

Watts Gallery: *Hope* Project

The Restoration of Watts Gallery

The centenary of Watts Gallery, the listed Arts & Crafts building which houses the studio collection of the eminent Victorian artist G F Watts OM RA (1817-1904), in 2004 was a moment of celebration but also a moment of crisis.

The Gallery has ten Trustees, with wide experience in museums and galleries management, who all contribute actively to securing the future of Watts Gallery. On the board of Trustees we have representatives from the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery.

Watts Gallery has survived one hundred years without any public funding whatsoever. It has relied on the original endowment established by Mary Seton Watts and the income from the buildings on the Watts Gallery Estate. The staffing on the Gallery has relied upon the courageous efforts of one curator and one assistant curator for the past thirty years. In one hundred years there were only four curators, and one of these was Wilfrid Blunt, brother of Anthony Blunt, who wrote the book on G F Watts entitled *England's Michelangelo*.

Over recent years there have never been sufficient funds or resources to maintain the building and the collection. The building is now officially listed by English Heritage as "at risk" and rain was coming through the roof. The collection has a backlog of over £1m of conservation work and the environment and storage continues to damage the collection as well as the people who visit or work at the Gallery. Buckets were a regular feature at the Gallery and during recent heavy rains, new leaks have occurred including a frightening flood in the picture store. Fortunately, through the rapid response of staff and volunteers, the collection has been protected from the worst of the conditions. Work has now moved on the gallery and a huge scaffolding structure is now encasing the building.

The centenary presented a powerful moment for the Trustees to address the needs of the Gallery. In setting out on this journey they asked themselves some key questions. What is the value of the collection and the Gallery, who needs it and what should it become? The first question was fairly

easy to answer as there is no other purpose built art gallery devoted to a single artist in Britain, there is no other centre for Watts and the collection is of international importance, there is also the context of the building as being sited in a "Watts village" with the original kiln built by William de Morgan which fired the tiles for the cemetery, a monument to Watts on Pilgrim's Way, Watts' original Great Studio, the Pottery and the Cemetery Chapel, making the Gallery and its collection of national importance. "Who needs Watts Gallery?" was a difficult question to ask at a time when the Gallery was probably one of this country's best kept secrets.

A term regularly used for Watts Gallery is 'hidden gem'. Visitor numbers were ticking over at approximately 12,000 a year and those who knew the Gallery wanted to keep it a secret!

BBC Restoration Village was the key which unlocked the secret! Watts Gallery received the most votes of any of the participating buildings over the two rounds of voting. As those of you who watched the final will know, Watts Gallery was piped to the post in the final count. Nevertheless, 86,000 people chose to vote for Watts, and for a Gallery in Surrey, with a collection by an unknown Victorian artist, this was remarkable. This evidence provided the answer to the question regarding the importance of preserving Watts Gallery and its collection for future generations. The issue of the Gallery's future was a dilemma. What so appeals to many of our visitors is the charm, Englishness and idiosyncrasy of the building. So many of our supporters and visitors have urged us not to lose these essential characteristics. One Trustee describes it as the importance of not becoming McGallery!

However, like all powerful founding visions, there is scope for evolution and change at Watts Gallery. Watts was not only a great artist but he was also a social activist. He encouraged young painters, notably Val Prinsep, in their craft. As a Gallery we feel that we should not only look backwards but also forwards. The Fenton Arts Trust Artist in Residence scheme has provided that forward impetus, bringing each year a final year student from the University of Creative Arts to undertake workshops with different groups, to be supported



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Director, Watts Gallery

Perdita Hunt is a trained arts administrator. She has worked in senior positions at the Arts Council, Heritage Lottery Fund and WWF-UK. In addition Perdita served as theatre projects co-ordinator at Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff, Marketing and Development Director at the Aldeburgh Foundation in Suffolk and Press Advisor to Suffolk Crafts Society. She is a Trustee of Baynards Zambia Trust. Perdita has been Director at Watts Gallery since 2004 and was appointed to lead the £10m Watts Gallery *Hope* Project to save the future of Watts Gallery and its collection.

in their development and to stage an exhibition at the end of their residency to promote their profile and work. The Gallery has now established an annual Watts symposium held at the Gallery and also at our partners, the Courtauld Institute, to explore 19th-century issues through the Watts lens. We have looked at social issues, spirituality and cities. Given the strong sense of place provided by the 'Watts village' in Compton, Trustees are being encouraged to strengthen Watts Gallery as a centre of learning. This dream was hugely supported by the generous donation made to the Gallery by Professor Rob Dickins CBE, one of the Gallery's Trustees, when he gave the Gallery a collection of over 4,500 photographs and letters of Victorian leaders, artists, celebrities for our archive and for exhibition.

Journey of Hope

In starting out on the *Hope* Project the Trustees established six aims: to save the building and the collection, increase access to the Collection, strengthen the role of Watts Gallery locally, nationally and internationally, increase audience and income, and strengthen Compton as a centre for learning and study. As part of arriving at these objectives, the Gallery has undertaken a thorough review through the development of a conservation management plan, a business plan and the development of new policies.

The Building

The needs of the fabric of the building were to be addressed through a major capital bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund. As part of this, the Gallery itself needed to raise matching funds. Through the remarkable generosity of Trusts and Foundations, individuals and local authorities, we have succeeded in raising sufficient funds to unlock a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund of £4.3m to undertake the capital work. The Gallery has secured planning permission and listed building consent and work started on site in January 2009. The architects Zombory Moldovan Moore are leading the project working with the conservation architect Dante Vanoli from Purcell Miller Tritton. The scheme for the project is largely working with the current footprint of the Gallery, but will provide increased storage for the collection, access for people with disabilities to all the galleries, additional gallery space (using the now derelict apprentice potters' washroom), an education space with a kiln and wetroom, landscaping of the grounds to create a Gertrude Jekyll style garden, increased car parking and above all environmental and lighting improvements to enhance the visitors' enjoyment of the collection at different times of the day.

However, throughout our work on the capital project, the Trustees were more than aware of the question of long term sustainability. How were we to ensure that the building and the collection did not, once again, fall into such a state of disrepair? There was no point in putting on a new roof if the collection was not preserved appropriately and the dynamic of the collections management was static.

The collection

As part of the rescue mission for Watts Gallery, Trustees felt it important to review the purpose and vision of the Gallery's collection. We are fortunate in being founded on a very clear and farsighted vision of "Art for All", with a clear purpose of promoting the work of G F Watts and Mary Seton Watts and protecting the Gallery and its collection for future generations. One hundred years on it was appropriate to review these original concepts in the current century. A brainstorm was held at the Paul Mellon Centre for British Art with leading experts and specialists in 19th-century art, as well as representatives from our partner organisations such as the University of Creative Arts. The result of this discussion, plus further consultations held with other stakeholders and among the Trustees, was a clear decision that Watts Gallery was first and foremost about Watts. It should therefore strive to be always an international centre of excellence for Watts. Secondly, it has a purpose to promote the work of Mary Seton Watts. In developing the idea of "Art for All", we were encouraged to evolve Watts Gallery and Compton in general as a centre for exploring Victorian art, social history and craft.

The collections policy for Watts Gallery is therefore to promote the understanding and appreciation of the work of G F Watts and Mary Seton Watts and preserve the gallery and its collection for the benefit of future generations.

The acquisitions and disposal policy for the Gallery recommends the acquisition of works by G F Watts, objects relating to Watts and to the various concerns of Watts or Mrs Watts. The Gallery is a registered museum and is seeking accreditation status this year.

With the support of a new Curator and after a number of consultations, the plans for the collection and its purpose are becoming more clearly articulated.

The key points arising from the development of the collections strategy are:

- We are about Watts first and foremost and we are about Mary Watts second.
- We must ensure that Watts Gallery is not only refurbished but has a collections management policy which is sustainable – there is no point saving the building if we have no funds to look after the collection in the long term.

Disposal

The outcome of this, in line with our acquisitions and disposal policy after much soul searching and discussions over a period of nearly two years, was that Trustees arrived at the proposal to dispose of part of its non-core collection. Specifically, the Trustees looked at two works, *Jasmine* by Albert Moore and *The Triumph of Love* by Burne-Jones, which were not specifically designated for Watts Gallery, but were given to Watts Gallery in the 1950s. These pictures therefore

came to the Gallery over fifty years after Watts' death in 1904, they were items which were not specifically intended for Watts Gallery, there were no donor conditions attached which would disallow their being sold and the paintings in question fell outside the policy of the collection and Gallery. Arriving at this proposal, Trustees had been driven by the Watts Gallery collections policy, financial pressure and public value.

Reluctantly the proposal was to sell the works rather than transfer them to a public collection in order to meet the needs of the Watts Gallery collection in the long term. In addition to disposal, the Trustees are exploring the commercial loan of non-core works. The income from the sale of the work will be ringfenced for the purposes of conserving, storing, interpreting, displaying and acquiring for the collection.

On selling the items, the Trustees are obliged to get best value when they dispose of assets of material value and the Trustees are duty bound to meet their legal obligations.

The question of deaccession was considered by Trustees between 2004 and 2006. There were many concerns to debate. Would the result of this path lose Watts Gallery support from its donors and visitors? Was there a risk, that if this measure was not accepted by the Museums Association, Watts Gallery could lose its status as a registered/accredited museum and thereby deprive it of its eligibility for a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund? Finally, would the uproar caused by Watts Gallery taking such a controversial measure, destroy its credibility and any chance of delivering the *Hope* Project. When in full agreement that there was no other solution for the long-term care of the collection and given further incentive to pursue this path, as the Heritage Lottery Fund was requesting that Trustees had a strong financial reserve for the future of the collection as part of its capital bid, we took our case to the authorities and stake holders. Trustees knew that this was a long haul undertaking and every step needed thorough diligence and a listening approach.

Consultation

Trustees embarked upon a consultation process in line with the standards set down by Museums Association and Museums Libraries and Archive Council. We consulted with key stakeholders, donors, volunteers in public fora and through correspondence. We undertook research into the legal position which permitted this proposal. The consultation involved meetings with many individuals and organisations including the South East Libraries and Archives Council, the Museums Libraries and Archives Council, the Museums Association, the Heritage Lottery Fund and The Art Fund, the charity commissioners, and the MLA & V&A Purchase Grant Fund.

It was necessary to follow the appropriate steps set out by the Museums Association of advertising the disposal in Museums Journal

in order to ensure that the offer was first made to public collections either in this country or abroad; failing this the works would be sold through auction.

As part of our consultation we undertook some public research on the proposal to dispose among our visitors. This revealed that on learning that the works were not by Watts and the proceeds for the sale was to save the core collection there was 100% support. During December 2006 and early January 2007, visitors to Watts Gallery were asked for their opinions about the possible sale of two non-Watts paintings in order to raise funds for the conservation of the core collection. 61% were unaware that the Gallery owned paintings by artists other than Watts. 87% agreed that, if the Gallery was forced to sell paintings in line with conservation management policy, they should be works by artists other than Watts. 79% believed that the first priority of Watts Gallery's collection management policy should be conserving, promoting and interpreting works by G.F.Watts with 93% agreeing that any funds raised from selling paintings should be specifically for conserving the core collection. 97% agreed that museums and art galleries should be allowed to sell items from their collection if such a sale could ensure the survival of the core collection.

Right at the outset, in our discussions on which pictures we should sell, we wrote to those responsible for public collections of 19th-century work. There was some strong reaction against the principle of disposal, but no-one challenged our collections management principle for disposal on the grounds that the two nominated works *Jasmine* by Albert Moore and *The Triumph of Love* by Edward Burne-Jones should not remain at Watts Gallery as they were by artists whose work was well represented in public collections and therefore they did not need to be kept in this country or given to a public collection.

When the decision to dispose of the two works had been taken, the Watts Gallery Curator wrote again to the holders of 19th-century collections to seek their views and any interest in buying the works. There had been some interest but given the state of acquisition budgets and the estimate of the two works, these fell away.

Questions & Answers

During the consultation there were a number of points raised with us in discussion; these included:

Will this set a precedent and will you sell more works at some later date?

Trustees cannot foresee a time when they would sell from the core collection of Watts and Mary Watts.

Will this reduce confidence in Watts Gallery?

There will be those who, like the Trustees, regret this decision. We can only respond that we must lose two other paintings to save the many by Watts.

Why have we chosen these specific paintings?

The final selection of the two paintings was made on the basis of our collections management policy and in terms of doing the least harm to the overall collection and providing the maximum benefit to the core collection.

Are there no other options?

Trustees have weighed up several options, including selling a property on the Estate and selling land. Neither option is viable. The first in terms of the long-term income received by the charity from rents of the Estate would not be realised through a sale; the second because the Gallery is in a conservation area and there would be no planning permission.

Is this proposal finance driven or collections driven?

This is the nub of the debate. How can Trustees truly commit to caring for the collection in the long-term without ensuring that there is adequate financial provision to deliver their collections management policy?

Change in the Museums' ethical code

Perhaps the most interesting part of this process was the collaboration with the Museums Association. Based on two reports, one by the MA called *Collections of the Future* and one by Mark Jones, Director of the V&A, for the National Museums Directors' Conference called *Too much stuff*, there was a growing desire in the museum community to have a more "dynamic" approach to collections management. What was the point in having cellars full of an unrelated collection which would never be seen by the public, and having no means to acquire new works which might add to the public interest? With this in mind, the ethics committee of the Museums Association, chaired by Vanessa Trevelyan, decided to undertake a public consultation on the idea of altering the ethical code relating to disposal. The key element of this consultation focused on the words "a predisposition against disposal for financial gain". Following sector-wide consultation, the MA voted at its meeting in October 2007 to amend the wording to allow for sale of items in strictly limited cases and when specific conditions are met, these being: when the item falls outside the museum's core collection; when the income generated will enable significant long-term improvements to the collection; and when other sources of possible funding for the desired significant long-term improvement have been explored. Watts Gallery provided a good example of just such a case. It was for this reason that the MA invited the Director of Watts Gallery to address the MA conference in October 2006 when the consultation was launched.

The final part was that the Museums Association announced its toolkit on disposal for museums on the same day that Watts Gallery announced its decision to sell the two paintings at auction at Christie's in June last year.

The Sale

The two pictures were sold at auction on 5 June 2008. They yielded over £1.5m to provide a financial reserve to secure the long-term care of the collection. Both buyers were from overseas. From now on, year-on-year, the Gallery will have the benefit of approximately £30,000 to invest in conservation, storage, interpretation, acquisition and documentation of the collection. Already, in terms of its commitment to "Art for All", the Gallery is touring The Rob Dickins Collection which went to London, Harrogate, New York and is currently on show in the Ruskin Library in Lancaster. A major "Watts in the City" programme of exhibitions at The Guildhall Art Gallery, which has attracted over 15,000 people, and at St Paul's which is being seen by over 150 visitors a day, has taken place during the restoration of Watts Gallery. A celebration at Postman's Park, Watts' memorial to everyday heroes, is taking place to draw attention to another part of the great artist's legacy.

Conclusion

On the part of the Trustees, the disposal of two paintings has been a difficult path to tread and one which we would urge any museum or gallery to consider carefully before embarkation. We have tried to undertake the process with real diligence, and real concern to ensure that faith in the museum sector is not sabotaged and yet we fulfil our governance responsibilities as Trustees. It is not easy and we are grateful for the time that MA and MLA and others have taken in guiding and informing thinking on this difficult issue. If others have better ways of dealing with these difficult and complicated issues, we would be grateful to have their advice and ideas. We have a great deal to learn.

Throughout this extensive process, the Trustees have never sought to put Watts Gallery in the vanguard of a change in the sector or to trumpet this decision as bold and brave. It is a regrettable decision and one of last resort. However, if Watts Gallery is to continue to provide a unique visitor experience and fascinating archive and record of one of our most interesting periods in our history, a proper financial plan for the future of the collection was essential. This was the only way to achieve it.