David Stewart  
Art Historian, UA Huntsville

G. F. Watts and “The Manliness of Noble Womanhood”

We know G. F. Watts as a painter of beautiful women, as a painter of charming young girls, as “Signor” to his coddling female admirers. In short we might call him the quintessential Victorian patriarch of the brush. Watts spent nearly his entire life with a whole host of angels in the house. From the adoring Lady Holland, to the adoring Sarah Prinsep, to the adoring Mary Watts, George Frederic built his artistic fame with the aid of a phalanx of adoring women. Though true in its outline this patriarchal story is too simple. It does not account for his style when painting portraits of women, for his words when discussing women, for his iconography when painting his female subject pictures, or for his deference when painting for those who pressed for women’s rights. Watts was a supporter of women’s suffrage who praised “the manliness of noble womanhood—manliness”. His stated ideal helps to explain three curious facts. Many art critics of Watts’s day were disturbed by the “manly” quality of his paintings of women, many women’s rights supporters lauded Watts’s paintings for just these same qualities, and many of today’s art historians have discovered fragments of this peculiar side of his paintings. Just how far outside of patriarchal norms was Watts willing to go for his friends who pressed for new rights for women? Perhaps just far enough to approach his own unsettling ideal: “the manliness of noble womanhood”.

David Stewart is an Associate Professor of Art History at UA Huntsville, in Huntsville, Alabama. He was an assistant to the Curator of the Watts Gallery in 1988 while completing research for his Ph.D. at Boston University. He published a series of articles on Watts as well as an essay for the Watts Gallery’s centenary exhibition catalogue, The Vision of G F Watts.