as a kind of realism. He believed that the world itself has meaning only through people who define it and thereby give it meaning. By painting works that seem raw and undefined, Watts is painting the real world, the world which man makes meaningful. Rooted in Theosophy, Watts's Symbolist art expressed his belief that 'the only reality that exists is the spiritual'.

3 Endymion, 1902. Oil on canvas, 104 x 122 cm. The Watts Gallery, Compton, near Guildford.