

GF Watts: the Victorian painter who inspired Obama

Paintings by GF Watts have influenced figures as diverse as EM Forster and Barack Obama. Two hundred years after his birth, he stands out as one of the most distinctive – and elusive – painters of his times



i GF Watts's *Ellen Terry (Choosing)* (1864). Photograph: National Portrait Gallery London

The great Victorians who made our modern world are in the process of turning 200. Dickens, Darwin and [Charlotte Brontë](#) all recently celebrated their landmark birthdays while younger peers – George Eliot, Florence Nightingale and Queen Victoria herself – are getting ready for their big day. Last month it was the turn of the artist GF Watts to blow out the candles and contemplate two centuries of being feted and ignored in equal measure.

Hughes, Kathryn. "GF Watts: the Victorian painter who inspired Obama," *The Guardian*. March 10, 2017.

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Watts, though, is a bit different from his fellow bicentenarians. While his name disappeared from public consciousness during a long stretch of the 20th century, his best known work has continued to resonate at high frequency. Take *Hope*, a large oil painting he made in 1886 and presented to the nation 11 years later. The image of a weary, blindfolded figure resolutely plucking at the remaining string of her battered lyre while perched on a ruined globe might not be to everyone's taste, but its easily readable symbolism made it fit for repurpose. [Martin Luther King](#) based a sermon on the painting in 1959, as did Jeremiah Wright a generation later. Among Wright's Chicago congregation in 1990 was a young Barack Obama who took the image and ran with it, making *The Audacity of Hope* the title of both his rousing address to the Democratic Convention in 2004 and the bestselling manifesto he published two years later.

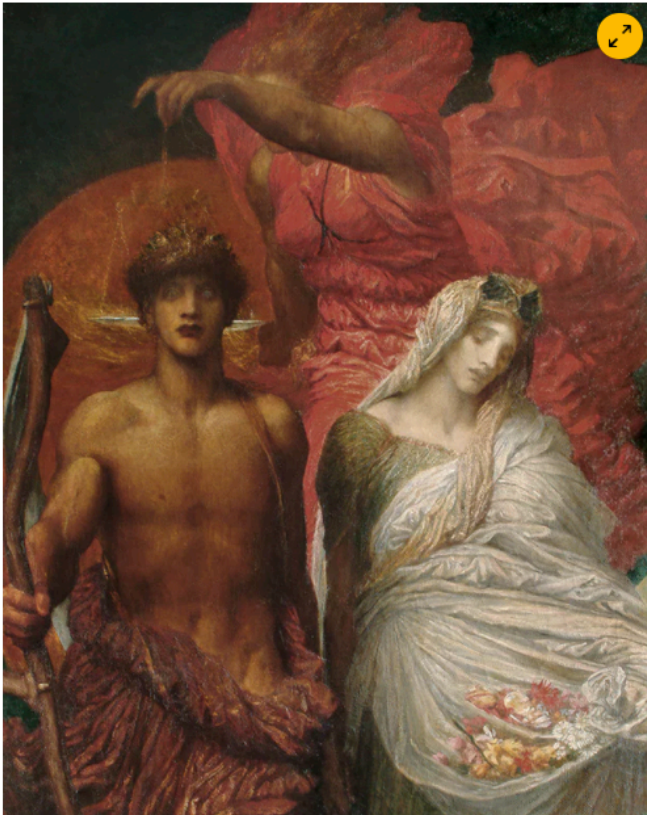
Watts's work, then, remains vast in its reach (the fact that his piano maker dad christened him George Frederic after Handel suggests that, from the start, the boy was encouraged to think of himself as walking with giants). Active over 60 years as a painter, sculpture and fresco maker, Watts was an all-pervading presence not only in British culture, but on the continent and beyond: in 1884 he was honoured with a solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and hailed as "the greatest painter since the old masters". This sense of Watts's artistic vision being built into the fabric of cultural life – literally, in the case of his many frescoes and murals – was in marked contrast to his personal insularity. He never sat on a committee, turned down a baronetcy twice and once pointedly failed to turn up to meet Queen Victoria when she visited Lincoln's Inn to see a vast fresco he had made of historical lawgivers. Having ducked out of the [Royal Academy](#) Schools as a boy because he felt he wasn't learning anything, Watts stayed aloof from institutional life and the concomitant obligation to produce paintings to order. Nicholas Tromans is curator at the Watts Gallery, where the artist's bicentenary is being celebrated this year with a sequence of three exhibitions. He suggests that we think of Watts as a kind of Victorian [Lucian Freud](#) – "a national treasure whose work was instantly recognisable yet whose refusal to appear in public only added to his personal myth".

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What made Watts's work so instantly recognisable was its determination to avoid the generic subject matter and Sunday School murmurings of the Victorian commercial art market. Rather than narratives in which sweethearts exchanged vows and fathers looked aghast at the news of yet another bank failure, Watts proposed knotty allegorical work that tangled with the dilemmas of real life in the modern industrial-scientific complex. Faith, death, love, progress ... these were the subjects from which he wrestled his "poems painted on canvas", a phrase that suggests he saw himself as a kind of second Tennyson, armed not with consolatory verse but a palette full of Winsor & Newton. Or, as one critic murmured, presumably approvingly, "the studio of Mr Watts is not merely a gallery of pictures but a museum of ideas".



A detail from GF Watts's *Time, Death and Judgment* (1900). Photograph: St Paul's Cathedral

One of the most celebrated of those ideas is *Time, Death and Judgment*, a large canvas which hangs in the Watts Gallery, built by Watts in the Surrey countryside, where he lived during the last part of his life. In this memento mori, which was originally shown in St Paul's Cathedral, Time strides ahead in the shape of a vigorous youth, while Death is a languid young woman gathering buds, blossoms and faded leaves in her apron. Judgment takes the form of a monumental female figure armed with a set of scales to weigh the souls of all-comers. The absence of any explicitly Christian reference makes the painting's message all the

more bleak: in this conspicuously godless world, it becomes the responsibility of each individual viewer to fumble towards their own salvation.

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If *Time, Death and Judgment* really was conceived as a poem, then it was one intended to be belted out at top volume, which is why Watts gave permission in 1885 for a mosaic version to be put up on the exterior western wall of St Jude's in Whitechapel. The idea was to provide moral succour to a roiling East End populace that was about to be plunged into further horror by [Jack the Ripper](#). Two years earlier, and on much the same principle, Watts had gifted the United States with *Love and Life* in the hope that the painting's message – that Life cannot reach its transcendent best without the help of charitable Love – might soften the mercantilist sharp elbows of the young nation.



Found Drowned (1850). Photograph: Watts Gallery Trust



This sort of painterly preachiness was wearing thin by the dawn of the new century. That's why [EM Forster](#) has the self-improving clerk Leonard Bast in [Howards End](#) dismissing *Time, Death and Judgment* as

irrelevant to his modern problems (not having enough money, basically), even though the picture “had educated him in former years”. Forster's fellow Bloomsberry Lytton Strachey meanwhile put Watts on his shortlist of self-deceiving, death-obsessed, immortality-grasping old bores whom he planned to skewer in his scabrous *Eminent Victorians* of 1918. And yet Strachey found he couldn't quite do it, perhaps because there was a heartfelt quality to all those “poems in paint” that made them tricky to rubbish. The inconvenient fact remained that during the recent carnage of Flanders and the Somme many people had taken a kind of stinging comfort from the great master's *The Court of Death*. Its implacable Grim Reaper is unmoved by wealth, youth or beauty but offers a peaceful end to those in pain.

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Other key voices at the time of Watts's death in 1904 likewise found it impossible to join in with the general dismissal of the man who liked to be known as "Signor" and was in the habit of dressing up in the rich scholastic robes and skull cap of a Renaissance sage, albeit one who lived just off Kensington High Street. The critic Roger Fry, responsible for introducing Britain to post-impressionism in the years before the first world war, maintained that, if you examined Watts's work closely, you discovered an artist engaged in that thoroughly modern job of interrogating form. A painting such as *Mammon* (1884-85) shows Watts pushing beyond his earlier sculptural realism to test how far he can warp and stretch the human form. Indeed *Mammon*'s central swollen papal-like figure with its donkey head and ears and distorted gouty leg looks almost as if it could come from [Francis Bacon](#). In addition, the surfaces of Watts paintings are often scarred and ridged, as if pulling away from the flat canvas. So much so that when Fry was asked to account for the way that cubism seemed to have burst out of nowhere in 1907, he explained briskly "it was quite easy to make the transition from Watts to [Picasso](#); there was no break, only a continuation".




It is exactly this continuation that struck president of the RA [Christopher Le Brun](#), when, as a young artist in the early 1970s, he first encountered Watts after making the pilgrimage to the Watts Gallery in Surrey. Watts's work had all but disappeared from view and Le Brun was taken aback when the dormouse-like curator, Wilfrid Blunt, brother of the more famous Anthony, presented the young man with a key and told him to make himself at home. What Le Brun found in Watts's studio transported him. At a time when pop art still ruled and a kind of willed flippancy was considered cool, "it was thrilling to be confronted with such huge intellectual and artistic ambition". Le Brun, who will deliver the annual Watts lecture next week, says that discovering Watts's assumption that "art is there to help with the big questions" of being alive in difficult times is more necessary than ever for artists. "If you're a young painter today it's quite easy to feel that what you're doing just doesn't make enough noise alongside your peers who are making installations". Watts's work is a reminder that there is an infinite amount that can be achieved with nothing more than brush and canvas.

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 Mammon, Dedicated to His Worshippers (c1885).
 Photograph: Watts Gallery Trust

Tromans agrees that you don't have to look very far to find evidence of Watts's influence in today's art world. Watts's insistence on mounting big statements about the nature of humanity in public places is similar to Antony Gormley's interventions in the landscape with [iron men](#) and *Angel of the North*. What's more, suggests Tromans, Watts's scouring of newspapers and periodicals to find subject matter for his art finds an echo in the socially urgent work of Jeremy Deller, whose multimedia practice often riffs on the headlines. For a period in the 1840s, Watts even abandoned allegory in favour of urgent social realism. *Found Drowned* (1850), an endlessly reproduced image of a respectable young woman dragged from the moonlit Thames, points an accusing finger at the sexual double standard which leaves a "fallen woman" vulnerable to suicide. *The*

Irish Famine (1850) depicts a young family evicted from their home.

It was this flickering desire to step beyond the boundaries of allegory and intervene directly in the lives of ordinary people that led to the only incident in Watts's life that came close to causing a scandal. In 1864 at the age of 46 he married the 16-year-old actor Ellen Terry, who had been his model. In his Pygmalion fantasy, Watts would take a beautiful working-class girl and educate her into ladyhood. But Terry was too difficult, too interesting and above all too talented to be saved from herself. After 10 awkward months in a hothouse marriage, she left Watts and embarked on the business of becoming the preeminent Shakespearean actor of her age.

The turbulence of that time did at least produce what remains for many the most exquisite painting Watts ever produced. According to Wilfrid

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Blunt, who wrote a biography of Watts in the 1970s while continuing to give every indication of not rating his work very highly, *Choosing* shows Terry “trying to decide between the rival merits of a showy, scentless camellia and the humble but fragrant violets held close to her heart”. The allegorical mode may be in full play – this is a choice between worldly vanities and the higher virtues – but Watts cannot help revealing himself here not only as a master colourist but as a sensualist to rival his contemporary Rossetti. Yet more evidence, as Le Brun suggests, that Watts “could do everything”.

- The Watts annual lecture, A Letter to GF Watts by Christopher Le Brun, is on 13 March at Charterhouse School, Godalming. *Monumental Murals* continues at the Watts Gallery, Compton. wattsgallery.org.uk.

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