David Stewart

Of Angst and Escapism:
George Frederic Watts and Frederic, Lord Leighton

On December 10, 1881, Frederic, Lord Leighton, President of the Royal Academy, openly announced to the students that the mission of art should be escapism, that the Academy should produce "Art which has borne up, and daily bears up, in oblivious ecstasy so many weary souls, which has lulled and cheated if only for a moment so many aching hearts" (54). It is well known that such platitudes produced enemies outside of the Academy, but what is not widely known is that one of Leighton's greatest adversaries was his close friend and fellow Royal Academician, George Frederic Watts. In fact, Watts's mature career may be largely defined as an attack on Leighton's principles, Leighton's Academy Addresses, and Leighton's art. Watts challenged Leighton's aim to use art to dull the British sense of the social, personal, and gender conflicts of the day, and he challenged Leighton's view that ethical issues were beyond the proper sphere of art. This paper as a case study addresses the œuvre of George Frederic Watts, whose most powerful paintings and most passionate words were directed as attacks upon the art of Frederic, Lord Leighton.

In many ways, Watts's published writings were conceived to counter Leighton's argument. He rejected Leighton's notion that art lacked political dimension. He found Leighton's ideal of art to be anything but amoral and labeled it, in fact, as a decadent ideal of leisure and wealth, an expression of the moral corruption of Victorian capitalism. Watts begins "The Aims of Art," published in the Magazine of Art (1888), with a discussion of the rise of capitalism with its "personal acquirement and aggrandisement" (M. Watts,
Annals 3: 228) and advocates the Victorian need for socialism with its “human idea of justice and right to others. [Socialism] asks what man requires of his fellows, justice and truth; for these are the qualities which enable one man to depend upon another”(229). This tension between capitalist greed and socialist justice is a tension Watts sees at work in the art world between those who have “asserted, that art should be nothing but a mere ornamental fringe on the social garment” and those who want art to play an ethical role in political life (230). The political and social intensity of Watts’s art began as early as the 1840s with his social realist paintings, *The Irish Famine*, *Under a Dry Arch*, *The Song of the Shirt*, and *Found Drowned*, and is maintained in later social allegories such as *Mammon*, *Industry and Greed*, *Can These Bones Live?*, and *The Minotaur*. The social allegories, unlike his paintings produced within the discourse of social realism, appropriate the formulas of the Academy only to subvert those formulas from the inside. Within months of Leighton’s first Address as President of the Royal Academy in December 1879, Watts published an article in *Nineteenth Century* that attacked the Victorian art world, its ideals, and in particular the Royal Academy establishment. Watts calls for an art “to increase or preserve a healthy state of mind among the wretched many whose voices in reality do, and must more and more govern” (3: 158) and complains that art at the Academy is “treated as a plaything, nothing more. While this is the case, artists will employ themselves in making toys, and the annual exhibition will be cared for by the nation pretty much as a Christmas tree is, and not so important an institution by half as the Maypole formerly was” (165–66).

For Watts, the problem with the art of the annual exhibition was that it played no ethical role, that it was severed from the voices of the wretched, that it intoxicated its audience and served industry more than social ethics, broadly defined: “An Academy Exhibition room is no place for a grave deliberate work of art. . . . We are elated by champagne and light buzz of talk. . . . We must have something light, epigrammatic, not too long, or we shall be bored to death. . . . Modern public exhibitions are most unfavorable, it may be said disastrous, to the best interests of art—good perhaps for industry, but injurious to art as art” (180–81).

Watts contended that art as art “rests on much wider and more solid foundations than mere amusement for moments of leisure” (156). For Watts,
art was not an escape from the moral dimension of social life, but a direct confrontation of its tensions. His diatribe against Leighton's Academy and Leighton's ideals sets the stage for the life-long contest between Watts and Leighton in print, in paint, and in their personal lives.³

In Leighton's paintings, beauty is intended to work as a narcotic to dull the pain and restlessness of life. Adrienne Munich maintains that Leighton's art shows his "distancing himself from sexuality" (176), and Joseph Kestner argues, in a similar gender-based critique, that "[Leighton's] art loses tension from his emotional repression"(162). Leighton's art is a shimmering veil that softens threatening truths of sexual, social, and personal life by raising intoxication to a level of the ideal. Kestner and Munich offer rich and convincing interpretations of the ways that Leighton's art participates in a discourse on women to limit women's political power and also to quiet his own sexual anxieties. No doubt they are correct in their assessment of Leighton's gender politics, but Leighton's repression extended itself into class struggle, urban blight, and a host of other Victorian areas of conflict and decay. Through lecturing and painting in a discourse defined by repression and escapism, Leighton became a powerful voice for the status quo in realms including, and extending beyond, gender politics.

In no way does Leighton deny the value of Victorian life; rather he asserts the value of living in a luxurious land of art that numbs the senses. Leighton's obsession with death is undeniable, as it is undeniable that he treats death as an ideal state: perfect and beautiful. On this apparently mixed ideal of life and death, Nietzsche astutely observed that "the thought of suicide is a powerful comfort: it helps one through many a dreadful night" (281). Leighton uses the thought of death to remake life into a sweet, redeeming dream. Kenneth Bendiner argues that in Leighton's art "sleep and death are reinforcements of stasis"; that is, they are reinforcements of life. The suppressed restlessness that Bendiner sees in Leighton's art, "knotted and agonizing" (122), serves as justification enough for compositions that produce an overall effect that is anything but knotted and agonizing. Leighton's art is an art of resolution, harmony, and perfection. His is an art of the arabesque in which smooth transitions of color, line, and form soothe, calm, and attract the viewer into a world of repose, ease, and sleep. When Leighton does introduce tension, he
presents a clash of two worlds: turmoil threatens repose and lust threatens peace. Waking and sleeping stand as opposites, vying for power over humanity. Leighton's ideal is neither the striding athlete of ancient Greece nor the frenzied mænad, but rather the sleeping Eros who puts passion to sleep and makes the dreamer the model of beauty (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Frederic, Lord Leighton, Flaming June, ca. 1895, Collection Museo de Arte de Ponce, The Luis A. Ferré Foundation, Inc., Puerto Rico.

In contrast, Watts's paintings are anything but narcotic. He offers a spark, a shock, a call to action, a condemnation of luxury, and a diatribe against sleep. It is no wonder that Leighton tried to dissuade Watts from ethical reflections. Watts's art is not of the arabesque and the smooth transition but rather of broken lines, dissonance, and wonder. Watts's art threatens peace and shakes Eros from sleep into a life of pain, angst, failure. He represents sleep as decay,
ruin, and waste. His paintings offer an antidote to paralysis and withdrawal by raising frustration to the level of its highest value. In his work, it is frustration that spurs movement, pain that indicates life, and failure that becomes a human ideal. For Watts, as for Robert Browning, to arrive at an end is to have nothing left to do. In essence Watts presents satisfaction as death and failure as the distinguishing mark of all great endeavors.⁴

Some modern art historians see Watts otherwise. Leonée and Richard Ormond see Watts's Ariadne (1895; Fogg Museum, Harvard) as a "dreamy reverie," and they see his paintings of sleep such as Endymion (ca.1869; private collection, Fig. 2) as creating "an idealized effect" that lacks "sensuality and tension" (35-37).⁵ Yet, quite the opposite is true: Watts's work depicts despondency, tension, and sensuality. Even in these two remarkably beautiful paintings, Watts treats sleep as a curse and reverie as despair. Watts's Endymion of 1869 is strikingly different from Leighton's treatments of sleep. At a glance, Watts's presentation of the reclining Endymion appears to be drawn from Leighton's Ariadne series of 1868: Ariadne Abandoned by Theseus, Ariadne

Figure 2. G.F. Watts, Endymion, ca. 1869, private collection. Photograph courtesy of Sotheby's, London.
Watches for His Return, Artemis Releases Her by Death (Salar Jung Museum, Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad, Fig. 3). Watts’s recumbent figure of Endymion is somewhat less fluid, with his sharply raised knee and his legs splayed, but like Ariadne, the sleeping Endymion is so languid as to appear dead. However, there the similarities end. Watts’s composition employs two figures, one charged with life and one listless. The partially clothed body of Diana swirling above Endymion is animated by the repeated lines of her sweeping clothes that vibrate and respond to the arc of her body, the turn of her arm, and the sweep of her hair. A surging sensual form, Diana’s body hovers over the comatose Endymion. She throws her knee forward and descends, breast bared, as her neck abruptly bends and plunges down to the limp, unresponsive flesh of her beloved. This is obviously an image of frustrated sensuality but an image of sensuality nonetheless. Endymion awaits the sexually animating power of Diana but never receives it, while Diana becomes the victim of her chaste, yet erotic seduction of paralyzed flesh. Sleep is treated as loss, and waking as pain. Watts presents tension here, not resolution. Whereas Leighton’s Ariadne proclaims escape and resolution, Watts’s Endymion offers neither.
Figure 4. Frederic Leighton, Omphale and Iphigenia, 1884, Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Watts's own 1875 version of Ariadne, Ariadne in Naxos (Guildhall Gallery, London), differs significantly from Leighton's. Yet neither this work nor Watts's Ariadne of 1895 is a "dreamy reverie." In each case Watts depicting despondency, ennui, and depression as states of self-awareness, not as occasions for escape into sleep or reverie. The bent posture, collapsing left arm and sagging head, show spirits broken and ruined. These Ariadnes display tragic beauty fallen into decay. Drawn from the Elgin marbles, each version of Ariadne embodies the classical ideal as grand but exhausted and tragically devoid of power. Ariadne is not rescued by death, but suffers a living death in the face of ruin. Watts's Ariadnes are clearly not escapes into dream.

Indeed, a high percentage of Watts's paintings are devoted, even more explicitly, to destroying the land of sensuous dreams promised in Leighton. Leighton's 1884 Cymon and Iphigenia (Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Fig. 4) is a representative example of the class of painting that Watts attacks in his 1885 Wife of Plutus (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, Fig. 5). Bathed in pastels, softened lines and gently undulating forms, Leighton's bed of Iphigenia offers a luxurious invitation to the male figure, Cymon, who approaches his vision of ideal slumber. With arms raised over her head, Iphigenia is open and available to the advance of Cymon, who is enraptured by the soft glow of flesh and sheets. As Leighton offers the viewer the warm and sensuous form of Iphigenia, she may seem an object to be possessed, no doubt, but she is not intended exclusively as an erotic object. Rather she is offered as a luxurious down comforter, beckoning Cymon to join her in sleep.

In The Wife of Plutus, Watts takes this ideal and reverses it, presenting a sensual, nude woman whose head falls to expose the full line of her neck and breasts, which rather than being draped are erotically displayed. Watts frames his restless, sleeping nude in a sensuous envelope of shimmering pillows, glistening jewels, richly painted sheets and a full head of sumptuously curled hair. Yet, Watts's painting turns out to be highly disturbing rather than erotic because he depicts the wife of Plutus as ill. Her erotic appeal vanishes, as she appears about to be sick in her sleep, as her pained face twists into shadow and her wrist falls limp. Her figure expresses nausea and despair rather than invitation to imagined blisses. Watts uses luxurious, sensuous, and even sensual imagery to produce an effect of revulsion and angst in what is a rather pointed attack on the Leightonian ideal.
Watts explained the meaning of the painting in a letter to its buyer: “in the Wife of Pluto [sic] I wish to suggest the disease of wealth” (Watts, Letter to Smith). When the painting was exhibited at the New Gallery in 1896-1897, the catalogue entry included a phrase from Ecclesiastes 6.7: “And yet the soul is not filled” (M. Watts, Works). The iconographical message is simply that the life of money and pure sensuous pleasure is not enough, and that it is in fact diseased. What is more, Watts was deeply opposed to the dream ideal as his wife Mary (M. S.) Watts records: “Life, [Watts] said, has something more than a dream for its object. There is work wh. is what we have to live for—not sitting amongst flowers by a stream” (Ms. January 1890). Leighton’s luxurious dreamland ideal was to Watts anathema.
Watts frequently expressed to his wife a profound dislike for Leighton’s style and iconography. Watts would say that Leighton “would have been greater as a statesman than as an artist” (M. Watts, Annals 2:25). In particular, Watts found Leighton’s approach to be academic, unlike his own, which he saw as subjective and essentially symbolist in nature. On 8 July 1887, Watts stated that “the work should be felt first” and contrasts this approach with “Sir Fred [Leighton] who reasons out his subjects before he feels” (M. Watts, Ms). On 3 May 1893, Mary Watts quotes her husband on Leighton’s method of painting: “I deplore it for tho’ imagination is not his strong point he possesses it, & this painting by recipe is the negation of it” (Ms). For Saturday, 3 October 1896, she writes that Watts believed “it was better to have excess of soul, than excess of Hand—. . . that is where Leighton was wrong” (Ms). Watts’s analysis of Leighton places great emphasis on “feeling,” “soul,” and “imagination”; in each case he finds Leighton wanting. Watts also found Leighton’s works to be unmoving and unimpressive. On 28 August 1894, he said that “actual dimension has an impression of its own. Leighton does not feel this impressiveness, so his large work is not as good as his smaller” (Ms).

Watts was also critical of Leighton’s technique, which he saw as effortless, mindless, and shallow. In extracts from her diaries, Mary Watts writes for 2 February 1897 that Watts believed Leighton’s “very accomplishments, the power of dexterous mastery was a limitation to him he ceased to seek & strive & there were no birth pangs before the picture sprang full grown & ready dressed into the world—’He does not move one’ alas Signor sadly confessed” (Ms).

Watts attacks what he sees as Leighton’s failure to work and struggle in the creation of his paintings. On 3 May 1893, Mary quotes Watts: “Looking at Leighton’s work, for instance, he makes up his mind to painting certain subjects, makes his sketches—only extremely fine things, but to carry them out without loss of time, he treats much as Andrews does his fret work. There is never anything unexpected in his work, & consequently nothing appeals to you.”

Leighton’s systematic approach, never allowing in the unexpected, was distressing to Watts. In particular, it was Leighton’s insistence upon precision and perfection that distressed him. On 6 August 1893, Watts spoke of Leighton
and "tried to explain what Sir F. [Leighton] means by sloppy English not bad grammar but want of preciseness—just what his work would give one the key to—
the common habit of leaving certain things to be understood is to him unfinished . . . I am glad to be stupid!" (M. Watts, Ms). Watts equates Leighton's art with aesthetic "preciseness" and marks this as one of his faults. Speaking of anatomical precision in his own work, on 1 October 1891, Watts stated: "I am not given the credit of having any anatomical knowledge, & probably I have very much less than Leighton or Poynter who are always quoted, but I am careful to avoid any exhibition of my knowledge in my work, & this probably is not understood—Both Leighton & Poynter allow things to be seen . . . I purposely avoid display of anatomical knowledge" (M. Watts, Ms).

Watts's deliberate rejection of Leighton's displays of draughtsmanship is symptomatic of the profoundly different approaches each had to the human figure and to technique as a whole. M. H. Spielmann, in an unpublished and undated note, quotes Watts's saying that "Leighton's perfection was too great—like himself. His successful search for beauty produced results that were necessarily apart from humanity.” Watts condemned Leighton for inhuman standards of perfection in much the same spirit as Algernon Swinburne, who found that Leighton's Actaeon "has the charm a well-trained draughtsman can give to a naked figure, this charm and no other" (Kestner 152). Leighton's technique had become a clear object of reproach.

Watts argued with Leighton for an art that would spark the imagination. For Watts, the power of suggestion within a painting was far more important than simple beauty. On 18 May 1887, Mary Watts records an exchange between Leighton and Watts: "Leighton asserts that beauty 'only is the true mission of art, & a picture actually loses something if it suggests a thought beyond what is painted—Sir Fredrick [sic] says no art should be didactic. . . . Signor [Watts] says neither painting nor poetry should be didactic, but there is a wide difference between being didactic & being suggestive'” (Ms).

Watts set himself against Leighton's formalist art in favor of his own more symbolist approach. In a related statement, not explicitly mentioning Leighton, Watts argued, "If a picture which is unquestionably well painted and well designed should fail only in that quality which makes another work of art seize and hold the spectator—though technically a less accomplished work of art, I
should say that this is due to the method of the painter. He has given the whole intellectual idea at once and too completely. A suggestion of something much larger and better can be given by a far less good thing" (M. Watts, Annals 2: 175–76).

Watts creates a dichotomy between accomplished art and an art of suggestion. In her biography of Watts, Mrs. Russell Barrington writes that Watts "would say, that Leighton’s paintings and sculptures were ‘achievements,’ his own were only ‘suggestions’" (Barrington 197–98). Watts’s own art, an art of suggestion, he ranked far above the accomplished art of his associates such as Lord Leighton.

Watts was also vexed with Leighton for what he perceived as his blindly academic approach to the Royal Academy. Mary Watts writes the following entry for 3 May 1893: “Signor regretting the effect of the yearly exhibition on art—. . . He [Leighton] takes me [Watts] round the Academy—“There look at that, they say the Academy does not teach—is not that good work” as far as it goes it is good—I only regret it is so, for it bringing so many young people up to paint, & it can never make artists of them—I feel so angry with dear Leighton for not giving himself a chance’ Signor says” (Ms).

For Watts, Leighton worsened the greatest fault of academic painting by promoting technically good work above good art. Mary Watts’s observation on her husband’s association with the Royal Academy is telling. On 22 January 1891, she wrote: “More & more one regrets that Signor should even nominally be connected with such a dull stupid institution, where in future times all the greatest names of the day will be outside—Rossetti, Holman Hunt, Burne Jones & many more—Why does one go on hoping for any improvement it becomes more & more impossible each year. Only love of Sir Frederick [Leighton] keeps Signor there” (Ms).

It is a fact that although Watts was not sympathetic with the Royal Academy nor with Leighton’s art, nor with Leighton’s approach to art, he remained a lifelong friend to Leighton nonetheless. With remarkable powers of understatement, Mary Watts wrote of their friendship, “It was a singular friendship, quite without undue interdependence” (Annals 1: 200). This was a particularly deep friendship in which opposites did attract. As a kindness to this friend, Watts resigned his membership in the Royal Academy only after Leighton’s death.
Mammon (1884-1885; Tate Gallery, London, Fig. 6) is Watts's most direct attack on capitalist greed, and not surprisingly it undermines Leighton's sensuous treatment of slumber and satin. Unfortunately, the bulk of the criticism generated by this painting, and other similar paintings, consists of painstaking descriptions of what is baldly obvious: this is a propagandistic painting portraying capitalist greed, or mammon, as cruel, brutal and dehumanizing. Watts achieves the power of his image by using bold, conventional pictorial devices. The skulls, money bags, and asses' ears are obvious

Figure 6. G.F. Watts, Mammon, 1884-1885, Tate Gallery, London.
conventional symbols. The slack muscles in the face of Mammon are exaggerated into caricature to express his utter indifference. Below, the victims of Mammon are dead or unconscious, destroyed by the power of greed. These crumpled and twisted figures echo Leighton’s sleeping figures in Cymon and Iphigenia (Fig. 4) and Summer Moon of 1872 (private collection, India), but Watts treats them as victims of luxury, not as cosseted lambs in a silky land of sleep.

In Peace and Goodwill (1888–1900; Watts Gallery, Compton, Fig. 7) Watts painted his version of Leighton’s slumbering beauty in which he parodies and undercuts the iconography of his closest friend. The painting employs a sleeping figure but reverses the iconography. It was no accident that in commenting on Peace and Goodwill, which presents a bandaged, broken, and simply ugly reclining figure, Watts found it appropriate to remark on “the fact that the spirit of work was vanishing from among us” and that “Man is not a nocturnal animal” (“Notes”). Leighton’s most famous work, Flaming June (ca. 1895; Fig. 1) is a striking expression of his dream ideal in which beauty, refinement, subtlety, and technical excellence make dreams luxurious and divine. Watts’s disgust with the dream ideal of Leighton is reflected in his subversion of that ideal in The Slumber of the Ages of 1901 (Watts Gallery, Fig. 8). Here sleep is shown as painful; sensuousness is replaced with decay; flowing lines become jagged, and precision dissolves into mystery. Seated on the lap of Watts’s sleeping mother is a baby. This image of an alert child on a sleeping woman in a smoldering landscape is a sharp reversal of its sources. Watts achieves reversal not only by challenging the ideal of inaction but also by attacking Leighton’s conventions for the use of line, color and brushstroke; and thereby, aggressively, he challenges conventional expressions of beauty. Roger Fry asserted, “it was certainly not incompetence that led Watts to finally adopt that rocky, dry, and crumbled quality which had given rise to the curious legend of his incompetence. Even in those later works, unsympathetic though their surface may be, he shows incomparable skill in using these dry rubbings and scumblings of pigment so as to produce colour which has mystery and infinity, and most wonderful of all, transparency” (“Watts and Whistler” 621).

Watts’s work affronts Leighton’s conventions of beauty and harmony because to Watts, beauty was an unattainable ideal. Beauty obscurred, not
beauty formulated, was his subject. As early as 1852 he wrote, "Beauty and Truth I do not forget, but they in their perfection, are too distant and too much obscured to be profanely thought of even" (Letter to Newton). To offer Watts Beauty and Truth in the form of academic depictions of sleep was to offer provocation. Since innovation is born of dissatisfaction, Watts kept Leighton nearby. In 1895, when word of Leighton’s death reached Watts he was devastated. He said, "Half my life is gone with Leighton" (M. Watts, Annals 2: 254). Fortunately the art and memory of Leighton were enough to sustain Watts for the nine remaining years of his life.

Figure 7. G.F. Watts, Peace and Goodwill, 1888–1900, Watts Gallery, Compton.
Perhaps today, with the collapse of Clement Greenberg's pure formalism, it is time to see Watts as more than an artist who failed to be abstract, formalist, and modern. What is most interesting about Watts to a postmodern audience are the tensions he painted that lay behind the authoritative academic, formalist facade of his day.

University of Alabama in Huntsville

Figure 8. G.F. Watts, The Slumber of the Ages, 1901, Watts Gallery, Compton.
NOTES

It is my pleasure to thank Richard Jefferies, Curator of the Watts Gallery in Compton, for his generous intellectual and moral support. I would also like to thank the Trustees of the Watts Gallery for making this essay possible.

1 Also in the Academy Address of 1881 Leighton wrote, “What ethical proposition can it [art] convey? What teaching or exhortation is in its voice? None, absolutely none. . . . Now the language of Art is not the appointed vehicle of ethic truths” (54–55).

2 Most of his social realist paintings remained unexhibited until the 1880s, and they never had the impact or the audience of his social allegories.

3 Today the will to create beauty through discipline, structure, and absolute formal control stands under assault from Neo-Expressionism with the rise of artists such as Julian Schnabel, Georg Baselitz, and Francesco Clemente. These artists owe their heritage to those nineteenth-century Romantics who challenged the formulas of the Academy in order to create a more personal, more disturbing, style and iconography for themselves. Nineteenth-century Romanticism and twentieth-century Neo-Expressionism share a common source of inspiration in the limits of formalist art. Both Romanticism and Neo-Expressionism are parasitic, deriving their nourishment from the very art they seek to undermine.

4 Elsewhere, I analyze Watts’s call to action in paintings such as Hope, Progress (1888–1900; Watts Gallery Compton), Sun, Earth and her Dead Daughter the Moon (1899–1902; Watts Gallery). Here the subject is Watts’s condemnation of Leighton’s idealized sleep.

5 Although much recent scholarship tends to find the similarities in the approaches of Watts and Leighton, nineteenth-century assessments were quite different. Ruskin, for instance, in his lecture on “Classic Schools of Painting,” sees Leighton’s art as expunging fault, as “Anti-Gothic; antagonist, that is to say, to the temper in which Gothic architecture was built: and not only antagonist to its faults, cold to its enthusiasms, and impatient of its absurdities” (33: 307). He adds of Leighton that “I am indeed able to recognize his skill; but have no sympathy with the subjects that admit of its display” (33: 318).
In the same series of lectures, Ruskin writes of Watts as a representative of the Mythic Schools of Painting:

Mr. G. F. Watts, has been partly restrained, and partly oppressed, by the very earnestness and extent of the study through which he has sought to make his work on all sides perfect. His constant reference to the highest examples of Greek art in form, and his sensitiveness to the qualities at once of tenderness and breadth in pencil and chalk drawing, have virtually ranked him among the painters of the great Athenian days, of whom, in the sixth book of the Laws Plato wrote: “You know how the intently accurate toil of a painter seems never to reach a term that satisfies him.” (33: 302)

To Ruskin, Watts’s flawed attempt at perfection “virtually ranked him among the painters of the great Athenian days,” while Leighton’s rejections of fault placed him beyond sympathy. For Ruskin, Watts and Leighton were profoundly different. Watts’s art embodied struggle, toil, and an imperfect quest for the ideal, whereas Leighton’s art perfectly realized its ends.

The critic Roger Fry also drew a sharp distinction between Watts and Leighton. In a 1901 review for the Athenæum, Fry attacked Leighton’s Hercules Wrestling with Death for the Body of Alcestis as “empty accomplishment” (“Glasgow” 357). For Fry, Leighton is factitious, sentimental, and expressionless, whereas Watts is immediate, sensual and boldly expressive through strong modelling. As late as 1928 in his catalogue for the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Fry maintained a strong distinction between the two. He ridicules Leighton for an emasculated, formless, and inexpressive style, then in the next paragraph praises Watts, who “shows a consciousness of pictorial construction such as none of his contemporaries could recognise” (Introduction 30–31).

The German critic Richard Muther also saw a profound difference between Leighton and Watts. In his 1896 edition of The History of Modern Painting Muther saw Leighton’s art as scrupulous, painstaking, cultivated, lacking
temperament and dead (3: 121). In contrast, Watts was a highly original artist who rejected calculated refinement to create mysterious allegorical suggestions (3: 642–43).

6 Sketchley argues in a similar fashion: “As a composition of two figures it is one of the most formal of Mr. Watts’s pictures . . . The significance of the subject, however, prevents a responsive emotion on the part of Endymion from serving the necessity of the design . . . Drama is in the ardent curve of the goddess, stooping till her mouth is over the unconscious mouth of the sleeper, contrasted with the involuntary, sleep-drowned limbs of Endymion” (145).

7 M. Watts, Ms, 3 May 1893. George Alfred Andrews was one of the Watts’s servants (cf. M. Watts, Works 3).

8 Joseph Kestner finds Leighton to be an artist who notably deviated from fine anatomical draughtsmanship (144), and this assertion is undoubtedly true. Leighton’s distortions of anatomy, in terms of line and color, however, differ significantly from Watts’s. Leighton produces controlled “waxwork” women that demonstrate his position of power, while Watts’s deviation from aesthetic and anatomical formulas suggests human tensions beyond his mastery.

9 It was exhibited for the first time in 1885 with the following Handbook entry: “Mammon. Dedicated to his Worshippers’ is the righteously scornful title of a singularly powerful work. Here is the god of wealth, robed in gold and scarlet: brutal, coarse bull necked, loathsome. See how he crushes down, with his clumsy foot and vile unsparing hand, whatever is weak and gentle and timid and lovely. Note that this being is not wantonly cruel. It is mere brutal indifference; utter heedlessness of things on which he treads or which his vile hand bruises.”

Works Cited


Watts, Mary S. Unpublished Mss in the M. S. Watts Papers at the Watts Gallery.
