Université de Montréal

Mary Seton Watts :
Artist, Activist, Feminist

Camille Audette Sabourin

Département d'histoire de l'art et d'études cinématographiques
Faculté des arts et des sciences

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Ce mémoire intitulé

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Présenté par Camille Audette Sabourin

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Nicholas Chare

Président-rapporteur

Ersy Contogouris

Directrice de recherche

Kristine Tanton

Membre du Jury

Résumé

Mary Seton Watts (1849–1938) était une artiste et une activiste importante de la fin du 19e siècle et du début du 20e en Angleterre. Bien qu'elle ait connu un grand succès de son vivant, l'histoire n'a su assurer l'héritage de cette femme. Le Royal Victoria College de l'Université McGill à Montréal abrite *Our Lady of the Snows*, une bannière en soie brodée par l'artiste, accrochée dans l'anonymat dans un couloir. La bannière fut commandée par le gouverneur général du Canada Lord Grey, en 1907, dans un effort d'assurer dans le système universitaire canadien une présence impériale. Il a ainsi fait la commande d'une série de bannière à des dames de la société anglaise, leur demandant spécifiquement l'inclusion d'une image de Saint George et le dragon. Seulement, des deux bannières envoyées par Mary Seton Watts, aucune ne présentait cette imagerie. Alors que *Our Lady of the Snows* a été envoyée à l'institution féminine Royal Victoria à Montréal, l'autre, *Spirit of the Flowers of the Nation*, n'a pas été incluse dans les envois du gouverneur général.

Ce mémoire vise à positionner *Our Lady of the Snows* à l'intersection de l'activisme féministe et de l'activité artistique de Mary Seton Watts. Tout au long de sa carrière, l'artiste a démontré que sa vision personnelle et son occupation professionnelle existaient en symbiose dans son esprit. Elle a, à la fois, utilisé son art dans ses efforts d'améliorer le monde autour d'elle et a puisé inspiration dans ses valeurs personnelles afin de construire un langage symbolique qui lui est propre. Peintre, potière, brodeuse, designer, entrepreneure, activiste et suffragiste, Mary Seton Watts a laissé un vaste héritage qui se caractérise par son habileté d'adaptation et son refus de se plier aux normes artistiques et sociales. L'artiste a produit cette bannière à un moment crucial du suffrage des femmes, où des bannières de nature similaire étaient utilisées comme outils de revendication. Par une analyse technique et symbolique détaillée de *Our Lady of the Snows*, ce mémoire démontre que l'œuvre est inscrite dans la foulée de ces bannières suffragistes, et comme un objet caractéristique du mariage entre art et activisme chez Mary Seton Watts.

Mots Clefs : Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938), Arts and Crafts, craftivisme, bannières suffragistes, broderie, histoire de l'art féministe

Abstract

Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938) was an important artist and activist of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century England. Although she was successful in her lifetime, her legacy has been forgotten through time. McGill University's Royal Victoria College in Montreal houses *Our Lady of the Snows*, a banner designed and embroidered by Seton Watts. The banner is hung unidentified in the hallways of the building which now serves as university housing. *Our Lady of the Snows* was part of a commission from the then governor general of Canada, Lord Grey in 1906. This project was in accordance to Lord Grey's wish to instill an imperial presence within Canadian universities. He ordered a series of embroidered banners from English gentlewomen and specifically requested they depict Saint George and the Dragon. However, of the two banners he received from Seton Watts, neither included the theme he had asked for. While *Our Lady of the Snows* was sent to Montreal, *Spirit of the Flowers of the Nation* was never displayed as part of his project.

This thesis sets out to position *Our Lady of the Snows* at the intersection of Seton Watts's feminist activism and artistic activity. Throughout her career, she exhibited how her art and values formed a symbiotic relationship. She used art in service of her social engagement and let her political beliefs transpire in her extensive symbolic language. Painter, potter, needleworker, designer, entrepreneur, activist and suffragist, Mary Seton Watts left a legacy that is extraordinary in its refusal to submit to artistic and societal expectations. She created this banner at a crucial moment in the history of the movement for women's suffrage. Banners were becoming an iconic symbol of suffragist processions and were used to reclaim needlework while fighting for women's rights. A close technical and symbolic reading of the banner positions the object as in direct dialogue with suffragist banners, as well as an emblematic demonstration of the union of art and activism in the work of Mary Seton Watts.

Keywords: Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938), Arts and Crafts, craftivism, suffragist banners, embroidery, needlework, feminist art history

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Introduction

McGill University's Royal Victoria College is very different now than it was when it was built in 1899. Initially housing one of Canada's first women's colleges, the building underwent many changes to accommodate the needs of the university, and it is now a dormitory building. Framed collages in the hallways remind students and visitors of the history of the college. In a particularly dark hallway, one might entirely miss the 255 x 153 cm glass case that hangs on a wall partially hidden behind a door. (Fig. 1) The case protects *Our Lady of the Snows*, an embroidered banner that was offered to the Royal Victoria College in 1907 by the then governor general of Canada, Lord Grey. Neither the banner nor its creator are identified and the presence of the banner in an otherwise sober décor is unexplained. *Our Lady of the Snows* was part of a project piloted by Grey to instill an imperial presence within Canadian universities.[1] It is one of a series of embroidered banners of Saint George and the Dragon that the governor general commissioned from various artists. Representative of the empire, and a model of masculinity, courage and loyalty towards the crown, Saint George embodied the values that Lord Grey wished to see in Canadian youth. The banners were commissioned from English gentleladies and made their way to Grey's Government House in Ottawa when completed, to be assigned throughout the country. The scheme went as planned until Grey received the two banners designed by artist Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938): *Our Lady of the Snows* and *Spirit of the Flowers of the Nation.* Neither of them included Saint George, the main pictorial element requested by Lord Grey. Instead, Seton Watts designed "Bejewelled lad[ies] in frosted silk and velvet."[2] Although, the banners resisted some of the governor general's wishes, *Our Lady of the Snows* was sent to the Royal Victoria College in the name of Queen Alexandra, who pressured Grey to include it in his deployment. *Spirit of the Flowers of the Nation* never left Government House and was brought back to England at the end of Lord Grey's term. It is now part of the Victoria and Albert collection in London.

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[1] Salahub, Jennifer (2004), "The Distribution of Cultural Identity: A Canadian Case Study," presented at "Appropriation," "Acculturation," "Transformation," *Textile Society of America 9th Biennial Symposium Proceedings*, p. 506.
[2] Salahub, Jennifer (2006), "Governor General Grey's 'Little Scheme': Majesty in Canada," in Colin Coates, ed. *Majesty in Canada: Essays on the Role of* Royalty, Toronto: Dundrun Press, p. 111.

Fig. 1 – *Our Lady of the Snows* partly hidden by a door in a hallway of the Royal Victoria College.

Our Lady of the Snows is one of thousands of objects overlooked by the institution that owns them. Specifically in the Royal Victoria College art collection, the erasure is limited to Seton Watts's banner. Many paintings of the collection are hung in the main entrance, where everyone can see them, others in a meeting room or places of importance. All these paintings are clearly identified with either the subject represented or the name of the artist.[3] Seton Watts's banner seems to have been placed somewhere out of the way, unidentified and ignored by those who pass by it every day. This suggests a lack of interest about this object specifically, but perhaps also a general sense of reserve towards textile art and craft that mirrors its lower status in the art historical canon.

The creator of the banner has been similarly neglected. During her life, Mary Seton Watts was one of England's most successful women artists. An engaged member of her community and respected professional, Mary Seton Watts's achievements have hardly secured her a footnote in art history books. In recent years, more researchers have taken interest in this woman who rejected both artistic traditions and social customs. She was a potter, designer, painter, activist, and needleworker, she established herself as a successful artist by bringing together personal beliefs and artistic expression. Seton Watts's professional activity was integrated to her political positions. She was aware of her environment and used her influence to better the world around her. Involved in the Arts and Crafts Movement and in the fight for women's suffrage, she positioned herself as an agent of the changing times. She expressed her social concerns within her artistic activity and used art in her political activism. She founded guilds to provide employment for her community, established sustainable exploitation of local materials, and always kept her personal vision of art as the priority when embarking on a new project. Her reputation and success assured her many high-profile commissions such as the banners for Lord Grey.

In the following pages, I seek to demonstrate that *Our Lady of the Snows* is emblematic of Mary Seton Watts's work as an artist and as an activist. Throughout her career, she expounded a personal symbolism and a vision that defied artistic tradition and her peers' expectations. Through a close technical and symbolic reading of *Our Lady of the Snows*, and using Seton Watts's own words, which she shared through her journals and her book *The Word in the Pattern*, I wish to restitute her agency as an artist and an activist. I will show that this banner can be read as a powerful statement of her artistic and political convictions, her belief in needlework as an art form and her

[3] A majority of these paintings are portraits, and the labels identify the sitter and their affiliation with the Royal Victoria College.

commitment to the cause of women's suffrage, and indeed of the link between craft and women's suffrage.

Literature review

It is only in the last two decades or so that interest in Mary Seton Watts has been revived. Her career had previously been eclipsed by that of her husband, artist George Frederic Watts (1817-1904). GF Watts was a highly successful portraitist, allegorical painter and sculptor. He was associated with the Symbolist movement and often represented allegories of love, hope, life and death in his work. He embraced the movement's celebration of subjectivity and its rejection of naturalism. Although he is perhaps not considered quite as highly today, he was a celebrated painter in his time and has been the subject of numerous monographs, notably Hugh Macmillan's *The Life-Work of George Frederick*[4] *Watts*[5] (1906), G.K. Chesterton's *G.F. Watts*[6] (1914), and, more recently, Marks Bills and Barbara Bryant's *G.F. Watts: Victorian Visionary: Highlights from the Watts Gallery Collection*[7] (2008). These publications explore GF Watts's life and career in depth, and if she is mentioned at all, Mary Seton Watts is relegated to a minor role. Her agency as an artist has been stripped away: her work is portrayed as a simple hobby, or, it is mistakenly attributed to her husband. The most influencial monograph on GF Watts is Wilfrid Blunt's biography, entitled *England's Michelangelo* in reference to the nickname that was given to him by his contemporary, Frederick Lord Leighton, to suggest GF Watts's talent and influence. In his book, Blunt characterized Seton Watts as a submissive "acolyte and servant to the genius of [G. F.] Watts," as a "nurse" and a "slave" to her husband, and that she "worshiped him blindly."[8] This characterization has remained unchallenged until recently. It is true that Seton Watts herself played a part in her husband's pantheonization. After his death, she dedicated a significant part of her

[4] GF Watts always spelled his name with a "k," it is unknown why he is generally referred to without it.
[5] Macmillan, Hugh (1906), *The Life-Work of George Frederick Watts,* Chicago: University of Chicago, 302p.
[6] Chesterton, Gilbert Keith (1914), *G.F. Watts,* London: Duckworth, 75p.
[7] Bills, Mark & Bryant, Barbara (2008), *G.F. Watts: Victorian Visionary: Highlights from the Watts Gallery Collection,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 310p.
[8] Blunt, Wilfrid (1975), *England's Michelangelo: A Biography of George Frederic Watts*, London: Hamilton, 258p.

time assuring his legacy. In her *Annals of an Artist's Life*,[9] Mary Seton Watts documents his accomplishements in detail. She ensured the development of the Watts Gallery that would house their works, and she saw to completion many of the projects left unfinished at his death.

This thesis builds on research by Veronica Franklin Gould, Dresna Greenhow and Lucy Ella Rose, who have all contributed to bring Seton Watts's work out of the shadows. In 1998, Gould published *Unsung Heroine of Art Nouveau*[10], which followed from her work on the exhibition of the same name that she curated for the Watts Gallery. This exhibition and book, which relied heavily on the Watts Gallery archives and more specifically on Seton Watts's journals, generated renewed scholarly interest in the artist's life and career. After years spent transcribing Seton Watts's journals, Desna Greenhow published a selection of them in 2016,[11] thus providing an invaluable resource for future research into the artist and her oeuvre. Her written words provide a crucial point of view on her work and reveal otherwise unknown information. The publication of the journals were also an important step towards a respectful study of her work, and towards recognizing and bringing to light the artist's agency. Thus far, research has focused on Seton Watts's more visible work, such as the Watts Cemetery Chapel and the Compton Pottery Guild. Her involvement as an activist and the art she produced after her husband's death, of which *Our Lady of the Snows* is an example, remain largely unexplored. Lucy Ella Rose's work in *Suffragist Artists in Partnership: Gender, Word, and Image*[12] brought an entirely new focus on Seton Watts's work, re-establishing her agency within the Watts couple and recognizing her involvement in the suffrage movement.

My research is greatly indebted to these publications. My thesis aims to build upon them in order to bring into view Mary Seton Watts's demonstration of her agency as an artist, how agency and social concern are present in the banner *Our Lady of the Snows*.

The banner itself has been little studied by art historians. The documentation on this and the accompanying *Spirit of the Flowers of the Nation* is very limited. The Watts Gallery collection, which is responsible for the bulk of the conservation of Mary Seton Watts' works and the

[9] Watts, Mary Seton (1912), *Annals of an Artist's Life*, London: Macmillan and Co., Vol. 1: 330 pp., Vol. 2: 352 pp., Vol. 3: 329 pp.
[10] Gould, Veronica Franklin (1998), *The Unsung Heroine of Art Nouveau,* Compton: Watts Gallery, 80p.
[11] Greenhow, Desna, ed. (2016), *The Diary of Mary Seton Watts 1887-1904*, London: Lund Humphries, 264p.
[12] Rose, Lucy Ella (2018), *Suffragist Artists in Partnership: Gender, Word and Image*, Edinburgh University Press, 260p.

unearthing of her legacy, does not possess any archives on this commission. Craft historian Jennifer Salahub wrote about Grey's commission in "Embroidering the Ties of Empire: The Lord Grey Banners"[13] (1999), "The Distribution of Cultural Identity: a Canadian Case Study"[14] (2004) and "Governor General Grey's "Little Scheme": Majesty in Canada"[15] (2006). Her focus is on the commission as a whole and on the governor general's motivations behind the commission. She highlights the ways in which Seton Watts's contributions depart from the other banners and indeed from the commission itself. She does not explore the motivations behind Seton Watts's divergence but mentions Lord Grey's attempts at justifying the ways in which *Our Lady of the Snows* respected the commission.

Art historian Elaine Cheasley Paterson has published two articles specifically on *Our Lady of the Snows: "*Our Lady of the Snows: Settlement, Empire, and 'The Children of Canada' in the Needlework of Mary Seton Watts (1848-1938)"[16] and "Gifted Design: Imperial Benevolence in the Needlework of Mary Seton Watts."[17] Cheasley Paterson shows that Seton Watts used her art to profit charitable causes and not solely for her own reputation or monetary gain. Cheasley Paterson's readings of *Our Lady of the Snows* establish a parallel between Seton Watts's philanthropic activities and the British child migration movement. "Part cultural history, part biography, part family oral history," is how Paterson explains her approach to these two articles. This approach has greatly influenced my own. While I agree that the banner was created with motivations separate from the governor general's demands, I believe we can read other motivations behind it as well – motivations that are more personal to Watts than what is presented in these articles. I argue that Seton Watts took a risk in departing so boldly from Lord Grey's demands and that this risk was in the name of a cause that was, to her, worth jeopardizing her career and her reputation for. Her continuous involvement in the women's suffrage and the nature of the banner

[13] Salahub, Jennifer (1999), "Embroidering the Ties of Empire," in Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward & Jeremy Aynsley, eds., *Material Memories: Design and Evocation*, Oxford: Berg Publishers, p. 143-158.
[14] Salahub, Jennifer (2004), "The Distribution of Cultural Identity: A Canadian Case Study," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, p. 506.
[15] Salahub, Jennifer (2006), "Governor General Grey's 'Little Scheme': Majesty in Canada" in Colin Coates, Ed. *Majesty in Canada: Essays on the Role of* Royalty, Toronto: Dundrun Press, p. 98-118.
[16] Paterson, Elaine Cheasley (2020), "Our Lady of the Snows: Settlement, Empire, and 'The Children of Canada' in the Needlework of Mary Seton Watts (1848-1938)," in Johana Amos and Lisa Binkley, eds., *Stitching the Self: Identity and the Needle Arts,* London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, p. 111-122.
[17] Paterson, Elaine Cheasley (2020), "Gifted Design: Imperial Benevolence in the Needlework of Mary Seton Watts," in John Potvin and Marie-Ève Marchand, eds., *Design and Agency: Critical Perspectives on Identities, Histories, and Practices,* London: Bloomsbury, p. 49-68.

lead me to believe she saw the commission as an opportunity to bring a suffragist presence into colleges and universities.

Methodological Framework

When Linda Nochlin published "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in 1971, her goal was not to prove that women are capable of greatness, but rather to expose how art education has failed women. In a similar fashion, I wish to resist traditional histories of art to offer an unprejudiced look at Mary Seton Watts and her work. As Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker discuss in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, even modern attempts that only slightly alter traditional art history have failed to write about women artists adequately.[18] In order to provide a reading of *Our Lady of the Snows* that shows the significance of this work as well as the extent of Seton Watts's skill, I will take into consideration the wider socio-economic context at the time of the banner's creation and examine this work through the lens of material studies and visual culture.

I am also borrowing from the strategies displayed in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism* edited by Norma Broude and Marry D. Garrard. Instead of simply deploring women's difficulty to be recognized within the institutions of art, they authors opt to acknowledge the existing agency of women artists, and adopt this as their strategy:

> [T]he right strategy for feminists now, in our view, is not to complain that we don't have access to cultural power, but simply to recognize and claim the power and agency that women have had and continue to exercise. What needs now to be further explored is the interplay between women's cultural assertion and the erasure or resistance that both followed and preceded it.[19]

One strategy I used to ensure the respect of Seton Watts's agency within my analysis of her work was to use her writings and pay particular attention to the different ways in which she exercized

[18] Parker, Rozsika & Pollock, Griselda (1981), *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, London: Pandora Press, p. 52.
[19] Broude, Norma & Garrard, Mary D. (2005), "Introduction: Feminism and Art History" in Broude & Garrard, eds., *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 22.

her agency. One of those conscious choices was to refer to her as Mary Seton Watts (or Seton Watts), as it is how she referred to herself. Very early on, I decided against using only "Mary" as many did when writing about her husband.[20] Referring to women artists by their first names has been done for too long to infantilize them or undermine their status as professional artists, and has never been common practice for their male counterparts. A majority of Seton Watts's professional artistic activity was signed under her married name. Likewise, most contemporary press coverage about her work or social involvement is under Mary Seton Watts. The journals Seton Watts left behind are at the heart of my argument. As her agency has been stripped almost systematically in the past, I wanted to let her words guide my research and let her claim her own power.

Dissertation Structure

The thesis is separated into three parts that demonstrate how Mary Seton Watts's activism, art, and personal values are fundamentally linked. Each chapter title is a quotation taken from Seton Watts's journals. The first chapter, "Artistic [instinct] cannot die," retraces the main events of Seton Watts's life and career. Her eagerness to explore different mediums and her exploitation of them punctuate the major events of her life. The chapter follows Seton Watts's life chronologically and shows her immense capacity to adapt to her changing circumstances. From her childhood in Inverness, Scotland, to her artistic training in London, her marriage to GF Watts at the relatively advanced age of thirty-six, her foundation of pottery guilds, and her involvement in the women's suffrage movement well into her old age, Seton Watts proved that it was possible to weave professional ambition and social concern. The different projects presented in this chapter exhibit how personal life and professional life were not distinct for Seton Watts.

The second chapter, "I begin to design and think," analyzes the artist and social context at the time of the commission of the banner. The changes brought by the Industrial Revolution greatly impacted the commerce of art as well as many artists' relationship to the act of creation. The Arts and Crafts movement, of which Seton Watts was a part, represented an integration of concern for social welfare with preference for non-canonical artistic mediums. Her growing involvement in philanthropic activities encouraged her to use her art for the benefit of others. Similarly, her social

[20] I will refer to her husband as "GF Watts" to avoid confusion.

concern manifested itself in her elaborate designs and in her choice of mediums. Seton Watts's choice to exploit pottery is allied with her desire to involve her community in her artistic work and to engage in a sustainable practice. She and other women from the Home Arts Industries Association were involved in the women's suffrage movement and participated in suffragist processions. This chapter also highlights the significant role of women artists, who were important figures in the suffrage movement as they introduced one of the marches' most recognizable symbols: banners.

The last chapter, "I dare say what I think," presents an in-depth technical and symbolic reading of *Our Lady of the Snows* that reveals how Mary Seton Watts's disregard for Lord Grey's requests translated into a scheme of her own design that was personal and meaningful to her. Re-establishing Seton Watts's agency implies recognizing her knowledge of suffragist banners as well as her technical know-how when fulfilling this commission. The analysis of the banner will highlight the immense technical skill displayed by Seton Watts. The variety of stitches, the different techniques employed to achieve the intricately detailed composition will be explored here for the first time.

Through word and image, Mary Seton Watts demonstrated an ability to systematically incorporate art in her activism and her personal beliefs in her art. As I hope to show in the following pages, *Our Lady of the Snows* gives us a singular access to her fierce independence, her commitment to the women's cause, and her multifaceted artistic expression.

CHAPTER 1: “Artistic [instinct] cannot die”

This chapter sets out to trace Mary Seton Watts’s life and career. While her story has been told almost exclusively in the margins of her husband’s, I will show that she was an accomplished and recognized artist in her own right. She was born at a time when opportunities were limited for women who wanted to become professional artists. The authority enforced by the Royal Academy prevented access to education for women, and societal expectations reduced their artistic explorations to amateur work. Seton Watts was an established artist before her marriage to GF Watts. Although her husband’s artistic career subordinated hers, she pursued her own aspirations. She explored different mediums and established herself as a businesswoman by founding two pottery guilds. Her own career remained a priority during her marriage, and she continued her exploration well after her husband’s death. She used her status to benefit other women aspiring to an artistic career. The first two parts of the chapter are chronological. “Formative Years” takes us to 1886, when the Watts couple married, and “Married Life” to 1891, when they moved to Compton, Surrey, a turning point in Seton Watts’s artistic expression. The third part, “Compton, Surrey: Building a Community,” explores how Seton Watts achieved artistic satisfaction through her work in Surrey. There, she developed the symbolic language that appears in all her subsequent works. Her design of the Watts Cemetery Chapel is pivotal to understanding her art, as she documented her vision abundantly. The Chapel is also associated with the foundation of the Compton Pottery Guild and Seton Watts’s philanthropic efforts. The section “Social Involvement” is more thematic. In it, I explore Seton Watts’s extensive participation in philanthropic activities as well as her strategies specifically as a woman artist in these causes. The chapter closes with a consideration of the reasons for Seton Watts’s absence from history books and the ways in which her legacy is slowly being restored.

Formative Years

Mary Seton Fraser-Tytler was born on November 25, 1849, in India, where her father was working for the East India Company. While she was still young, she and her two sisters moved to Scotland, where they were raised by their grandparents at Aldourie Castle. Their mother, Etheldred

St Barbe, had died in 1851 and their father, Charles Edward Fraser-Tytler remained in India until 1861,[21] after which the family moved to Sanquhar, Forres, in Scotland. He had remarried in 1852 and had four more children. He dedicated his time to writing esoteric dissertations such as *The Structure of Prophecy* and *The New View of the Apocalypse.* He encouraged his daughters to pursue their artistic endeavours professionally. Very early in life, Mary Seton Watts showed promise as an artist and wanted to become a successful portraitist.[22] She attended the Inverness Art Training School at seventeen years old, and was as such among the first generations of women to gain access to an artistic education in Britain. Very few women were accepted in these programs and even fewer achieved professional success afterwards, but opportunities were opening up for women in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In 1841, Britain recorded only 278 professional women artists. By 1871, this number had jumped to 1069.[23] Although they were growing in numbers, women artists were not given the same training as their male counterparts. For instance, they were still forbidden from attending life drawing classes, even though these were considered as foundational to artistic training.

In 1868, Seton Watts joined her sisters in Freshwater, on the Isle of Wight, where they stayed with a family friend,[24] the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron.[25] They lived with Cameron for a few months and worked with her by helping with the design of props for the sets. Cameron gathered the Fraser-Tytler sisters for a portrait photograph that was inspired by *Maud*, the poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson.[26] In Cameron's photograph, each girl represents a flower. The poet William Allingham[27] was visiting Cameron's studio that day and recorded in his journal the strong impression the photographer and her sitters made on him:

[21] Seton, George (1896), *History of the Family of Seton During Eight Centuries,* Edinburgh: privately printed by T. and A. Constable, Vol. 2, p. 558-559. Accessed through the National Library of Scotland [online]: https://digital.nls.uk/histories-of-scottish-families/archive/96743300?mode=transcription.
[22] Gould, Veronica Franklin (1998), *The Unsung Heroine of Art Nouveau,* Compton: Watts Gallery, p. 17-19.
[23] Silcock, Jane (2018), "Genius and Gender: Women Artists and the Female Nude 1870-1920," *The British Art Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 3, p. 20.
[24] Acquainted through Cameron's husband, Charles Hay Cameron, who also had ties in India.
[25] Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879) British photographer and one of the most important portraitists of the nineteenth century.
[26] Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) British poet and friend of GF Watts.
[27] William Allingham (1824-1889) Irish poet and editor.

Meet girls going up the stairs in fancy dresses, Mrs C. has been photographing a group, and appears carrying glass negative in her collodionised hands. Magnificent! To focus them all in one picture, such an effort![28]

[28] Allingham, William (1868), *The Diaries*, H Allingham & D Radford, ed., London: The Folio Society, p. 164-165.

Fig. 2 - Julia Margaret Cameron, *Rosebud Garden of Girls,* 1868. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.
Left to right: Eleonor[29], Christina, Mary and Ethel Fraser-Tytler.

[29] Eleonor Fraser-Tytler is one of the daughters of Charles Edward Fraser-Tytler's second marriage.

Rosebud Garden of Girls (Fig. 2) is exemplary of Cameron's style with her signature soft focus and ethereal compositions. She positioned each model and created a living tableau. Cameron used her camera to represent each girl in the manifestation of femininity depicted by Tennyson. Cameron dressed the girls in loose flowing dresses and left their hair to fall on their shoulders. She created a romanticised image of femininity, youth, and purity.

The sisters stayed with Cameron for three months before travelling to Europe at the end of July 1868. They stayed in Dresden, Germany between 1868-1869 and spent the winter of 1869 in Rome. During their travels, Mary Seton Watts studied works of arts at the Dresden Gallery, which she visited nearly every day.[30] The Fraser-Tytler family was financially comfortable, and father's encouragement of his daughters' endeavours meant that they enjoyed a measure of independence. Etheldred (Ethel) the eldest, named after their mother, dedicated her life to philanthropic activity, and specifically to opening a home of recovery in the countryside to relieve overcrowded London hospitals. The Schiff Home was opened in 1910 and Ethel's legacy is recorded in the naming of the Fraser-Tytler Ward.[31] Christina Catherine Liddell (Fraser-Tytler), the second child, was a published writer. A poet and a novelist, she pursued her career as a writer.[32] Seton Watts illustrated Christina's collection of short stories *Sweet Violet and Other Stories* in 1869.[33]

Mary enrolled at the South Kensington School of Art in 1870. That same year, she met painter George Frederic Watts, whom she greatly admired. GF Watts became a mentor, and they struck a friendship that lasted over sixteen years before they married.

A growing interest for clay modelling led Mary Seton Watts to study at The Slade School of Fine Art in 1873. The school, founded just two years earlier, aimed to introduce their students to French *atelier* practices. It was also progressive and accepted both men and women.[34] Her time at The Slade[35] familiarized her with craft and guild practices. There, she became acquainted with the French sculptor Aimé-Jules Dalou, who taught dynamic clay modelling classes and shared his philosophies on the practice. The training she received from Dalou allowed her to begin to explore

[30] McMahon, Mary (2013), *The Making of Mary Seton Watts,* Compton: Watts Gallery, p. 17.
[31] Seton, *History of the Family of Seton During Eight Centuries,* p. 558.
[32] Rose, Lucy Ella (2018), "Christina Liddell, the Forgotten Fraser-Tytler Sister: Censorship and Suppression in Mary Watts's Life Writing," *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century,* No. 27, p. 8.
[33] McMahon, *The Making of Mary Seton Watts,* p. 15.
[34] Rose, Lucy Ella (2016), "Subversive Representations of Women and Death in Victorian Visual Culture: The 'M/Other' in the Art and Craft of George Frederic Watts and Mary Seton Watts," *Visual Culture in Britain,* Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 48.
[35] The name by which the institution was known as at the time.

pottery, which would later play a major role in her life and artistic career. Seton Watts left The Slade to study privately with Dalou. His mentorship led her to later adopt clay modelling as one of her principal means of expression. Many terra cotta etchings left by Seton Watts show the influence the sculptor had on her, especially his Mother and Child series.[36] While developing her skills as a potter, Mary Seton Watts kept exploring picturality. In 1872, she placed first in the periodical *Good Words for the Young*'s[37] annual list of illustrators. That same year, the illustrations she produced for the German author Richard Leander (Richard von Volkmann) in *Good Words for the Young* were published in *Fantastic Stories*,[38] a collection of Leander's work. She painted the portraits of her sisters Christina and Etheldred in 1870 and 1875 respectively.[39] She and GF Watts visited each other's studios, and she became his unofficial student. Through shared artistic philosophies and political opinions, their artistic relationship developed into a more personal one. She confessed her growing feelings for him in 1885, but he rebuffed her advances, dismissing her as a child infatuated with his art.[40] Perhaps it was their considerable age difference that explains Watts's reluctance to court Fraser-Tytler.

In 1884, she started giving clay modelling classes to people in dire poverty in Whitechapel. These were organized by social reformers Reverend Samuel Barnett and his wife Henrietta Barnett in an effort to help these individuals find employment by teaching them a trade. Toynbee Hall hosted artists weekly, their classes helped the students join guilds and escape poverty. Seton Watts would travel to Whitechapel from Pimlico,[41] another London neighbourhood, twice a week to teach these classes. Such endeavours were increasingly popular the United Kingdom in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In 1877, artist and social reformer Eglantyne Louisa Jebb had been inspired by the ideas of the Arts and Crafts movement to start the Home Arts and Industries Association (HAIA).[42] The HAIA believed in social justice as well as creating a sense of community among its members, values that were at the core of Mary Seton Watts's own personal beliefs. The two women met in 1886 and Mary Seton Watts got involved in the HAIA quickly

[36] McMahon, *The Making of Mary Seton Watts,* p. 22-23.
[37] *Good Words for the Young* was a monthly periodical published by Alexander Strahan between 1860 and 1877. Its goal was to publish high-quality literature with illustrations for children. Seton Watts made several illustrations for the periodical.
[38] Leander, Richard (1873), *Fantastic Stories,* London: Henry S. King & Co, 36p.
[39] Gould, *Unsung Heroine of the Art Nouveau,* p. 15.
[40] Letter from GF Watts, 24 Lewes Crescent, Kemp Town, Brighton, to MFT, 27 January 1885, quoted in Gould (1998), p. 27.
[41] She moved to the Pimlico neighbourhood in 1881 with her stepmother after her father's death.
[42] Then Cottage Arts Association.

thereafter. She was elected to the HAIA's Council Headquarters just a year later. GF Watts was also involved in the association through his acquaintance with Earl Brownlow, who had been appointed president in 1884.[43] The presence of both artists in the association rekindled their relationship, and in July 1886, he proposed. This time, it was Mary Seton Watts who was hesitant. She feared her marital duties would prevent her from pursuing her career, and this was a sacrifice she was unwilling to make. But upon GF Watts's assurances that she would be able to continue her artistic career,[44] she agreed, and they married on November 20, 1886.

Married Life

Their six-month honeymoon took them to Egypt and Greece. The trip was documented by Seton Watts in her journals:

> *Athens* […] We looked out through the pillars of the Parthenon & saw the same blue wonders that had been the power that stirred Homer, Phidias & all those wonderful men of that wonderful age. [GF Watts] spoke to me of those giants of the past.[45]

The diaries she left behind reveal the extent of her artistic collaboration with GF Watts. She mentions discussing designs with him on multiple occasions and even physically collaborating with him on some of his works. In GF Watts's memorial sculpture in honour of his friend Lord Tennyson completed in 1903, for instance, the flower that Tennyson holds, one of the key points in the sculpture, was made by Mary Seton Watts. Such collaboration was common in their work. In 1904, GF Watts painted the portrait of Lilian Mackintosh[46], the young girl they had unofficially adopted in 1898.[47] When GF Watts painted her portrait, *Lilian* (Fig. 3), Seton Watts was dissatisfied with certain details of the painting. She set out to entirely repaint the floral arrangement

[43] Paterson, Elaine Cheasley (2018), "Tracing Craft – Labour, Creativity, and Sustainability in the Home Arts Movement," *Journal of Canadian Art History/ Annales d'histoire de l'art Canadien*, Vol. 39/40, No. 2/1, p. 44.
[44] Gould, *Unsung Heroine of the Art Nouveau,* p. 27-30.
[45] MS Watts, Journal April 15, 1886, p. 26.
[46] Lilian Chapman after her marriage.
[47] The details surrounding the adoption are unknown because the journal entries mentioning the process were censored, allegedly by Lilian Chapman herself. Rose, Lucy Ella (2017), "The Diaries of Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938): A Record of Her Conjugal Creative Partnership with 'England's Michelangelo', George Frederic Watts (1817–1904)," *Life Writing,* Vol. 14, No. 2, p. 524.

the girl holds, for she found that the one her husband had originally painted was too "funereal."[48] These were not isolated incidents. In her journals, she noted on multiple occasions unapologetically that she advised her husband to change certain details. "I returned at the last to suggest a touch to strengthen the chin,"[49] she wrote about another portrait.

Fig. 3 - George Frederic Watts & Mary Seton Watts, *Lilian*, 1904, oil on canvas, Watts Gallery Trust Collection.

[48] Rose, Lucy Ella (2018), *Suffragist Artists in Partnership: Gender, Word and Image*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 36.
[49] MS Watts, Journal September 27, 1891, p. 98.

The scholar of Victorian literature Lucy Ella Rose believes that the couple's artistic partnership went beyond Seton Watts's occasional intervention in her husband's paintings. Rose argues that the Watts couple shared "an allegorical iconographic vocabulary."[50] In their respective work, they both strived to represent love, hope, life, and death allegorically. In *The Unsung Heroine of Art Nouveau,* art historian Victoria Franklin Gould mentions the existence of "Wattsian"[51] themes, a term she uses to indicate Seton Watts's use of symbolism introduced by her husband. However, the reality is more nuanced. As Rose shows, the couple influenced each other, and their symbolic expression was born of an ongoing dialogue of images and beliefs throughout their marriage. Rose notes the couple's subversive representations of mothers as angels of death as an example of this mutual visual expression. These representations contrasted with the symbolism usually associated with motherhood at the time. For Rose, the singularity of this symbolism is exemplary of the philosophies discussed between the couple. This imagery is visible, notably, in *Death Crowning Innocence*, a painting of GF Watts which was reinterpreted by Seton Watts on more than one occasion. The painting started as a sketch done by GF Watts to give to his wife's family following the death of her three-year old nephew in 1886. And yet, it is Seton Watts who is associated with the creation of this image. Between 1887 and 1891, Seton Watts undertook the design of a memorial for her family's private cemetery in Aldourie, Scotland.[52] The *Aldourie Triptych* is composed of three bronze panels, each a painting by GF Watts "re-presented"[53] by Seton Watts: *Love and Death*, *Death Crowning Innocence*, and *The Messenger.* Seton Watts translated the paintings into tridimensional relief, thus creating a new way of looking at the composition by adding physical depth and a new materiality. The paintings are not copied but reimagined in a different medium. Moreover, she changed details in the composition to better fit her interpretation of the scene. The hand of Death in the *Death Crowning Innocence* (Fig. 4) panel is a great example of the active reinterpretation done by Seton Watts. In her version (Fig. 5) the hand in carefully placed on the baby's face, whereas GF Watts's version shows Death holding the baby's hand. The painting's Death conveys a certain reassurance with a soothing gesture towards the baby. Seton Watts seems to have captured the exact moment where she brings death to the child. *Death Crowning Innocence* is a good example of the dynamics within "Wattsian"

[50] Rose, *Suffragist Artists in Partnership: Gender, Word and Image*, p. 38-39.
[51] Gould, *Unsung Heroine of Art Nouveau*, p. 43.
[52] Gould, *Unsung Heroine of Art Nouveau*, p. 30.
[53] Term used by Rose to signify how Seton Watts reprised her husband's work.

symbolism. The mother as Death was a symbol unique to their art, born of both of their minds. Nonetheless, through different eyes, the same composition presents some differences. The intimacy Seton Watts has with some of her husband's paintings suggests affection beyond a simple liking of his work. There is no evidence of her direct involvement in the design of this painting, however it translates a mutual influence between the couple.

Fig. 4 - GF Watts, *Death Crowning Innocence,* 1886-7, oil paint on canvas, 128 x 80 cm, Tate, N01635.
Fig. 5 - Mary Seton Watts, *Aldourie Triptych, Death Crowning Innocence pannel,* 1891, 102 x 67 cm, bronze, Watts Gallery.

Shortly after their marriage, Seton Watts's grew frustrated with the subordinate status of her career within her relationship. "Instead of my work, I focus on him."[54] While she was devoted to her husband's career, he was not so to hers. Her marriage to GF Watts required of her to accomplish certain duties and follow the needs of his career – for example when he called for her to advise on his work. A second frustration appeared as she grew tired of standing in the shadow of her husband as a painter. As her frustration escalated, she thought of completely abandoning art until she came to peace with her situation. "It will take me a little while yet to get over being under the shadow of his great work. I know until I do I shall do nothing."[55] This is when Seton Watts moved away from painting and decided to delve deeper in her exploration of non-canonical mediums, such as gesso panels, pottery and textile design. She embarked on the quest to find a medium that would allow her to express herself, and increasingly turned towards crafts and other "lesser" mediums. Each technique she mastered offered its own particularities. Clay modelling, gesso reliefs and symbolic design allowed her to gain greater creative independence. Since such artistic expressions were considered below the academic mediums of painting and sculpture, they were not subjected to the strict rules of the Royal Academy.[56] The much lesser degree of institutionalization for crafts translated into fewer rules and prerequisite elements in the designs. This freedom allowed her to develop a visual language that was entirely her own, but also to experiment with shapes and symbolism. Drawing inspiration from her Scottish heritage as well as her keen interest in Greek and Egyptian symbology, Mary Seton Watts continued to experiment across various mediums, from needlework to pottery, sculpture, and painting.[57]

[54] Seton Watts, Journal September 7, 1887.
[55] Seton Watts, Journal September 7, 1887.
[56] Kauffman, Edgar Jr. (1975), "The Arts and Crafts: Reactionary or Progressive?," *Record of the Art Museum,* Vol. 34, No. 2, p. 10.
[57] Hilary, Catherine (2012), "'A Shout from the Heart': Tracing the Genesis of Watts Chapel in the Ceiling Decoration at Limnerslease," in Mark Bills & Desna Greenhow, eds, *The Word in the Pattern: A Facsimile with Accompanying Essays on Mary Seton Watts's Cemetery Chapel Drawn from Watts Gallery Symposium 2010,* Lymington: The Arts and Craft Movement in Surrey, p. 8.

Compton, Surrey: Building a Community

When the couple moved to Compton in 1891, Seton Watts set out to decorate their home in accordance with the HAIA philosophy, which she shared, of surrounding everyday life with art. They named their home Limnerslease, from the Old English words "limner" meaning artist and "leasen" meaning: "To glean, our hope being that there were golden years to be gleaned in this house."[58] She conceived an elaborate symbolic program involving each of the rooms in their home. Seton Watts chose gesso reliefs to decorate her intimate space. They were not meant for the public eye and displayed the artist's philosophy of life. The meticulous symbolic design suggests a desire to create an inspiring domestic environment. Mary Seton Watts took inspiration from her Celtic heritage, her religious upbringing and her deep fascination for Egyptian mythology. She borrowed from each of these cultures to create a visual language representative of her beliefs. She shared her creative strategy and the motives behind her designs in her journal: "Signor[59] asked me what I was designing for the niche – I said I want it to be descriptive of the time we pass there – the things we think of chiefly."[60] Her objective was to inspire a sense of purpose in each room. The symbolism and colours she chose were complementary with the activities practiced in the room. The panels from the ceiling of the Red-Room at Limnerslease (Fig. 6), was analysed by art historian Veronica Franklin Gould in *The Symbolic Bas-Relief Designs of Mary Watts*.[61] She describes the squared frames are evocative of Egyptian cartouches. The central panel incorporates Seton Watts's interpretation of the Egyptian winged sun with four wings "pointing to the corners of the earth […] evok[ing] life and […] the universe."[62] The panel below features hearts, which Gould identifies as Egyptian hieroglyphs of goodness. These hearts were paired double crosses, a symbol of sacrifice. The flowers surrounding the crosses are roses, thus incorporating both the Christian symbol of incorruptibility and the Greek symbol of faithfulness. The four panels at each corner of the winged heart feature a bird. Seton Watts frequently used birds in her designs, here she included a phoenix,

[58] Seton Watts, Mary (1912), *George Frederic Watts: The Annals of an Artist's Life,* Volume II, London: MacMillan and Co., p. 190.
[59] Signor is a nickname given to GF Watts. This is how Mary Seton Watts refers to him most frequently in her journal.
[60] Seton Watts, Journal February 1, 1893.
[61] Gould, Veronica Franklin (1997), "The Symbolic Bas-Relief Designs of Mary Watts," *The Decorative Arts Society 1850 – the Present*, No. 21, pp. 9-21.
[62] Gould, *The Symbolic Bas-Relief Designs of Mary Watts*, p. 9.

a pelican, an owl and rooster. The panels on each side of the winged heart presents Celtic crosses of hearts with butterflies on the left and bees on the right. [63]

These ceiling panels are representative of Seton Watts's complex multicultural symbolic language. She married different cultures and played with common symbols to create an intimate narrative for her home. Actively and systematically bringing art inside her home related to her deep belief in artistic presence in everyday life, not only on an institutionalized pedestal. An imposing grey terracotta headboard for their bedroom, a reading alcove where she enjoyed reading Jane Austen with her husband, a mantlepiece, an intricate fountain, are only some of the ornamentations created by Seton Watts in addition to the gesso reliefs.

[63] Gould, *The Symbolic Bas-Reliefs Designs of Mary Seton Watts*, p. 10.

Fig. 6 - Mary Seton Watts, *Limnerslease ceiling panels of the Red-Room*, 1891, Watts Gallery Trust.

Through word of mouth, Compton residents became aware of Seton Watts's creations, her meticulous designs earned her the trust of many locals. She was particularly successful in receiving commissions from them for funerary monuments for the Compton Parish Cemetery. Seton Watts despised modern Victorian tombstones, which she regarded as cold and void of any feelings of love towards the deceased. Instead, she designed these monuments to honour the life of the dead and to bring comfort to their family and loved ones. She included symbolism that personalized them. In 1895, the parish bought land near Limnerslease for a second cemetery as the first one could not accommodate any more burials. Seton Watts offered to design a chapel to receive mourners, as the Norman church of St Nicholas was too far from this new cemetery.[64] She produced an intricate design that honoured her beliefs and those of the people who would be buried there, including her husband. The chapel was completed in 1904, only a few months before his death. The Watts Cemetery Chapel was designed and built in accordance with the philosophy of the Arts and Crafts Movement. It was built entirely by locals. The terra cotta bricks and ornamental pieces were made by those who would eventually form the Compton Pottery Guild, and whom Seton Watts trained herself.[65] In her charity work as well as her artistic work, Seton Watts created opportunities for women artists. It was very important for her to use local materials as well as employ local workers. She was involved in every step of the design of the chapel and its fabrication, which included the choice of the hands who helped build it. The elements she could not make herself, she carefully designed with the artist who would bring her vision to life.[66] An archival photograph (Fig. 7), shows Mary Seton Watts, the figure on the left, working on the interior panels of the chapel with students of the HAIA. This photograph shows the group working on the seraph figures before they were moved into the chapel.

The iconography can be deciphered thanks to *The Word in the Pattern: A Key to the Symbols on the Walls of the Chapel at Compton*, which she published in 1904, after the completion of the chapel. In it, Seton Watts described the meaning of each symbol she included in the design of the chapel as well as the names of all who participated in the construction of the building. She explained her motivations for writing the book as:

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[64] Calvert, Hilary & Boreham, Louise (2019), *Mary Seton Watts and the Compton Pottery,* London: Bloomsbury, p. 20.
[65] Unwin, Melanie (2004), "Significant Other: Art and Craft in the Career and Marriage of Mary Watts," *Journal of Design History,* Vol. 17, No. 3 p. 242.
[66] Bills, Mark (2010), *Watts Chapel: A Guide to the Symbols of Mary Watts's Arts and Crafts Masterpiece*, London: Philip Wilson Publishers, p. 34.

A symbol may well be compared to a magic key. In one hand it is nothing more than a piece of quaintly wrought iron, in another it unlocks a door into a world of enchantment. In these lines no endeavor is made to fix particular thoughts to the old symbols, but only to name them, so that the thoughts may remain free within them, to suggest as much or as little as a song without words.[67]

Fig. 7 - *Mary Seton Watts and three women working on the gesso panels of the Watts Cemetery Chapel,* 1902, Watts Gallery Trust.

[67] Watts, *The Word in the Pattern*, p. 29-30.

The Word in the Pattern is an invaluable resource that allows us to decipher the symbolism of the chapel. More than that, because Mary Seton Watts reused much of the same symbolism throughout her career, it offers information for most of her designs. There she explained which culture inspired her repeated use of birds, auras, Celtic knots and flowers. The chapel features an amalgamation of Celtic, Egyptian, Hindu, Pagan and Christian symbolism. In the book, she noted the volumes she consulted when creating the symbolism for the chapel, including *The Book of Kells*[68] and *The Handbook of Christian Symbolism*.[69] Both of these books presented examples of ancient symbols of worship which she sometimes combined to serve her narrative. The descriptions she offered convey the complexity of the symbolic design within the chapel.

> The pillars rising from bases, upon which there is a suggestion of a half crushed evil with closed eyes, bear the great name "I AM." Interwoven with the initial letter "I" is the hand of the nimbus or glory, the Celtic symbol of God the Creator. The "I AM" stands guarding the man on his knees – the symbol on the outer pillars – reverently interpreting parables from the book of nature, that tell him of life after death. With the interlacing cord of Celtic art – which, whatever meaning may have been attached to it in those early times, is here used as the symbol of the unity of a divine life and law, running through all things – is inwoven the name of Christ, the Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek Alphabet. They would say here, "I have girded thee though thou hast not known me."[70] (See Fig. 8)

The design complexity and important labour required to build the chapel stands as a testament of Mary Seton Watts's vision and dedication. The Watts Cemetery Chapel immediately received great recognition for its intricate and unique design. When shown the terracotta model for the Chapel, before construction started, writer Gleeson White shared his opinion in *The Studio:* "This chapel is the most original and perfect modern ecclesiastical edifice one has seen for many

[68] *The Book of Kells* is an illuminated manuscript from the ninth century. The book is famous for the intricate illustrations surrounding the four Gospels featured in Latin.
[69] W. & G. Audsley (1865), *The Handbook of Christian Symbolism,* London: Day & Son Ltd, 145p.
[70] Watts, *The Word in the* Pattern, p. 11.

years."[71] To this day, now part of the Watts Gallery's collection, the chapel receives thousands of visitors every year and is considered an important part of Compton's landscape.

Fig. 8 - *Pillars of the Watts Cemetery Chapel*, 1896-98, photograph by Robert Freidus (2011) published through *The Victorian Web.*[72]

In 1898, after years of teaching clay modelling classes, and to help her fulfill her commissions and build the cemetery chapel, Seton Watts founded the Compton Pottery Guild,

[71] White, Gleeson (1898), "A Mortuary Chapel. Designed by Mrs. G. F. Watts" in *The Studio,* p. 240.
[72] https://victorianweb.org/painting/watts/architecture/14.html

which went on to produce a range of objects, from tombstones to gardens pots and fountains. Most members were trained by Seton Watts herself, with the help of Scottish artist and sculptor Louis Deuchars. He became involved with the chapel in 1895 by helping Seton Watts with the clay modelling classes, which he eventually taught on his own. In an entry dated February 17, 1898, she noted in her journal that enrollment in her classes exceeded her expectations.

> My class! We were prepared for 40, but 48 swarmed in, & nearly overwhelmed us, all good & well mannered. So happy to be at work again.[73]

Once the Guild grew, she was no longer involved in the training.[74] The help she received from the Guild members allowed her to focus on design and to branch out with different projects. Although she did not physically participate in the fabrication of each piece sold by the Guild, her involvement was great and continuously recognized.[75] Sculptor Clare Consuelo Sheridan[76] was a patron of the Compton Pottery Guild, from which she commissioned a monument when her daughter died in 1914. She commented on her choice to work with the Guild in her autobiography.

> At the Watts pottery a few miles away, beautiful things were designed and made under the supervision and inspiration of a rare and precious personality, the widow of G. F. Watts. […] The result achieved was of a comparatively high standard considering the lack of artistic talent in the average English worker. Mrs Watts's vigilance maintained that standard.[77]

The Compton Pottery Guild was a part of the HAIA and followed the same philosophy. The employment of locals and the use of local materials were at the centre of the guild's creations. All the clay used for the goods was found in Compton or in the county of Surrey, where the village is located, in order to maintain a sustainable practice. The guild's works were featured in many of the HAIA annual exhibitions. These events were opportunities to sell products and to showcase

[73] Seton Watts, Mary, Journal February 17, 1898.
[74] Calvert & Boreham, *Mary Seton Watts and the Compton Pottery*, p. 40.
[75] Calvert & Boreham, *Mary Seton Watts and the Compton Pottery*, p. 73-74.
[76] Clare Consuelo Sheridan (1855-1970) English sculptor and writer.
[77] Sheridan, Clare (1927), *Nuda Veritas*, London: T. Butterworth Ltd, p. 100.

techniques mastered in different guilds. Georges Aubertin, one of the Guild's main modellers, was invited to demonstrate how to use a pottery wheel to throw a pot at the 1912 edition of the exhibition held at the Royal Albert Hall.[78]

The success of the Compton Pottery Guild encouraged Mary Seton Watts to create a second guild in Aldourie, Scotland, to create jobs in the town where she grew up. The project began in 1900 with the help of Edith Fraser-Tytler, the wife of her half-brother Edward Fraser-Tytler, who owned the family estate at the time. Seton Watts quickly named a pottery manager for the Aldourie Pottery, as her time was largely spent in Compton. She named Alice Robertson manager in 1902. After this nomination, Seton Watts remained involved in the development of this second guild, which she documents in letters to her family.

> I am trying to get an Italian potter for Miss Robertson. S/he would have to come here first & learn a little English - she [Miss Robertson] is being happy at Dores – smiles at bad weather & says the people seem to enjoy sitting up all night because they thought the loch was going to wash away their houses.[79]

Both guilds distinguish Seton Watts as an entrepreneur who meshed her business endeavours to her philanthropic work. She took the philosophy of the HAIA to heart and placed it at the heart of all her projects. The guilds promoted the employment of women and offered equal opportunity for management positions, and they were committed to using local materials.

After her husband's death in 1904, Mary Seton Watts dedicated most of her time to establishing the legacy of his work, and she also became increasingly involved in social issues. The absence of diaries for this period means that the latter part of her life can only be garnered through press coverage of her accomplishments. After her husband's death, she only wrote one or two entries for 1905 and 1906 before completely abandoning the journals. Seton Watts closed the Watts Picture Gallery in 1904, only a few months after opening it to the public. She did so to create a travelling memorial exhibition of GF Watts's works. She used the opportunity to further expand the gallery and exhibit more of his art. In 1912, she published the three-volume *George Frederic Watts: The Annals of an Artist's Life*,[80] as part of her efforts to ensure her husband's legacy.

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[78] Calvert & Boreham, *Mary Seton Watts and the Compton Pottery*, p. 68.
[79] Letter from Mary Seton Watts to Hester Fraser-Tytler, March 12, 1903, quoted in Calvert & Boreham, *Mary Seton Watts and the Compton Pottery*, p. 52.
[80] Watts, Mary Seton (1906), *George Frederic Watts: The Annals of an Artist's Life*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 402p.

As she grew older, she occupied many leading positions in charity organizations while continuing to encourage the craft industries: these two spheres of activity were intimately connected in her thought and practice. Newspaper articles of the time indicate that Seton Watts donated to schools and charities every year, and attended a number of caritative events. Girl's education was an issue that was particularly significant for her. She was a model of success to emulate for many women who dreamed to become professional artists, and she provided financial support for the education of girls who would not have otherwise had access to it. Her contribution benefitted many generations of women and inspired them. The training she offered for free allowed many to learn a trade and escape poverty.

She continued to receive commissions for both public and private works up until very late in her life. Her reputation as a skilled artist and designer awarded her with high-profile patrons. Seton Watts took over GF Watts's *Memorial to Heroic Self-Sacrifice* in London's Postman's Park after his death.[81] She oversaw the installation of a series of tablets honouring civic bravery. She was also one of the first women to collaborate with Liberty & Co, the department store established in 1875 by Arthur Lasenby Liberty.[82] Liberty was associated with the Arts and Crafts movement and worked with many artists of the movement to design wares. Seton Watts designed both garden pots and carpets for the company, most notably the famous *Pelican Rug*, in 1901.[83] She and Archibald Knox[84] are considered by Arts and Crafts scholar Barabara Morris as having a great influence in Liberty's Celtic revival.[85] Morris emphasizes how Seton Watts was acknowledged in Liberty's catalogues as the designer of certain objects, which they did not usually do. Morris highlights this as "a distinction rare."[86] In the early 1920s, Seton Watts received a commission to create miniature pottery for Queen Mary's dollhouse through her friend, fellow designer Gertrude Jekyll.[87] The work of Seton Watts with Liberty, the Compton Pottery Guild and the Aldourie Pottery earned her a glowing reputation as a potter and designer.[88] Her professional relationship

[81] Rose, *Suffragist Artists in Partnership*, p. 53.
[82] Morris, Barbara (1998), "Liberty's Pioneer Designer," in Gould, *Unsung Heroine of the Art Nouveau,* p. 11.
[83] *The Pelican Rug* (1899-1901) was featured in Liberty's exhibition "Founding a National Industry" at Grafton Gallery in 1903.
[84] Archibald Knox (1864-1933) was a designer known for his work branching across the Arts and Crafts Movement, Celtic Revival, Art Nouveau and Modern Style.
[85] Both artists' designs were featured in Liberty's 1904 *Book of Garden Ornaments.*
[86] Morris, *Liberty's Pioneer Designer*, p. 13.
[87] Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932) British designer and craftswoman.
[88] Underwood, Hilary (2011), "Compton Pottery," in Mark Bills, ed., *An Artist's Village: G.F. Watts and Mary Watts at Compton,* London: Philip Wilson Publishers Ltd*,* p. 108.

with high-profile patrons also earned her a commission from Earl Grey, the governor general of Canada, to create two banners to be sent to Canada, including one in Queen Alexandra's name. An old acquaintance of her husband's, Lord Grey commissioned Seton Watts for the project as well as family members and other English gentleladies for his project.

Later Life

Following her husband's death, Mary Seton Watts devoted increased energy to bettering the life of others. Already in 1891, thirteen years before GF Watts's death, she wrote in her journal,

> What is to become of my life when [George] dies – to help others is what I want to see before me, that only written in letters of light, in all surrounding might.[89]

She stayed true to her word. After GF Watts's death, she became more radical. She mentioned in her journal on multiple occasions that he was nervous about direct political actions, which might explain why she did not participate in such actions during his lifetime. Seton Watts was one of many women artists who got involved in politics at the turn of the twentieth century. Women artists and writers played an important role in Britain's suffrage movement because of their visibility. Their presence in the public space was itself a political stance, as women – and especially middle-class women – were largely confined to the private sphere in the nineteenth century. Increasingly, women artists and writers demanded their rights and argued for the importance of women's voices to be heard, and these demands were closely linked with the struggle for the vote. Edith Hinchley, British artist and suffragist, wrote a piece in *The Vote,* a suffragist periodical, in the name of suffragist artists.

> The art that is circumscribed is the Art that dies, but the Art of the Women's Movement is vital and throbbing. It is written in their dress and their pageantry and in those things which intimately concern everyday life. By-an-by we shall see the reflection of its new-born freedom in sculptured form and storied canvas in every country of the world.[90]

[89] Seton Watts, Journal May 20, 1891.

[90] Hinchley, Edith (1911), "Why We Want the Vote: The Woman Artist," in *The Vote*, August 12, 1911.

Art created by women introduced pictorial representations of women outside of the male gaze. Women could express their own experiences of the world of their own accord.[91] Very early in her artistic career, Mary Seton Watts had already been very careful in her pictorial representation of women. Instead of embracing tradition and following iconographic archetypes, the women she drew and painted always appeared as strong and in control, even when in domestic settings. Seton Watts thus created a doubly positive representation: the strong women she designed and the professionally successful woman, her. Although more and more women were able to live from their art and have commercial success, the barriers put in their path prevented them from escaping the label of amateur. Their growing numbers made it impossible for them to be ignored and some room had to be freed for them. These women proved that they were capable of greatness without a traditional artistic education and received important commissions defying the odds against them.

The importance of women artists for the suffrage movement goes beyond the content of their work. Their existence as professional women, considering all the obstacles preventing them from success, can be seen as an act of rebellion. As such, they not only fought for change, but enacted it and inspired it. Regardless of the direct impact Seton Watts had by donating money for girls' inclusion in art education, she proved to many aspiring artists that it was possible for a woman artist to achieve success. Her family wealth, late marriage and the fact that she never had biological children allowed her to focus on her career and bypass one of the main imperatives of Victorian womanhood, which was to stay home and look after the children. Standing in a place of privilege regarding this situation, Mary Seton Watts used her success to help others achieve the same. She believed that women needed to actively exist in the public space in order to achieve a better future, a stance she expressed in her journal: "The hope of the future lies greatly in the fact that woman is now beginning to take her place."[92] She kept fighting for others and for women's rights until her death. This struggle was not without risks. Militants and leaders were often subjected to abuse.[93] A photograph from Herbert Lambert (Fig. 9) shows Mary Seton Watts in the early 1920s,[94] when she would have been between seventy and seventy-five years old, still an active member within the art community and suffrage movement.

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[91] Pollock, Griselda (2003), *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art,* London & New-York: Routledge, p. 87.
[92] Seton Watts, Journal April 4, 1893.
[93] Rose, *Suffragist Artists in Partnership*, p. 43.
[94] Herbert Lambert (1882-1936) British portrait photographer.

Seton Watts was acquainted with many famous figures of Britain's suffrage movement such as Gertrude Jekyll and Josephine Butler. Jekyll was a fellow designer and craftswoman, the two women grew close because of their shared views on women's place in society and their love for garden design.[95] When Mary Seton Watts was appointed president of the Godalming branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in 1909, Jekyll was elected vice president. Jekyll and Watts both participated in the Great Pilgrimage of 1913 with 50,000 other suffragists. The banners Jekyll designed for the marches of the Guildford and Godalming branches of the NUWSS, both in Surrey, are a testament to her dedication to the cause. In his biography of his aunt, Francis Jekyll notes the roles that the two women played in the NUWSS.

> Gertrude, though she can hardly have sympathised with its more extreme manifestation, was persuaded to supply banners to the Guildford and Godalming branches and even attend a meeting at Compton Picture Gallery under the auspices of Mrs Watts.[96]

Local newspapers recall at least two meetings of the Compton branch in Seton Watts's home. She welcomed political action in the domestic space. In one of those meetings, she was asked if women could be strong enough to fulfill a political role, to which she replied:

> So nigh to grandeur is our dust,
> So nigh to God is man,
> When duty whispers lo! thou must,
> The soul replies, I can.[97]

In this address, Seton Watts quoted *Voluntaries*,[98] a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson. He wrote this poem in 1863 as a tribute to the unexperienced soldiers prepared for sacrifice in a fight for freedom. She quoted the last four verses of the poem, only changing "youth" for "soul." Her appropriation of military literature translates her militant attitude towards women's suffrage.

Josephine Butler was social reformer, she was a pioneer of the women's suffrage movement and inspired many to engage in philanthropy as well as in the fight for women's education. Butler was involved as early as 1866 in the fight for women's rights. She played a major

[95] Seton Watts mentions Jekyll as a friend who visited her often in her journals. They were acquainted long before participating in these marches.
[96] Jekyll, Francis (1934), *Gertrude Jekyll: A Memoir*, Northampton, Northampton: Bookshop Round Table, p. 174.
[97] Watts, Mary Seton, presidential address NUWSS, 1909, quoted in Rose, *Suffragist Artists in Partnership*, p. 50.
[98] Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1863), "Voluntaries," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 12, p. 394.

role in shaping Seton Watts's views on how to achieve equality between men and women. Acquainted through GF Watts, the two women struck a friendship. Seton Watts held Butler in high esteem, which she commented in her journals: "Mrs. Josephine Butlers [sic] life – a record of a great crusade – a wonderful Joan of Arc! What has she not accomplished."[99] They both considered education as the main tool to incite change. Butler campaigned for women to have better access to education, and specifically to higher education.[100] Among Seton Watts's efforts for women to have better education, other than her creation of two pottery guilds, she gave the opening speech at the handicraft's exhibition of the Girls Friendly Society in 1923; she and her husband were also the biggest donators to an exhibition organized to benefit to co-educational Powell Corduroy School in Dorking; she awarded numerous prizes to young women artists to encourage them to pursue the profession, including the Watts Art Prize and the Mrs GF Watts prize.[101] Mary Seton Watts was involved in the Women's Guild of Art when it was first established in 1907, before eventually becoming its honorary president in 1914. The organization aimed to create a network of women artists in order to help professional women artists as well as aspiring ones. The network welcomed suffragist artists and the new generation of members of the HAIA.[102] The Compton Potter's Art Guild, also known then as the Mrs G. F. Watts's village industry, was awarded the prize for general excellence at the thirtieth annual exhibition of the HAIA.[103]

Mary Seton Watts died on September 6, 1938, at the age of eighty-eight. *The Times* published an obituary descriptive of her character the day following her death. It is worth quoting at length as it presents a version of Seton Watts's life and career that explains (and performs) her erasure as an artist in her own right and as an activist.

> History is rich in the records of devoted wives who have given themselves up to the care of famous husbands and been content to subordinate their lives to that end. Of this self-effacing band Mrs. Watts was one. She might have made a name for herself in portraiture or sculpture, but having come under the influence of Watts as a student, she allowed herself to be completely dominated by his personality; […] After her marriage she felt that her painting was overshadowed by the work of her husband, and abandoned this activity for many others. She became a strong supporter, and for some years president, of the Home Arts and Industries Association, which from humble beginnings in Shropshire established

[99] Seton Watts, Journal October 20, 1896.
[100] Butler, Josephine (1868), *The Education and Employment of Women,* London: MacMillan and Co.
[101] Awarded respectively in 1922 and 1938.
[102] Rose, *Suffragist Artists in Partnership*, p. 49.
[103] *The Times*, 21 May 1914, p. 10.

> itself all over the country as an important medium for training peasant workers in almost every branch of handicraft; […] Politically Mrs Watts was a Liberal and had been a suffragist, but she cared little for society and took no part in public life, preferring to limit her many interests within her own environment of home arts. The simplicity and straightforward character of her enthusiasm gave her personality a drive and sometimes an impatience which often surprised people who were misled by her frail appearance and urbane charm of manner. Like her husband, she loved nobility, richness and sentiment, and although she knew the necessity for restraint she felt too intensely to be anything but baffled by irony and analysis. She was always generous to anyone who appealed to her idealism, for which she never hesitated to make any personal sacrifice, although she had an unexpectedly shrewd eye for humbugs. Perhaps ideas and sentiments were more real to her than individuals and facts, but within her chosen sphere she devoted her life to the service of others.[104]

The Times painted Seton Watts as subordinate to her husband. Her accomplishments are barely mentioned and belittled. Instead, the author insists on her servitude towards GF Watts and how her marriage prevented her from accomplishing greatness. She is also portrayed as a recluse who ignored society to focus on her craft. This description is paradoxical considering her repeated involvement in philanthropy and her militantism, which is mentioned in the obituary. While it is true that she did not wish for celebrity, this does not mean she avoided society. Her concern for future generations proves as such. *The Times* perpetrated the stereotypical image of the ideal Victorian wife by insisting on GF Watts's greatness instead of hers in her own obituary. She is reduced to a recluse and adoring supporter. These portrayals negatively influenced the consideration granted to professional women like Seton Watts, hindering the attention given to their work.

[104] *The Times,* "Mrs Watts Widow of the Great Artist," September 7, 1938, p. 14.

Fig. 9 - Herbert Lambert, *Mary Seton Watts,* (early 1920s), 208 x 161mm, bromide print on card mount, National Portrait Gallery, London, NPGx1586.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that Mary Seton Watts built a successful and personally fulfilling artistic career. She worked in a variety of mediums, as each of them offered her a different materiality to place in dialogue with her designs. The purpose and destination of the objects she created divides them into public and private. However, when analyzing the symbolism and attention to detail of each object, these categories are undiscernible. Both in the decorations for her own home and the memorials she did for strangers, the artist put such care and thought in the designs that her personality and values shine through. Watts was a passionate of the arts and symbolism. She designed with her heart and her mind and used what she felt was representative of the emotion she wanted to convey. Regardless of what she was working on or for whom, Mary Seton Watts worked with the same dedication, skill and care. She never put her vision of the world or of art aside for anyone and stood her ground for what she believed in. She was successful both before and after GF Watts's death, she enjoyed many commissions and important collaborations. Seton Watts sustained an intimate relationship between life and art in multiple ways: she used local materials; she trained and employed locals; she trained women and created opportunities for women artists to succeed; she founded two guilds to provide training and work in communities; she was a political activist and an active participant in the women's suffrage movement. Seton Watts's career is extraordinary because of her systematic association of artistic expression and political stance. Her work was not detached from life but intertwined with it in important ways.

CHAPTER 2: "I begin to design and think"[105]

The social and artistic conditions at the time of Mary Seton Watts's career translated into a number of new possibilities for artists. The industrial revolution had greatly impacted the consumption and production of art, and social issues resulting from the industrial economy inspired some artists to get involved in their community. Training programs for the poor and the desacralization of art shook up the hierarchy of art. This chapter will explore the different elements of Mary Seton Watts's environment that contributed to her creation of the *Our Lady of the Snows* banner. I begin with an overview of the general social and economic context of England after the industrial revolution. The second part of the chapter looks at the impact that this new economic reality had on the creation and commerce of art. One response was the development of the Arts and Crafts Movement, to which Seton Watts participated, and which I outline here. Social concerns were at the heart of this movement, which translated into a vast majority of its members being involved in striving to improve their community. The movement was also interested in addressing the different working conditions of women artists. The chapter ends with a consideration of traditionally feminine crafts such as needlework, as well as the ambiguous history of embroidered banners.

Labour Conditions

The changes brought about by the industrial revolution in Britain (roughly between 1750 and 1850)[106] led to significant transformations in the power dynamics between classes throughout the nineteenth century. The complete turn-around in the production, trade and consumption of objects translated into increased economic power for the middle class, which was accompanied by increased political power, made into law by the Great Reform Act of 1832, which guaranteed their presence in the sites of political power.[107] Some sections of the upper middle class, the "nouveau

[105] Seton Watts, Journal January 30, 1893.
[106] The dates delimiting Britain's industrial revolution remain source of debate, historian Eric Hobsbawm first marked it as starting in the 1780s, while historian T. S. Ashton marked it at the mid eighteenth century. Ashton's argument is that the growth in population of the 1750s initiated an acceleration of the economic pace, thus leading to a change in industries.
[107] Gunn, Simon (2004), "Class, Identity and the Urban: The Middle Class in England, c.1790-1950," *Urban History,* Vol. 31, No. 1, p. 31.

riches," benefitted from the industrial production and gained a new purchasing power, often using their financial means to emulate the old aristocracy.[108]

The second group, the working class, was negatively affected by industrialization. The acceleration of the production in manufactures aggravated working conditions. British educator Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth[109] published *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture of Manchester* in 1832, a pamphlet in which he investigated the labour conditions of the working class of Manchester. His inquiry was conducted with the objective of establishing the causes for health afflictions among the workers. Inadvertently, Kay-Shuttleworth's study provided an extensive look into nineteenth-century manufacture's labour conditions.

> Whilst the engine runes the people must work – men, women and children are yoked together with iron and steam. The animal machine, breakable in the best case, subject to a thousand sources of suffering […] is chained fast to the iron machine, which knows no suffering and weariness.[110]

From the beginning, the system brought division between those who dreamed of financial success and those who saw the damages caused by financial divisions.[111] The industrial economic system followed in the steps of the feudal system that had preceded it. The acceleration in production exacerbated the exploitation and oppression of workers, who were often forced to live in extreme poverty. This situation also led to workers organzing into workers' unions to fight for their rights. It also inspired Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to write *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848. The outrage in reaction to workers' conditions led to the radicalization of many who disagreed with the values of capitalism.[112]

Women workers experienced difficult working conditions. While women from higher classes did not need to participate in the family income to provide for their families, many working-

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[108] Helmreich, Anne (2017), "The Art Market and the Spaces of Sociability in Victorian London," *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 3, p. 339.
[109] Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth (1804-1877), British educator and public health reformer.
[110] Kay-Shuttleworth, James (1832), *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture of Manchester,* London: J. Ridgeway, 72p.
[111] Lamouria, Lanya (2015), "Financial Revolution: Representing British Financial Crisis After the French Revolution of 1848," in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Vol. 43, No. 3, p. 493.
[112] Wilson, Daniel C.S. (2014), "Arnold Toynbee and the Industrial Revolution: The Science of History, Politics, Economy and the Machine Past," *History and Memory*, Vol. 26, No. 2, p. 134-135.

class families could not survive on a single salary. These women were confronted to further ill-treatment and financial discrimination. Art historian Lisa Tickner explores how women faced additional prejudice when they were part of the work force.

> […] Working women were subject to a double oppression […] in viewing them as the wives and relatives of working men whose best hope lay with the family wage, the unions colluded in keeping them unskilled, underpaid and economically dependent on the husbands that one in five or six of them would never have.[113]

Working-class women were therefore subjected to a double oppression on the basis of their class and of their gender.

The Angel in the House

The establishment of the upper middle-class[114] challenged existing dynamics between classes in urban[115] settings. In their efforts to emulate the aristocracy, the upper middle-class instilled strict models of conduct to assure ordered social life. Family-centred domesticity became essential to the manifestation of their class. Urban historian Simon Gunn argues that women were at the centre of this affirmation of class.

> The stress on a home-centred way of life implied a significant shift in the representation of the English middle class. […] It also reflected the growing importance of wider codes of behaviour regulating interaction between the sexes and between classes, in which women had a crucial role.[116]

Women's periodicals played an important role in propagating the character of the "angel in the house." She first appeared in a poem by Coventry Patmore entitled "The Angel in the House" that

[113] Tickner, Lisa (1988), *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-14*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 178.
[114] Specifically upper middle-class, because these households could live from the single salary of the father, whereas the lower middle-class often necessitated the combination of two salaries.
[115] This phenomenon is particular to urban life, rural villages did not have the kinds of manufactures which caused these shifts in power dynamics.
[116] Gunn, *Class, Identity and the Urban: The Middle Class in England, c.1790-1950*, p. 38.

was published in 1854. He wrote the poem about his wife, who, he felt, embodied all the qualities of the ideal woman.

> Man must be pleased; but him to please
> Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
> Of his condoled necessities[117]

The angel in the house was submissive and devoted to her husband. The figure's influence was cemented through the publication of periodicals aimed at women. Women's magazines grew in popularity after the removal of the taxes on knowledge in 1853. Publications thus became available to a wider readership. While the magazines remained in the hands of upper classes, the wider readership spread the ideology to the less monied. The magazines advocated a strict model of conduct and set the standard for non-working women. The values encouraged by these publications could only be met by families who could afford to live comfortably on a single salary, only all women were subjected to this standard, regardless of financial standing. Periodicals such as *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* offered advice on dress etiquette, cooking, gardening and crafts. The advice presented in these publications met the ideology of the angel in the house, encouraging the cult of domesticity.[118]

The character, although well known in Victorian literature, remains a fiction and ideology. While upper middle-class women did play a central role in the family's social life and in the performance of their class status, these duties often took them out of the domestic space. Women were increasingly present in the public space. Non-working women had the opportunity to get involved in philanthropic organizations or to practice handicrafts. These activities allowed women to assert their class status while resisting domestic confinement. Crafts and philanthropic efforts also acted as a stepping-stone towards the suffrage movement for many women. Many crafts were used to demand change regarding women's political rights. Writers, needleworkers and artists, professional and amateur, used their craft towards the cause. It was art created by women and for women.

Mary Seton Watts stood as an exception is an example of these class dynamics. She was born in a financially comfortable family and did not need to work. Her father was a liberal and

[117] Patmore, Coventry (1858), *The Angel in the House,* London: John W. Parker & Son, 192p.
[118] Gunn, *Class, Identity and the Urban: The Middle Class in England, c.1790-1950*, p. 38.

encouraged her to pursue her passions. She had the opportunity to pursue an artistic education because of her status. She took advantage of her class's opportunities and went beyond the models of conduct imposed; she did not comply with the limitations. She was a professional and encouraged other women to become professionals. In *Angel in the Studio: Women in the Arts and Crafts Movement 1870-1914*, art historian Anthea Callen describes how societal domestic expectations prevented women from achieving success.

> It may be that no woman is, or ought to be, able to free herself from domestic duties and associations, which, in their inevitable interruption, render almost impossible the concentration of purpose and leisure of mind essential to high success.[119]

Seton Watts's situation put her at an advantage. While she was devoted to her husband, her professional success, ambition and militantism positioned her as defiant of the angel in the house. She navigated the expectations enforced on her class by not letting them limit her professional activity.

The Art Market

The transformed class dynamics and industries, in turn, had an impact on the commerce of art. The nineteenth century saw an increase in the number of commercial galleries in major cities such as London. Commercial galleries were elite spaces where access to artworks was reserved to those who could potentially acquire them. Galleries were spaces for class performance, an opportunity for the new upper middle class to assert their position within society.[120]

Nineteenth century art galleries saw the beginning of the dealer-critic market. This market was defined by speculative purchases by art dealers in the hopes of generating a profit.[121] The dealers ran commercial galleries where they sold their newly acquired works of art. This system allowed for a diversification of artistic styles as it introduced personal opinion and taste in the

[119] Callen, Anthea (1979), *Angel in the Studio: Women in the Arts and Crafts Movement 1870-1914*, Mendham: Astragal Press, p. 22.
[120] Helmreich, *The Art Market and the Spaces of Sociability in Victorian London*, p. 440-441.
[121] Helmreich, *The Art Market and the Spaces of Sociability in Victorian London*, p. 437.

commerce of art. In "The Periodical and the Art Market: Investigating the "Dealer-Critic System" in Victorian England," art historians Pamela Fletcher and Anne Helmreich show how art dealers and art critics slowly replaced the Royal Academy as the reference for potential buyers.

> According to its own rhetoric, art criticism initially acted as a disinterested guide for would-be consumers or viewers, directing the public's attention to the best on offer in the market and educating their taste. At mid-century, art critics and editors […] embraced this role of educator as part of the professionalization of the artistic field and concomitantly consolidated notions of the British School.[122]

The separation of the art market from the Royal Academy strengthened the role of periodicals within the commerce of art. Many publications such as *The Illustrated Review* and *Connoisseur* reported on market trends, rising artists and schools or specific art dealers.[123] Art critics played an important part in the market movements and the popularity of certain style and artists by advocating for schools of artists of their own choosing.

While the art styles represented in galleries started to diversify, a prejudice remained against craft-based art, which was deemed of lesser importance than canonized mediums such as painting and sculpture. However, industrialized production of goods contributed to a new appreciation for decorative art.[124] These objects were characterized by a combination of quotidian practicality and technical expertise, unlike the objects produced in factories, where accelerated and low-cost processes resulted in goods of lower quality. Artist Walter Crane[125] came to the defense of handcrafted objects, whose prices compared unfavourably to those of industrially produced items.

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[122] Fletcher, Pamela & Helmreich, Anne (2008), "The Periodical and the Art Market: Investigating the 'Dealer-Critic System' in Victorian England," *Victorion Periodicals Review,* Vol. 41, No. 4, p. 324.
[123] Fletcher & Helmreich, "The Periodical and the Art Market: Investigating the "Dealer-Critic System" in Victorian England," p. 327.
[124] Paterson, Elaine Cheasley (2018), "Tracing Craft: Labour, Creativity, and Sustainability in the Home Arts Movement," *Journal of Canadian Art History/ Annales d'histoire de l'art canadien*, Vol. 39-40, No. 1-2, p. 42.
[125] Walter Crane (1845-1915) English artist and book illustrator.

> According to the quality of the production must be its cost; and that the cheapness of the cheapest things of modern manufacture is generally at the cost of the cheapening of modern labour and life, which is a costly kind of cheapness after all.[126]

The purchasing power of the upper middle class and a growing concern for workers' conditions in factories led to an increased demand for decorative art. If their place in the commerce of art, and if their recognition as art, was disputed by some critics, many came to the defence of crafts. In 1889, art critic John Ruskin wrote a piece in the journal *Decorator and Furnisher* condemning the negative attitude towards decorative arts:

> Get rid, then at once, of any idea of decorative art being a degraded or a separate kind of art. Its nature or essence is simply being fitted for a definite place; and in that place, forming part of a great and harmonious whole, in companionship with other art.[127]

Critics like Ruskin played an important role in the changing attitudes towards craft. Many shared concerns regarding the effects of industrialization on smaller industries. The repercussions of factories on communities and the environment were significant to the creation of the Arts and Crafts movement, which took a stand against these issues.

Arts and Crafts

The Arts and Crafts movement appeared in England in the late nineteenth century. The term is used to describe a network of guilds and craftspeople who were frustrated with the way in which the industrial economic system affected both the quality of decorative art and the working conditions of artists. The movement was initiated in 1861 following the creation of the decorative art firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. The firm was created by designer William Morris[128] and fellow artists Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne-Jones, Charles Faulkner, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, P. P. Marshall and Philip Webb. Their goal was to produce and sell handcrafted items

[126] Crane, Walter (1911), *William Morris to Whistler: Papers and Addresses on Art and Craft and the Commonwealth,* London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd, p. 39.
[127] Ruskin, John (1889), "John Ruskin on Decorative Art," *Decorator and Furnisher*, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 14.
[128] William Morris (1834-1896) English textile designer, artists and social activist.

inspired by medieval guilds.[129] In 1887, the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society was founded to exhibit crafts alongside fine arts. Morris became its president in 1891 succeeding Walter Crane. The society had a great influence on the flourishing of the Arts and Crafts movement.

The Arts and Crafts movement positioned itself against industrialization by promoting local industries. Craft guilds often exploited resources found locally and promoted the employment of locals. These industries benefitted communities rather than a single business owner. The objects created following the Arts and Crafts philosophy were the product of individual and collective skill. The artists employed in craft guilds were valued for their expertise and had significantly more control on their working conditions.[130] Historian Elizabeth Carolyn Miller uses the term "eco-socialist" to define Morris.[131] She places his opposition to industrial manufactures as a social concern as well as an environmental concern. This attitude was at the centre of the Arts and Crafts movement. The many lectures Morris gave and his multiple publications helped spread his vision. Art historian Caroline Arscott argues that his concern for the social welfare of artists and his vision of art can be considered as the first attempt at a Marxist theory of art.[132] Mary Seton Watts was among the artists who shared these concerns, and she actively worked to use her art against the prejudices perpetrated by industrial manufacturing processes. She confided her resentment towards living and working conditions in her journals.

> Ah if we could but work fanatically in the light of our own 19th century thought […] fight against immorality, seeing the injustice of present social opinions, against that sacrifice of sacrificing women, against intemperance, against that desire for wealth & the hideous inequality of distribution.[133]

The Arts and Crafts movement worked towards elevating craftspeople as artists. The emphasis put on hand crafting brought individuality back to the products on the market. While collective effort was needed, each artist possessed unique skillsets. In contrast, industrial production was made of unknown labourers working in a chain. The Arts and Crafts movement put forward the idea of design and the relationship between idea and object. This philosophy

[129] Arscott, Caroline (2006), "William Morris: Decoration and Materialism," in Hemingway, Andrew, ed., *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left,* London: Pluto Press, p. 9.
[130] Paterson, "Tracing Craft: Labour, *Creativity, and Sustainability in the Home Arts* Movement," p. 49.
[131] Miller, Elizabeth Carolyn (2015), "William Morris, Extraction Capitalism, and the Aesthetics of Surface," *Victorian Studies,* Vol. 57, No. 3, pp. 395-404.
[132] Arscott, *William Morris: Decoration and Materialism*, p. 9.
[133] Seton Watts, Journal April 24, 1893.

elevated the work of the craftspeople as well as status of the objects. Beyond their utility, they were showcasing fine artistic skill. Finished objects were considered for more than the technical aspects they displayed.[134] Artists like Mary Seton Watts wrote books revealing their intentions and use of symbols. The creative agency of the artists resisted anonymity in design, their individuality being exhibited in all their work. A good example of this are the funeral monuments created by Mary Seton Watts and the Compton Pottery Guild. This venture was initiated out of Seton Watts's frustration at the cold and personality-less monuments that were commonly made in her time. Even before founding the Compton Pottery Guild, Seton Watts documented her desire to create meaningful monuments.

> I am much interested in Lady Brownlow's letter asking Signor to advise her about a gravestone for Lady Waterford. I should like to do something like it in clay. I am interested because I do share Lady Bronlow's feeling against anything ugly being set up over her. I wonder if they will at all enter into my feeling, about the treatment, beauty, simplicity, architectural conventionality of design & as much beauty of symbol as is possible to put into it. No sculpture. Figures of angels look well in our climate, or in our simple English church yard.[135]

As seen in *The Word in the Pattern,* Seton Watts's designs were a complex combination of English, Celtic and Egyptian symbolism. Although this was far from what was common at the time, she nevertheless grew a customer base. Many consumers were interested in personalized monuments that were, in some way, evocative of the deceased. Changing mentalities and new purchasing power instigated the flourishment of craft industries.

The Arts and Crafts movement existed in parallel and somewhat in opposition to the practices of the Royal Academy.[136] By practicing art outside of strict canons, the artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement enjoyed greater artistic freedom. Resisting the Royal Academy allowed for artistic exploration and hybrid practices. This opportunity appealed to many artists who turned their backs to traditional mediums in order to explore new means of expression. The artist William De Morgan, for instance, trained at the Royal Academy, but he made his career as a potter and tile

[134]Crawford, Alan (1997), "Ideas and Objects: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain," *Design Issues,* Vol. 13, No. 1, p. 20.
[135] Seton Watts, Journal October 6, 1891.
[136] Paterson, "Tracing Craft: Labour, Creativity, and Sustainability in the Home Arts Movement," p. 28.

designer.[137] The creative liberties granted by craft also appealed to Mary Seton Watts. She was interested in the hands-on potential of pottery, which offered a greater degree of intimacy between the object and her ideas.[138] If portraits and illustrations necessitated the implication of a third party in the creation, clay modelling involved a creative process where she, the clay and her ideas were free. Seton Watts's work as a potter offered her freedom of expression, which allowed her to assert her agency as an artist and designer. The cost associated with the creation of paintings and sculpture meant a greater dependence on commissions,[139] thus leaving the artists faced with the demands and expectations of patrons rather than their personal vision. The modest nature of clay and the accessibility of materials meant a certain freedom in its exploitation. In her article "Tracing Craft: Labour, Creativity, and Sustainability in the Home Arts Movement," art historian Elaine Cheasley Paterson explores the relationship between the Arts and Crafts movement and the introduction of the notion of sustainability. She links crafts to

> Practices with an ethical sensibility designed to offer greater control over time and labour in order to highlight ongoing concerns about consumption and production.[140]

Sustainable and ethical practices were especially present in rural guilds. In 1884, social reformer Eglantyne Louisa Jebb founded the Cottage Arts Association. Following the philosophy of the Arts and Crafts movement, the association was particularly invested in local crafts and building artistic communities.[141] As it grew, the Cottage Arts Association became the Home Arts and Industries Association (HAIA) in 1885. Mary Seton Watts became involved early in the association's existence and was elected to the HAIA's Council headquarters in 1887. She served on the design committee and acted as a judge multiple times for the annual HAIA exhibition in London. She ran the Compton branch of the association, and the Compton Pottery Guild was one of the businesses affiliated with the HAIA.[142] Out of social and ecological concern, the guilds

[137] Rose, Lucy Ella (2018), *Suffragist Artists in Partnership: Gender, Word and Image*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 76.
[138] Paterson, Elaine Cheasley (2005), "Decoration and Desire in the Watts Chapel, Compton: Narratives of Gender, Class and Colonialism," *Gender & History*, Vol. 17, No. 3, p. 717.
[139] Helland, Janice (2012), "'Good Work and Clever Design': Early Exhibitions of the Home Arts and Industries Association," *Journal of Modern Craft*, Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 276.
[140] Paterson, "Tracing Craft: Labour, Creativity, and Sustainability in the Home Arts Movement," p. 43.
[141] Helland, *Good Work and Clever Design': Early Exhibitions of the Home Arts and Industries* Association, p. 277.
[142] Paterson, "Tracing Craft: Labour, Creativity, and Sustainability in the Home Arts Movement," p. 44.

sustained local practices, employed locals and supplied their materials locally.[143] The Compton Pottery Guild followed these principles. Seton Watts trained locals who found work at the guild and used clay local to Surrey. Figure 10 shows Seton Watts working along two local men. In *The Word in the Pattern*, she discusses at length the working conditions under which the chapel came to be:

> As far as is possible therefore every bit of the decoration of this chapel, modelled in clay of Surrey, by Compton hands, under unusual conditions – much of the work having been done gratuitously, and all of it with the love that made the work delightful – has something to say though the patterns can claim to be no more than the letters of a great word.[144]

Through all her projects, Seton Watts procured work to locals and specifically offered opportunities for women. Of the seventy-three individuals she credited in *The Word in the Pattern* as having had a hand in the modelling of the Watts Cemetery Chapel, close to half of them were women.[145]

[143] Bosanquet, Bernard (1888), "The Home Arts and Industries Association," *Charity Organisation Review*, Vol. 4, No. 40, p. 196.
[144] Watts, Mary Seton (1911), *The Word in the Pattern*, London: W.H. Ward, p. 5.
[145] Seton Watts, *The Word in the Pattern*, p. 27.

Fig. 10 - *Mary Seton Watts, George Thompson and an unknown man at work,* 1891, Watts Gallery Trust.

Women and the Arts and Crafts Movement

The Arts and Crafts movement offered many possibilities for women artists. The constant critiques and the near impossibility of artistic recognition drove many women to mediums other than painting or sculpture. Success in the academic arts was reserved to an elite group of artists, very few of them women.[146] Mary Seton Watts herself found success through the practice of crafts.

[146] Callen, Anthea (1984), "Sexual Division of Labour in the Arts and Crafts Movement," *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 3.

Her continuous effort to work with other women is representative of a general acceptance of women within the Arts and Crafts movement.

The practice of crafts professionally by women was deemed acceptable because of the link it was seen as having to domesticity. Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker argue in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* that the separation of fine arts and crafts was a way of maintaining patriarchal values.

> What distinguishes art from craft in the hierarchy is not so much different methods, practices and objects but also where these things are made, often in the home, and for whom they are made, often for the family. The fine arts are a public, professional activity. What women make, which is usually defined as "craft," could in fact be defined as "domestic art." The conditions of production and audience for this kind of art are different from those of the art made in the studio and art school, for the market and gallery. It is out of these different conditions that the hierarchical division between art and craft has been constructed; it has nothing to do with the inherent qualities of the object nor the gender of the maker.[147]

While a casual practice of crafts is discussed above, this separation is what allowed for women's inclusion in professional practices. Many mediums called for inherently "feminine aptitudes" such as minuteness, patience and attention to detail. They were thus considered acceptable pursuits for women.[148]

While a certain prejudice remained in the reasons for which women were accepted within crafts, artists played an important role in furthering women's access to the professional space. Their mere presence in the commercial space and in guilds alongside men was a stand against patriarchal traditions. These women were the proof that pursuing a career was possible.[149] Once their careers were established, many artists used their success to provide opportunities for other women, as did Mary Seton Watts. Figure 11 shows Lena Titcomb, one of the many women working at the Compton Pottery Guild. Seton Watts's social involvement positioned her as an agent of the changing times. She was aware of the different issues her community was facing, which is how she became an activist and choose to partake in philanthropic efforts.

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[147] Pollock, Griselda & Parker, Roszika (1981), *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, New York: Pantheon, p. 70.
[148] Callen, "Sexual Division of Labour in the Arts and Crafts Movement," p. 3.
[149] Parker & Pollock, Old Mistresses, p. 13.

Fig. 11 - *Lena Titcomb Modeller for the Compton Pottery Guild at work,* 1930s, Watts Gallery Trust.

Philanthropy

Philanthropy grew in popularity in the nineteenth century following the wealth division worsened by industrial manufactures. Neighborhoods such as Whitechapel in London were experiencing a severe crisis[150] and were the site of much philanthropic activity. Philanthropy contrasts with charity by its long-term aspect. Charity is defined as a punctual and impulsive act of providing monetary aid that is often rooted in an emotional response to direct contact with suffering. Philanthropy, on the other hand, is an organized strategy of relief targeting the root of

[150] Mearns, Andrew & Preston, William Carnall (1883), *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Inquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor,* London: James Clarke & Co., 40p.

the issue.[151] Philanthropy was an activity associated with femininity as benevolence was considered a great female virtue. Philanthropy was not only practiced by women but also theorized by female authors such as Jane Haldimand Marcet,[152] *Conversations on Politcal Economy* (1816),[153] Harriet Martineau,[154] *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1834)[155] and Margracia Loudon,[156] *Philanthropic Economy* (1835).[157] The extensive contemporary literature on philanthropic economy shows that women's benevolence went beyond a sentiment of duty consistent with "women's virtues." The phenomenon of nineteenth-century charity shows a growing interest among upper middle-class women for politics and social justice.[158] The impact of these women's work went beyond the direct help they procured to the poor. The literature on philanthropic economy reached important political figures as well as a popular readership.[159] The phenomenon of philanthropic economy appeared in direct reaction to the New Poor Laws introduced in 1834. This legislation established extremely strict policies to discourage able-bodied individuals from seeking a grant.[160] It set out to encourage unemployed men towards employment, for men were seen as the main financial providers of two-parent families, their unemployment therefore leading to the poverty of their wives and children. One of the biggest issues of the New Poor Laws was the status of women. The wife was considered by law as accessory to her husband, and therefore did not qualify for the grants even if she was estranged from her husband or unable to get a divorce. As for independent women, such as widows or unmarried women, the legislation made no mention of them which, once again, excluded them from access to financial support.

The crisis experienced by neighbourhoods such as Whitechapel led to a wave of philanthropic activity. Existing organizations grew and many new organizations appeared to respond to the need. Charitable organizations welcomed women with open arms. Philanthropy was

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[151] Lawrence, Robert (1965), *Professional Social Work in Australia*, Canberra: The Australian National University Press, p. 29.
[152] Jane Haldimand Marcet (1769-1858) English writer.
[153] Haldimand Marcet, Jane (1816), *Conversations on Politcal Economy*, London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 486p.
[154] Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) English social theorist.
[155] Martineau, Harriet (1834), *Illustrations of Political Economy*, London: Leonard C. Bowles, 191p.
[156] Margracia Loudon (est. 1788 -1860) Irish novelist and political writer.
[157] Loudon, Margracia (1834), *Philanthropic Economy or The Philosophy of Happiness Practically Applied to the Social, Political, and Commercial Relations of Great Britain*, London: Edward Churton, 312p.
[158] Richardson, Sarah (2013), *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, London: Routledge, p. 65.
[159] Richardson, *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, p. 76.
[160] Thane, Pat (1978), "Women and the Poor Law in Victorian and Edwardian England," *History Workshop*, No. 6, p. 36.

an activity that allowed women to exist in the public sphere while remaining in accordance with patriarchal values. Writing about Australia, which experienced much the same pattern of quick industrial growth accompanied by abject poverty, social work historian Robert Lawrence explains how women accessed management positions through their social involvement.

> On the one hand there was an approach through broad legislative measures, sponsored by political parties and administered by government, largely male, officials; on the other was an approach through numerous small voluntary organizations, catering for individual needs, sponsored by a wide variety of citizen groups or churches, with detailed work largely in the hands of unpaid women in the higher income groups.[161]

These organizations proved to women that they could hold a position of power, make decisions, and manage large sums of money. While they were denied access to the political sphere, such organizations allowed them to have an impact in their communities. Philanthropy offered political power to women before they obtained the vote.[162] Historian Sarah Richardson situates philanthropy at the heart of women's political worlds:

> Nor should it be presumed that philanthropy represented a "soft" option for women in contrast with the "hard" political activities of middle-class radical men. In fact philanthropy served as a test-bed for radical women's ideas for the reform of politics and social policy.[163]

This phenomenon contributed to the apparition of the "new woman" figure, a woman with a sense of agency and responsibility.[164]

Many types of charitable organizations existed in nineteenth-century England. Their aim was to provide the poor with tools and opportunities to escape poverty. A notable enterprise in which Seton Watts participated was Toynbee Hall. Founded by social reformists Henrietta and Samuel Barnett in 1884, and located in the Whitechapel neighbourhood, the institution received artists to teach a trade to the poor to help them escape poverty.[165] Mary Seton Watts taught clay

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[161] Lawrence, *Professional Social Work in Australia*, p. 29.
[162] McCarthy, Kathleen D. (1996), "Women and Philanthropy," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 232.
[163] Richardson, *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth Century,* p. 81.
[164] Swain, Shurlee (2014), "From Philanthropy to Social Entrepreneurship," in Joy Damousi, Kim Rubenstein and Mary Tomsic, eds., *Diversity in Leadership*, Canberra: ANU Press p. 191.
[165] Wilson, Daniel C. S. (2014), "Arnold Toynbee and the Industrial Revolution: The Science of History, Political Economy and the Machine Past," *History and Memory*, Vol. 26, No. 2, p. 137.

modelling there. Both physically and monetarily, she supported many causes she held close to heart. Apart from Toynbee Hall, she focused on groups that helped young women in particular access a general education or an education in the arts. For many women artists who were philanthropists and/ or activists, craft represented a way to express their social concerns and actively participate in demands for change.

Feminine crafts

Crafts that were traditionally considered feminine enjoyed a new-found appreciation among women through the Arts and Crafts movement. The accessibility of textile work encouraged many artists to reappropriate the medium, to practice it in their own way. Needlework was particularly effective in that it was a skill that was frequently passed down through generations of women. It was usual for women of the higher classes to practice amateur ornamental needlework. For those who hadn't learnt the skill as children, apprenticeship, classes and employment were readily available to them. Because of societal expectations, the field was dominated by women.[166]

Ornamental needlework emerged alongside practical textile work. Building on existing techniques used for the construction of garments, embroidery incorporates both simple and complex stitches to create images and motifs. Traces of embroidery have been found in artefacts dating as early as ca. 500-300 BCE.[167] In England and other Northern European countries, professional embroidery was almost exclusively produced for religious or monarchical purposes between the tenth and sixteenth centuries. The labour and resources necessary to produce a large piece of embroidery limited their access to royalty, aristocracy, or the high clergy. Although professional needlework was practiced by a limited number of individuals, amateur needlework

[166] Callen, Anthea (1984), "Sexual Division of Labour in the Arts and Crafts Movement," *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 22.
[167] Wilckens, Leonie von (2003), "Embroidery" in *Grove Art Online*. https://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000025971#oao-9781884446054-e-7000025971.

was widely practiced as early as the eighth century CE.[168] The collective power and skill of guilds were necessary to produce large and intricate objects. Medieval embroidery guilds employed both men and women but were nearly always managed by men. The objects were representative of the owner more than the artist(s) as they were tailored to the demands of patrons.

Although embroidery is used for embellishments, meaning it does not contribute to the integrity of garments, its presence on practical objects puts it on the same level as most arts and crafts mediums, at the exception of purely decorative objects such as tapestries. Around the fifteenth century, guilds changed to adopt a more corporate system. The businesses were inherited generationally with greater capital resources. Head merchants became entrepreneurs and prioritized wealth. This shift disrupted the apprenticeship system that had established over centuries.[169] Women were excluded from this system and the skill of needlework was instead passed down from mother to daughter in the home. It is unlikely that women stopped practicing professional embroidery entirely. The difficult access to apprenticeship was rather to prevent their economic exploitation of the skill.[170] The women who accessed professional positions as embroiderers between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries mostly did so because they were married to guild members or because they inherited the family business. Clare Crowston has shown that there were many types of guilds and their acceptance of women as members varied.[171] Many small guilds recreated the patriarchal family dynamic, with the male head of the household watching over the operations and the marginalization of women's work to the shadows. According to S.D. Smith, the work women accomplished within guilds often remained unrecognized.[172]

Embroidery as a medium presents many dualities embedded in the act of embroidering, for instance, or in its weight on women's lives. The medium has earned both criticism and praise from feminist artists and art historians. Many women turned away from needlework as it represented generational oppression. Enforced practices such as needlework were seen as infantilizing to many

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[168] Wilckens, Leonie von (2003), "Embroidery" in *Grove Art Online*. https://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000025971#oao-9781884446054-e-7000025971.
[169] Smith, S. D. (2005), "Women's Admission to Guilds in Early-Modern England: The Case of York Merchant Tailors' Company, 1693-1776," *Gender & History*, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 103.
[170] Crowston, Clare (2008), "Women, Gender, and Guilds in Early Modern Europe: An Overview of Recent Research," *International Review of Social History,* Vol. 53, p. 19-44.
[171] Schmidt, Ariadne (2009), "Women and Guilds: Corporations and Female Labour Market Participation in Early Modern Holland," *Gender and History,* Vol. 21, p. 170-189.
[172] Smith, "Women's Admission to Guilds in Early-Modern England: The Case of York Merchant Tailors' Company, 1693-1776," p. 101.

women, as they were used to prevent them from occupying themselves towards different, larger goals.[173] Mary Seton Watts deplored women's difficulty to achieve professional status in the arts. "Why women fail in art is answered to myself 'because of the little things in life.'"[174] Needlework was part of the daily domestic burden that insured the confinement of women to domestic spaces and prevented them from pursuing a career. It was also an important portion of their education which limited what they were taught on other subjects. Generation after generation of women learned the skill through family members and in educational institutions. Boys had the power to voice preference, whereas girls were left to follow tradition. Consequently, needlework reinforced patriarchal values.[175] By teaching their daughters, mothers modelled an example of appropriate behaviour for their future. At the same time, the generational transmission of the skill of embroidery stands as one of the few feminine traditions, free of masculine consideration.

Needlework presents art historians with an artform that is independent of the established canon. The techniques, the references and the socio-historical implications require that art historians turn away from the more traditional practice of art history in order to avoid further discrimination against textile work. Pre-established opinions about needlework need to be deconstructed if we are to achieve an unprejudiced gaze. The negative bias against embroidery developed through years of misinformation, judgment and stereotype. Textile work was said to appeal to women because the practice required innate feminine qualities. As stated above, the "appeal" exists more because of access and generational tradition.

The act of embroidering itself has long been seen as a marker of women's oppression, but more recent artists have reclaimed it. Writer and sociologist Harriet Martineau shares her thoughts on needlework in 1877 when writing her autobiography: "[it was] not thought proper for young ladies to study very conspicuously; and especially with pen in hand. Young ladies […] were expected to sit down in the parlour to sew."[176] Martineau considered needlework as a punitive obligation which prevented and distracted women from greater enterprise. Many women shared this attitude and abandoned the practice altogether. More recently, however, artists found in

[173] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, p. 82.
[174] Seton Watts, Journal April 15, 1893.
[175] Gowrley, Freya (2020), "The Sister Arts: Textile Crafts Between Paint, Print and Practice," *Journal for Eighteenth* Studies, Vol. 43, No. 2, p. 154.
[176] Martineau, Harriet (1877), *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography,* London: Virago Press, p. 77.

needlework a sense of community and tradition with other women. When taking up the skill later in life,[177] artist Louise Bourgeois[178] wrote about her embroidered works:

> When I was growing up, all the women in my house were using needles. I have always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power of the needle. The needle is used to repair damage. It's a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it's not a pin.[179]

Bourgeois's description of the practice indicates that, although there was an obligation to practice needlework, she considered it positively and not as a passive activity. She reappropriated needlework and practiced it in her own terms.[180] However, her stance on needlework remains pacifist and calm. She states that the needle is far from the pin and is incapable of violence, which is arguable for it can also be said that needlework is the repeated action of piercing a fabric with a needle. The language associated with embroidery endorses this aspect of the practice. Embroidery stitches are separated in two categories: sewing stitches and stabbing stitches. Sewing stitches are characterized by the weaving of the needle through thread, whereas stabbing stitches necessitate a repeated piercing of the fabric. The name associated with this type of stitches acknowledges the violent nature of the technique. As such, needlework is much more aggressive than stroking a canvas with a paintbrush.

The argument that needlework is more feminine because it requires minuteness and attention to detail may seem surprising, because many types of painting require the same qualities. Their main difference exists in the spaces where they were practiced. By associating embroidery with femininity, it was possible to confine women to their homes, whereas men could travel the world and receive prestigious training.

Mary Seton Watts's opinion on the practice of needlework are uncertain. She only mentioned needlework twice in her published journals outside of the commission of the banners from Canada's governor general. Whether she practiced it recreationally or the extent to which she appreciated it are unknown. "Stitching a little curtain for the niche,"[181] she writes in one journal

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[177] After 1984, from 73 years old.
[178] Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) French American artist.
[179] Louise Bourgeois quoted in Meyer-Thoss, Christiane (1991), "'I am a Woman with no Secrets': Statements by Louise Bourgeois," *Parkett Verlag*, Vol. 27, p.45.
[180] Many artists from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have reappropriated needlework, for instance Annette Messager and Ghada Amer. Others have reclaimed different "feminine" crafts such as knitting and quilting, see Sabrina Gschandtner and Wartime Knitting Circle (2007).
[181] Seton Watts, Journal August 12, 1893.

entry, and "Got up and did my needlework. It is strange that this soothes me more than anything,"[182] she jotted in another. The very casual tone with which she mentioned this activity imply a certain familiarity with it. As part of a young girl's education in Victorian Britain, Mary Seton Watts as well as her sisters were probably taught needlework at a young age. As there is no other mention of embroidery elsewhere in her journal, we can assume it was an activity she considered too mundane to document or that it was something she did not practice as entertainment or art. However, the skill displayed in *Our Lady of the Snows* proves that the artist mastered many embroidery techniques. The size and intricacy of the composition also suggests that she might have received help, as she did when taking on larger projects such as her gesso panels and the Watts Cemetery Chapel. No records remain of the identity of those who helped her embroider the banners. However, her repeated efforts towards creating a community for women artists and the nature of the activity encourages the belief that she was helped by other women. As the fight for women's rights accelerated throughout the nineteenth century, many used their skills to embroider banners to carry in processions. Using a task that was forced upon them as a weapon for the fight for their liberation was a way to embrace and reclaim needlework.[183]

A History of Banners

Banners such as the ones featured in suffragist processions find their origins in a long tradition of textile objects. A banner itself is hard to define because of the interchangeability of "banner," "flag" and "tapestry" through history. The Grove Art Dictionary defines the word banner as "Devices consisting of pieces of fabric attached to poles. Depending on the size and shape of a flag, it can be called a banner, gonfanon, guidon, pennon, standard, streamer, or vexillum, though these terms are not always used consistently."[184] Just as the word designates different objects, nineteenth-century banners originate from multiple textile traditions. Banners themselves derived

[182] Seton Watts, Journal August 18, 1904.
[183] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, p. 197
[184] Nickel, Helmut (2003), "Flags and Standards" in *Grove Art Dictionary*. https://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000028487?rskey=J6IJ6p&result=9.

from medieval heraldry. The word "banner" was first introduced to designate flag-bearing knights. Knight bannerets would carry banners, which were a type of heraldic flag that was given to knights in recognition of their valorous conduct. These flags were typically square and of a small size. The fabric was rigid which meant the flag would preserve its shape as the knight moved. Other types of heraldic flags, like fork-tailed pennons, were long and thin, allowing the wind to move the fabric. The knights would parade on their horses proudly waving the banners with their coats of arms. This type of banner, in the same way as a flag, was fixed to a lance going vertically through one of the sides. Heraldic flags were also commonly found above churches with the arms of the current sovereign. Larger heraldic banners were also made, although they had more in common with tapestries than flags. Larger banners were usually meant to remain stationary inside a building. They were fixed on a rod that went through the very top of the fabric horizontally. A string was tied to each extremity allowing the banner to be hooked on a wall fixture. The string would balance in the center and taut in a triangle shape leaving the banner to hang on the wall. This type of contraption is evocative of small tapestries and embroidered ecclesiastical wall hangings that were both common at that time. Tapestry, by definition, implies a specific technique of weaving thread to create an image. Many examples, such as the Bayeux Tapestry, show that it was not always the case. Many were made by embroidering different fabrics.[185]

Procession banners, such as the ones used in women's suffrage processions, appeared following the Gothic Revival of the eighteenth century. Architect Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin was behind the popularization of the Gothic Revival in the nineteenth century.[186] The newfound interest in the architectural style brought the public's attention to the textiles used to decorate gothic churches. The embroideries adorning the stone walls of England's gothic churches are particular, not only in purpose, but in technique. The textile industry was thriving in Britain between 1100 and 1350. The country was renowned for an embroidery style dubbed "opus anglicanum" or "English work." This style of embroidery was mastered by professional embroiderers in workshops.[187] *Opus anglicanum* embroidery was held in high regards throughout

[185] Owen-Crocker, Gale R. (2002), "The Bayeux Tapestry: Invisible Seams and Visible Boundaries," *Anglo-Saxon England*, Vol. 31, pp. 257-273.
[186] Carver, Stephen (2003), "Pugin: The Mad Genius of the Gothic Revival," Murray, Chris, *Routledge Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era*, Routledge, p. 1.
[187] Coatsworth, Elizabeth (2016), "Opus What? The Textual History of Medieval Embroidery Terms and Their Relationship to the Surviving Embroideries c. 800-1400," in Maren Clegg Hyer and Jill Frederick, eds., *Textiles, Texts, Tntertext: Essays in Honour of Gale R. Owen-Crocker,* Woodbridge: Boydell Press, p. 45.

Europe and was considered as the most prestigious production of embroidery in the world. The objects created in these workshops were exceptional because of the embroiderers' unique use of the split stitch. This type of stitch is one of the most common stitches in embroidery, as it allows the needleworker to create a steady continuous line and opaque colour fillings. The artists of the opus anglicanum style used this simple stitch in a way to create three-dimensionality in their figures through the different colours of threads and this specific application of the split stitch. Opus anglicanum embroideries were extremely detailed and made from the hands of highly skilled artists. The style also featured a frequent and generous use of gold and silver threads. The use of noble materials such as metallic threads as well as silk or velvet as a background made the objects very precious.[188] Unlike heraldic embroideries, the designs were very intricate and complex. This complex tradition of objects and techniques led to the banners seen in suffragist processions. By choosing these objects, women reclaimed an oppressive practice as well as a celebration of chivalry and masculine qualities.

Banners as Tools of Activism

> "A banner is a thing to float in the wind, to flicker in the breeze, to flirt its colours for your pleasure, to half show and half conceal a device you long to unravel…"[189]

In 1909, Mary Lowndes published a pamphlet entitled *Banners and Banner Making*, in which she encouraged suffragists to make banners when participating in processions. The pamphlet suggested designs and offered patterns for women to follow at home. The designs included mottoes, heroine banners recalling the legacy of great women, reappropriation of certain symbols, such as birds, flowers, and the use of rich materials such as gold thread, velvet or silk. These choices aimed to evoke heraldic banners and the portraits of political heroes.[190] In a similar fashion, many suffragists made banners to honour important women. Banners were dedicated to women scientists, artists, writers and thinkers, thus echoing those of war heroes in the Middle Ages. An important aspect of suffragist banners was the text. Slogans, mottos and demands were

[188] Coatsworth, Elizabeth (2012), "Opus Anglicanum," in Gale Owen-Crocker, Elizabeth Coatsworth & Maria Hayward, eds. *Encyclopedia of Medieval Dress and Textiles in the British Isles C. 450-1450,* Leiden: Brill, p. 503.
[189] Lowndes, Mary (1909), *Banner and banner making*, London: Fawcett Society, 7p.
[190] Hunter, Clare (2017), "Our History of Banner-Making," *Procession* [Online]: https://www.processions.co.uk/story/history-banner-making/

stitched on banners to make women's voices read. The symbolism widely used in these banners made the minimal compositions as impactful as possible. Embroidering the banners was not a chore preventing women from considering important issues, but a way to honour women and to fight for the future. Figure 12 shows a group of women embroidering banners for a procession. The making of banners was a collective effort and was a way for women to gather before a march, and to discuss issues and tactics.

Banners were a part of suffrage processions early in the existence of the movement. They served as tools of resistance and exhibited women's skills and creativity. Their visual impact attracted attention and made a strong statement. Textile artist and curator Clare Hunter describes the visual impact of suffragist banners:

> This was a pageant of women. It was a visual refutation of the accusation that the suffragettes were aping masculinity in their bid for the vote, and an assertion of womanhood in all its colours.[191]

The use of banners was so common that advertisement for accessories such as shoulder straps for banner bearers began to appear in suffragist journals such as *Women's Franchise.*[192] Although banners had appeared in processions before the twentieth century, their popularity soared after Lowndes founded the Artists Suffrage League (ASL) in 1907,[193] the same year as *Our Lady of the Snows* was offered to the Royal Victoria College.

[191] Hunter, *Our History of Banner-Making*.
[192] "Shoulder-straps for Banner-Bearers," *Women's franchise,* June 4, 1908, p. 3.
[193] Sexton, Sarah (2018), "Subversive Suffrage Stitches," *The Quilter*, No. 154, p. 26.

Fig. 12 - *Suffragists Making Banners for a Woman's Social & Political Union Rally,* 1910, courtesy of LSE Library.

Craftivism

The political motivation behind the creation of suffragist banners suggests the practice can be seen as an early example of craftivism. Theorized by artist and activist Betsy Greer in 2003 through her website, the term "craftivism" was born after a "rising sense of hopelessness to change anything in the world"[194] after the fall of the twin towers in 2001. Craftivism represents the act of

[194] Greer, Betsy (2007), "Craftivism," in Gary L. Anderson & Kathryn G. Herr, eds. *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice,* SAGE Publications, p. 557.

using crafts to incite change. Greer explains that the concept is intertwined with feminism and resistance to capitalism. The evolution of the economy and of manufacture through the twentieth century eradicated the need for craft as the time and cost of materials required made it unpractical. Breer places craftivism alongside the do-it-yourself spirit, advocating the use of creativity for the improvement of the self and the world. Without a necessity to produce crafts, she argues a return of crafts as tools of activism. Just as the Arts and Crafts Movement used their industries to improve their communities, Greer positions craftivism as a form of engaged creativity, a personalized activism.[195] In a similar fashion, the suffragists who made banners for processions were not all professional artists. Many were taught needlework at a young age and used their skills to participate in the suffrage movement. Undeniable similarities are present between the theorization of craftivism and embroidered banners, which positions this activity as a direct precursor of this modern practice.

Conclusion

Maty Seton Watts's awareness of her environment inspired her to practice art to align with her values. Her involvement with the Arts and Crafts Movement introduced her to philanthropic efforts and the creation of community. She worked at a time when craft is gaining increased recognition. She worked with other women, for women. Her social involvement specifically targeted the education of girls and easing their access into the professional practice of art. The women's suffrage movement offered an opportunity for women artists to reappropriate traditional feminine crafts such as needlework. Embroidered suffragist banners are an example of craft being used in activistic activity. A visual statement reappropriating a long history of oppression.

[195] Greer, "Craftivism," p.558.

CHAPTER THREE: "I dare say what I think"[196]

The commission Mary Seton Watts received from Canada's governor general in 1906 is puzzling in multiple ways. Lord Grey's request for embroidered banners raises many questions because of the tradition and prejudice behind needlework. He requested needlework, a practice with a feminine heritage, to serve a masculinist purpose. Moreover, this work was commissioned at a time when banners carried a political weight associated to their presence in suffragist processions. The link to the suffrage movement contrasts with Lord Grey's desire to instill an image of the empire and an example of masculinity. And Seton Watts's disrespect of details of the commission adds to the object's misinterpretation.

In this chapter, the commission of Lord Grey's banners is considered with an engaged eye. The implications of the banners' use in the suffragist movement and their place in the long history of needlework are explored. This reading of *Our Lady of the Snows* is based on an in-depth symbolic analysis and technical reading of the banner in the first two parts of this chapter, entitled "The Banner," and "Symbolism." These sections present the most detailed analysis the banner has received to date. The two following sections "The Divine Feminine" and "Threads of Power" set out to weave Seton Watts's activism into her design of the banner, as she did in all her work. Finally, "A Scheme Within a Scheme" reflects upon the different inconsistencies between Lord Grey's commission and Seton Watts's banners in order to offer an interpretation of the scheme the artist orchestrated.

The Scheme[197]

In 1907, Mary Seton Watts was contracted by the governor general of Canada, Lord Earl Grey to execute two banners sporting images of Saint George and the Dragon that would be sent to Canada. This commission was part of Grey's plan to affirm Britain's imperial presence in Canadian universities. Although Canada had its own culture and identity, the government wanted

[196] Seton Watts, Journal January 17, 1893.
[197] Expression used by Jennifer Salahub, quoting Lord Grey who referred to this commission as a scheme. See Salahub, Jennifer (2006), "Governor General Grey's 'Little Scheme': Majesty in Canada" in Colin Coates, ed., *Majesty in Canada: Essays on the Role of* Royalty, Toronto: Dundrun Press, pp. 98-118.

to create an "acceptable identity within the rubric of imperialism."[198] The commission was an attempt to cultivate patriotic belonging among Canadians towards England and their "imperial family"[199] more widely. The governor general felt it was of the greatest importance for the Canadian middle-class[200] to establish ideological ties with English royalty.[201] Grey decided to focus his attention on students, the future adults of the nation. He introduced imperial symbolism within education establishments to serve as models for the students, but also to familiarize them with such images. The quotidian contact of students with these images, he hoped, would lead to a sentiment of affinity towards the empire. Grey proceeded to order a series of banners from English gentlewomen. Historian Jennifer E. Salahub, to whom we owe most of the research on these objects, looked closely at Grey's scheme and identified twelve to thirteen banners that can be traced to this commission. Although the exact number of banners ordered and received from England remains unknown, Salahub believes that many of them are now lost or undocumented.

Grey commissioned two banners from Mary Seton Watts: *Our Lady of the Snows* (Fig. 13), which was offered in Queen Alexandra's name and *Flowers of the Nation* (Fig. 14). The latter never left Ottawa's Government house, it was brought back to England and donated to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London after Grey's term as governor general ended.

[198] Salahub, Jennifer (2004), "The Distribution of Cultural Identity: A Canadian Case Study," presented at "Appropriation," "Acculturation," "Transformation," *Textile Society of America 9th Biennial Symposium Proceedings*, p. 506.
[199] Salahub, "The Distribution of Cultural Identity: A Canadian Case Study," p. 506.
[200] The middle-class specifically as many of Canada's elite immigrated directly from Britain, ties already existed.
[201] Salahub, Jennifer (2006), "Governor General Grey's 'Little Scheme': Majesty in Canada" in Colin Coates, ed., *Majesty in Canada: Essays on the Role of* Royalty, Toronto: Dundrun Press, p. 99.

Fig. 13 - *Our Lady of the Snows*, Mary Seton Watts, 1906-7, 325 x 255 cm, Royal Victoria College, Montreal.

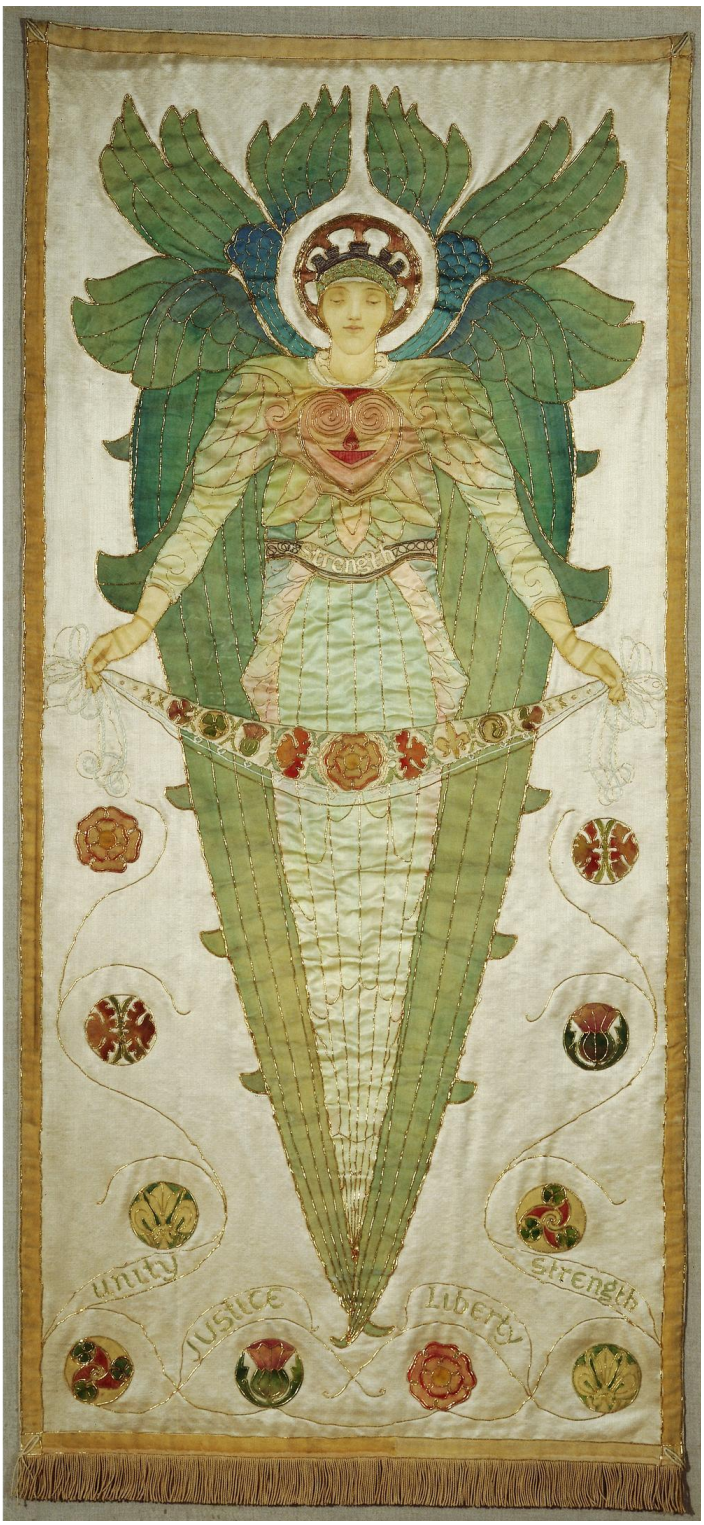

Fig. 14 - *Flowers of the Nation*, Mary Seton Watts, 1906-7, 325 x 255 cm, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Grey chose the theme of Saint George and the Dragon because of its association with British royal visual culture. Not only is Saint George the patron saint of England, but he also presents a model of "perfect" masculinity. The character acts as a visual reminder of imperial power. The choice of imagery reveals Grey's target audience for the banners: young men. It was a way for the governor general to communicate to them that the future of the empire was in their hands, and that they were the ones he had chosen to invest in. Lord Grey grew up within the British nobility, banners embodied royalty and power to him. As descendants of the tradition of knights banneret, banners would encourage loyalty and bravery in Canadian youth.

The banners commissioned by Lord Grey featured complex embroidered compositions, generally made of silk and were framed with fringes, a nod to epic medieval banners. Each banner Grey received varied in style, but the governor general's scheme was generally going according to plan until he received the two banners sent by Seton Watts. Instead of representations of Saint George, Seton Watts sent him *Our Lady of the Snows*, a glistening seraph surrounded by words inspiring love and hope, and *Spirit of the Flowers of the Nation*, a winged messenger bringing messages of justice and unity. The style and subject of Seton Watts's banners heavily contrasts with the masculine values Grey wished them to embody. He was left with floral pastel banners displaying what might be seen as stereotypical feminine aesthetics. *Our Lady of the Snows* was commissioned as a gift from the queen consort, Queen Alexandra. It is the only banner of the commission group to have this distinction and it was established before the governor general received it. Regardless of the banner's departure from what Grey had commissioned and from the rest of the commission group, Grey felt compelled to use it as part of his scheme because of the queen's association with the object. When Grey received the banners in Ottawa, he was the one to decide where each would be sent. He decided to gift *Our Lady of the Snow* to the Royal Victoria College, a women's college in Montreal. This decision was calculated. If Watts's banner did not portray his vision for what should be instilled to the male Canadian youth, he would send it somewhere with a different viewership. There, the banner would not negatively influence the future of the empire, as Grey seemingly did not feel that women had an important enough part to play in the future of the empire.

The Banner

Our Lady of the Snows is a silk banner measuring 325 x 255 cm. A seraph figure is being crowned by two angelic figures. The seraph figure is surrounded by her impressive wings as well as a series of intertwined ribbons and scrolls. Seven doves fill the lower part of the banner, all carrying words of hope and love. In a letter to William Peterson, McGill's principal from 1895 to 1919, Lord Grey confirmed that Seton Watts did not only design the banner but also worked on it herself: "A banner has just arrived from Her Majesty the Queen, which has been designed and worked by Mrs. Watts, widow of the artist."[202] However, because of the size of the object, it is unlikely that she completed it alone. Seton Watts must have received help from a group of women, maybe other members of the HAIA. She was accustomed to collaborative work, so such a collaboration would not have been out of character for her.

The seraph at the centre of the banner is a motif that she had reprised on multiple occasions. The winged figure stands in the centre of the composition and holds a sphere with the words "The good seed are the children of the kingdom." (Fig. 15) The banner is composed of muted hues of green, mauve, and light blue. Aside from the embroidery, *Our Lady of the Snows* is a patchwork of different pieces of silk and velvet, decorated with a variety of stones. The crown, the seraph's robe, and the sphere she holds are covered in aquamarine, crystal, garnet, and pearls. The different pieces of silk were hand dyed with inks in order to create different colour gradients. In the floating scrolls and in the sleeves of the seraph's robes, ink was used to add a completely different colour to the silk and give it additional dimension. For the wings, a darker ink was used on the edges of the surface to create a gradient. (Fig. 16) Ink was also used for some of the text present on the banner, such as in the sphere, in the floating scrolls and under each dove. (Fig. 17) Some ink is also visible on the gold details of the sphere and the crown. The ink was applied to give depth to the highly reflective silk surface. (Fig. 18)

[202] Lord Grey, letter to William Peterson, January 5, 1907, McGill University Archives.

Fig. 15 - Detail of ink lettering, dyed goldwork and beadwork.

Fig. 16 - Detail of ink color gradient on silk.

Fig. 17 - Detail of ink lettering, stitching and ink washes.

Fig. 18 - Application of black ink on sections of goldwork.

The minuscule phrases, only a few centimeters wide, within the illustrations held by the birds, on the other hand, have been embroidered with very fine black thread. (Fig. 19) The words "love," "faith," and "peace" on the crown were intricately made with a specific technique of needlework called goldwork. In goldwork, the artist uses a thread made from metal instead of a natural or manmade fibre such as cotton, wool or silk. The metal threads are either wrapped around a fibre core or entirely composed of metal, which seems to be the case in our banner. By looking closely at the goldwork on the banner, it seems that the gold thread is "smooth-passing" wrapped gold thread so as not to add any extra texture. The wrapping of the gold thread is visible in Figure 20, the diagonal lines are the edges of the metallic thread, and the horizontal lines are the regular threads fixing the appliqué to the banner. The gold appliqués were made by shaping the threads, tying them together and then were attached to the banner with regular fiber thread. (Fig. 21) Whereas for the silver threads, present on the doves and on the seraph's robe, the texture of the thread reveals that multiple wrapped threads were added together and then twisted to create texture. (Fig. 22) Although the composition of these metallic threads is different, the silver thread was also shaped and then secured onto the banner with fibre thread. While the silver thread is limited to certain areas of the banner, the gold thread can be seen throughout the composition, delimiting each element. Certain details such as the halos, the crown and the sphere are entirely covered in goldwork, which is highly light reflective and attracts the eye.

Goldwork was traditionally the most luxurious technique of embroidery. It was reserved for ecclesiastical purposes, military uniforms or for the nobility. The density of the thread in comparison to regular fibre thread makes it impossible for the artists to physically "pierce" the fabric like they would normally do. To be attached onto the fabric, the gold threads were simply layered together in rows, tied together with thread, and that stitch is then used for another thread to go through the silk. Because of this, the range of stitches possible with goldwork is very limited. The metal threads could be formed or "curled" and maintain their shape before being secured in the fabric. In the case of the silver threads in *Our Lady of the Snows,* the metallic nature of the thread meant it could be twisted (or kinked) to give texture without requiring a complicated stitch like traditional thread.

The different shapes of each stone required a different technique to attach each of them to the silk. The bigger stones, such as aquamarines, garnets and bigger crystals, were pierced in order to pass a thread through them and secure them to the fabric. This strategy ensured that they would

be solidly attached although they were the heaviest stones. The sphere in the centre of the banner is partly filled with shiny disks. (Fig. 15) Historically, sequins first appeared in Egyptian, Indian and Peruvian nobility dress as early as 1550 BCE.[203] They were generally made of gold and used as a display of wealth. Although nineteenth-century sequins were usually cut from a piece of metal, the ones featured in the banner are made of nacre (mother-of-pearl). They are pierced in the centre, and the thread goes through the hole of the bead, around it, and back through the fabric. This same technique is also used in the banner for star-shaped sequins spread around the seraph. (Fig. 21) Those sequins seem to be made of gold or another metal. Smaller beads throughout the design are anchored to the banner with a back-stitch technique, where a few beads are added onto the thread and then secured onto the fabric with a simple stitch, then the embroiderer goes back and secures each bead individually on the fabric.

Another method that is commonly used is the couching technique. This type of beading is visible on the vertical lines on the robe. It seems Seton Watts and the embroiderers used the couching method rather than the backstitch, for the thread can be seen for every few beads instead of for each one. It is possible both were used depending on the embroiderer. On the robe, the beads alternate between a series of tiny beads followed by one bigger one. (Fig. 23) The other single beads throughout the banner are attached by a single stitch matching the colour palette of the threads around it.

It is difficult to identify exactly what type of thread was used for the simpler stitches. Although silk was the most commonly used fibre for silk embroidery projects, cotton thread quickly became the most popular thread for sewing as the nineteenth century progressed. Both could have been used on the banner. These threads were used to attach the stones and beads, as well as the metallic appliqués. Natural fibre threads were also used for the small lettering in the doves' medallions and for the details of the faces and hands. A thread a few shades darker than the characters' skin tone was used to define fingers as well as the details of the face. (Fig. 24) Some ink was also painted on to give dimension and depth to those elements. Fine sewn details were achieved by using a simple backstitch. This stitch allows the artist to create a secure continuous line by a series of small segments of thread. This stitch can be used for lines as well as for attaching

[203] Carey, Margaret (2003), "Beadwork" in *Grove Art Dictionary* [Online]. https://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/search?siteToSearch=groveart&q=beadwork&searchBtn=Search&isQuickSearch=true

beads. What defines a backstitch is how the needle goes back through a place where it previously pierced the fabric. This technique can also be used to create very controlled thin lines, which is ideal for fine details. Under the netting surrounding the seraph's head, the artists produced the effect of hair by layering the netting on top of another stitch. This detail is hard to see at first, as the seraph's hair is almost the same colour as the background. The hair is achieved by multiple horizontal rows of satin stitches layered on top of one another. (Fig. 24) The satin stitch is the most common technique used to opaquely fill an area. It is achieved by a series of straight stitches next to each other at a very close proximity. When well executed, this stitch gives the effect of a solid colour, the texture of the thread is barely visible. In the case of the banner, the stacked rows create a dented line where each stitch goes through the background fabric. The same technique was used for the inner circle of the angels' halos. By using different techniques and materials on the banner, the object's surface can be appreciated not only for the image it supports, but also for its textures and tridimensionality.

Although the conditions under which the banner can be seen today are very different from those of 1907, the goldwork still reflects the light in a way that makes the figures glow on the satin background. The intricate beading attracts the light in different ways, which makes the eyes travel through each detail. The sense of depth created by the ink details makes each surface unique in colouring. The women who brought Mary Seton Watts's design to life mastered the art of needlework in a way a machine never could. When looking closely at each stitch of this embroidered banner, the artists' traces are undeniable. Each irregularity or imperfect detail, for example a word that does not fit in a straight line for lack of space (Fig. 19), reminds the viewer of the hands that made it. These details are part of what the arts and crafts movement fought for when resisting the industrial way of producing items. The quality of the needlework present on the banner is characterized by the intricacy of design, the variety of stitches, the lavishness of materials and the minuteness in execution.

The banner was sent as a pair with *Spirit of the Flowers of the Nation.*[204] Although I did not have the opportunity to see this second banner, it seems to have been made using the same techniques as *Our Lady of the Snows.* On this second banner, another seraph figure is represented, taking up most of the composition. Her wings have a feather-like quality that contrasts with the

[204] I have not been able to see this banner in person, therefore I cannot offer the same level of detail in my reading of *Spirit of the Flowers of the Nation*.

scroll-like wings of *Our Lady of the Snows*. Her eyes are closed, her face serene. A crown frames her face, creating a halo, and she holds a fabric with embroidered flowers. Her dress features a belt with the word "strength" going across her waist. The whole figure is in hues of green with occasional red details, such as the heart plate on her chest and the flowers spread across the composition. These flowers appear on the fabric she holds, as well as in orbs in the lower half of the banner. The words "unity," "justice," "liberty" and "strength" are intertwined at the bottom. The overall composition is minimal in comparison to *Our Lady of the Snows.* The background is generally plain and of a neutral color. Seton Watts included the same washed-off colour on the wings to create a sense of depth. The origin of the name of this second banner is also unknown. Salahub suggests that *Spirit of the Flowers of the Nation* earned its name from an article by L. A. M. Lovekin describing the banner. Lovekin sees the flowers as a representation of the different nations united by England.[205] This interpretation seems to be unique to Lovekin, as he contradicted Lord Grey's public opinion of the banner, which he described as:

> Sir George is represented by a young angel knight with a strong tower coronet, resting upon a wreath of laurels – a face which might have been painted by Burne-Jones; shoulders and head standing out from a background of strong, supporting and most graceful wings...tapering down to the feet in the shape of a shield...on the back of the banner...is the simple red cross[206] of St. George.[207]

While the governor general defended an interpretation of Saint George, Lovekin offered his own reading of the banner. When using flowers in her design of the Watts Cemetery Chapel, Seton Watts explain their symbolic meaning in *The Word in the Pattern* as "the flower in full faith casting off its petals that the seed may ripen, and once more renew life" and "the flower that closes with the setting sun, and opens again when darkness is past."[208] Although she did not give this name to the banner, the symbolism associated with the title is reminiscent of Cameron's photograph *Rosebud Garden of Girls*, in which she paired a flower to each model. Associations between

[205] Salahub, "The Distribution of Cultural Identity: A Canadian Case Study," p. 511.
[206] Here, Lord Grey uses the cross at the back of *Spirit of the Flowers of the Nation* as an argument to defend it as Seton Watts's vision of Saint George. However, *Our Lady of the Snows,* which was named by the artist, features the same detail.
[207] Letter from Lord Grey to Lord Mountstephen, 13 March 1906, quoted in Salahub, "The Distribution of Cultural Identity: A Canadian Case Study," p. 511.
[208] Seton Watts, *The Word in the Pattern*, p. 12.

femininity were common during the Victorian era. The symbolism included by Seton Watts in the banners is what cements them as distinctive from the rest of Lord Grey's banners.

Fig. 19 - Detail of fine letter stitching.

Fig. 20 - Detail of goldwork and backstitch filling.

Fig. 21 - Gold work appliqués.

Fig. 22 - Detail of silver thread.

Fig. 23 - Detail of the bead couching technique.

Fig. 24 - Detail of the seraph's blonde hair achieved with rows of satin stitches.

Symbolism

Seton Watts briefly mentioned her work on the banner in her personal journals. Upon starting it, she wrote: "I am beginning my banner – this new banner to be given by the Queen to the children of Canada, I want to put everything into it, that can possibly be thought out – A full rounded aspiration to give to the children there."[209] This shows she took the project extremely seriously, thinking through every detail in her design so as to convey her message to her young viewers in Canada.

The words punctuating the banner are good examples of the ways in which Watts used literary references to transmit her vision. At the centre of the composition, the sentence "the good seed are the children of the kingdom" is wrapped on the orb held by the seraph. The materials used in this section of the banner as well as its position make it a focal point. The reference is to the Parable of the Good Seed: "the field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but tares are the children of the wicked [one]."[210] The parable described children as the hope for the future of the Kingdom of God. As the banner was offered to the "children" of Canada as an aspiration, it is likely the artist saw her work as a means to inspire the students to be "good seed." The presence of the parable on the banner can be interpreted as a simple religious inspiration; surrounded by the rest of the symbolism that Watts included in the banner, however, the words can be interpreted differently.

Indeed, Seton Watts added another religious reference: it appears as a text carried by the doves on the lower half of the banner. The words come from the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, a list of spiritual virtues from early Christian Writers. The Middle English she uses when naming them indicates that she probably learned about them through Richard Rolle of Hampole (1305-1349), a British hermit mystic.[211] Rolle placed great importance on cultivating an individual relationship with God, rather than following a collective faith. This attitude towards religion probably appealed to Seton Watts as it allowed for different interpretations of religious texts according to one's values and beliefs. As a feminist, this allowed for a reconciliation between religious faith and a desire for women's emancipation. The gifts offer a certain guidance while

[209] Seton Watts, Journal July 29, 1906.
[210] Matthew 13:38.
[211] Bills, Mark (2010), *Watts Chapel: A Guide to the Symbols of Mary Watts's Arts and Crafts Masterpiece,* London: Philip Wilson Publishers, p.73-74

leaving space for individuals to interpret them within their own set of beliefs. These gifts appear to be important to Seton Watts as she used them in the design of both the banner and the Watts Cemetery Chapel. The gifts, as presented in the banner, are:

The Gifte of Wysdome [wisdom] – wisdom of God – with a seraph figure.

The Gifte of Pittie [pity] – by love serve – a red pelican feeding its babies.

The Gifte of Strenghte [strength] – armor of God- a knight in full armor.

The Gifte of Comfait [comfort] – go forth speak comfort- heart shaped halo

The Gifte of Understanding – understanding in all things- a snake going up a fruit tree

The Gifte of Counyinge [knowledge] – do with all thy might- three hands

The Gifte of Reverence – put off thy shoes- a pair of shoes near a flower tree

While she includes God in her description of the gifts, these do not appear to be inherently religious to her. The many apparitions of the gifts in different texts and the evolution of language resulted in many irregularities in the exact words used to designate each gift. Because of this, we cannot attribute changes in words to the artist, with one exception. Watts was familiar with the different gifts, as she had used the scheme in her design of the chapel. Documented in her book *The Word in the Pattern*, we have traces of the terms and translation known to her. When comparing how she designated the gifts in the chapel and, a few years later, in the banner, we can see that she changed one of the gifts. The last gift is the gift of "dreede" which translates to the fear of God. However, she changed it to reverence and "put off thy shoes," a reference to humility. Why would she make this change?

"Reverence" is defined in the Cambridge dictionary as "a feeling of respect or admiration for someone or something." The word is also commonly used in a religious context. By replacing fear of God with reverence, Seton Watts shows a desire to replace fear with respect. The symbol and sentence framing the gift are also devoid of direct religious reference, thus broadening the application of the gifts. Grey's commission sought to inspire imperial kinship, not to introduce religious presence. In a letter to Queen Alexandra, Lord Grey, citing a letter that Seton Watts wrote

to him,[212] defines her design by saying it represents "the unfolding of Canada, and reaching up towards the attainment of high ideals."[213]

When introducing the seven gifts, Seton Watts refers to them as gifts of the spirit and not gifts of the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost as they were generally called. This further suggests that she viewed these as general ethical values and not religious ones. In her official description of the banner to Lord Grey, she takes care to explain each gift, each a lesson to be taught.

> The Gifte of Wisdome, which sees things in their true proportion with truth and with courage that comes from a right judgment.
> The Gifte of Pittie, opening the eyes to that which is higher than self interest and inspiring noble self sacrifice.
> The Gifte of Strenghte, which is based on temperance and mastery over self.
> The Gift of Comfort, sympathy and service – the special work of the Spirit of God.
> The Gifte of Understanding, which comes from light within, revealing the deepest meanings of Life.
> The Gifte of Couninge, with its roots in the words "I can," knowledge gained by learning and practice – a gift by the power of which men do their best work, whether they are born to reign through service or to serve through reigning.
> And finally, The Gifte of Dreed or Reverence, […] sums up the other six for
> Reverence makes Wisdom take off her shoes on Holy ground; Pittie is ennobled by Reverence; Strength is held in check by Reverence; Comfort becomes a consecration by Reverence; Understanding is made higher and wider by Reverence; and Knowledge inspired by Reverence is Praise and Worship.[214]

Not only has Reverence replaced the traditional seventh gift of "fear of God," it has become the guiding principle in the iconographic program of the banner – the thread that binds all other gifts.

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[212] There is no trace of the original letter from Seton Watts, but Grey follows his description of the banner by saying "If Your Majesty has been able to follow this description, which is mainly a repetition of Mrs. Watts own words" in Lord Grey, Letter to Queen Alexandra, January 4, 1907.
[213] Lord Grey, Letter to Queen Alexandra, January 4, 1907.
[214] Seton Watts cited by Lord Grey in Letter to Queen Alexandra, January 4, 1907.

The title that Mary Seton Watts gave to her banner is another perplexing element. It seems to be a nod to Rudyard Kipling's poem "Our Lady of the Snows,"[215] published in 1897. But in her official description of the banner, Watts does not mention the poem nor any justification for its title. Instead, she uses the phrase "Our Lady of the Snows" to designate the figure at the centre of her composition: "The central figure is Our Lady of the Snows."[216] Before being used by Kipling in his poem, our Lady of the Snows was one of the many names given to Saint Mary of the Snows. The name refers to a legend where the Virgin is said to have visited a couple in 352 A.D. who had prayed to her after they had been unsuccessful in their attempts to conceive a child. As a sign that the Virgin had heard their prayer, snow fell on Rome in August.[217] The legend is at the origin of the construction of a church in 358 A.D. now known as the Basilica of St. Mary Major (Santa Maria Maggiore) in Rome. There seems to be no link between this Mary and the one n Kipling's poem. Canada's climate is likely what led Kipling to use this name as a personification of the country, regardless of the name's religious origins. The poem was written as a celebration of one of Sir Wilfrid Laurier's decisions regarding British imports. In it, Kipling praises Canada's place within the dominion, which thus stands in accordance with Grey's vision for the country. Kipling's stereotypical association of Canada as a land of snow and ice earned the poem a very negative response from Canadians. Any reference to "Our Lady of the Snows" would guarantee uproar. It is therefore very unlikely that the governor general suggested the name to Seton Watts, especially given that he had requested banners of Saint George and the Dragon. In fact, when he offered *Our Lady of the Snows* to the Royal Victoria College, Grey referred to it as the Queen's banner to avoid any controversy. The motivations behind Seton Watts's decision to draw inspiration from this poem are unknown, but it is possible that it was the symbolism of Kipling's words that inspired her. The last two stnazas of the poem introduce many feminine allegories:

> "Carry the word to my sisters—
> To the Queens of the East and the South.
> I have proven faith in the Heritage
> By more than the word of the mouth.
> They that are wise may follow
> Ere the world's war-trumpet blows,

[215] Kipling, Rudyard (1897), "Our Lady of the Snows," *The Times*, April 27, 1897.
[216] Cited by Lord Grey, Letter to Queen Alexandra, January 4, 1907.
[217] *Devotion to Our Lady of the Snows* (2021), Our Lady of the Snows Shrine [Online], https://snows.org/about-us/shrine-history/

But I—I am first in the battle,"
Said our Lady of the Snows.

A Nation spoke to a Nation
A Throne sent word to a Throne:
"Daughter am I in my mother's house
But mistress in my own.
The gates are mine to open,
As the gates are mine to close,
And I abide by my Mother's House,"
Said our Lady of the Snows.[218]

As she did throughout her career by drawing inspiration from a variety of cultures, Watts seems to have used Kipling's words here according to how she interpreted them, rather than how they were intended by their author. In *The Word in the Pattern*, she asserted her right to use symbols as she saw fit.

> [The use of symbols] in modern times is to be defended only on the plea that they carry their suggestion to the mind along a somewhat disused pathway, and that, as in the case of parable and metaphor, these little tokens dwelt upon earnestly and lovingly have a fire of thought within them which has power to flash new light upon the soul.[219]

In *The Word in the Pattern* as well as in her letters and journal entries, Watts insists on her vision of symbolism as highly personal. She used imagery and words that spoke to her mind regardless of their original meaning. The floating scrolls around the seraph are an example of this attitude. The left one features the sentence "peace and growth to her" and the right one "strength and worth to her." In her official description of the symbolism, she simply refers to them as a "Gaelic blessing."[220] She does not explain the origin of the blessing nor her reasoning for including it. The meaning behind the blessing was not common knowledge and only known to her because of her Scottish heritage and her keen interest in it. The text seems to have been used for what it is and not what it meant. She intentionally chose a text that was gendered female.

The gender of the seraph figure has been a source of debate since the creation of the banner. According to Salahub *Our Lady of the Snows* is an allegory of Canada. Unlike Britain with

[218] Kipling, "Our Lady of the Snows."
[219] Seton Watts, *The Word in the Pattern*, p. 29.
[220] Seton Watts cited by Lord Grey, Letter to Queen Alexandra, January 4, 1907.

Britannia, Canada does not have an official personification. Figures such as Miss Canada or Johnny Canuck[221] attempted to make their way into popular culture, but they did not achieve the expected popularity. "Our Lady of the Snows" was used by Grey on more than one occasion to refer to Canada, notably in his New Years Address to the King in 1906.[222]

> The Ice and Snows of Canadian Winters, which have won for the dominion for the Dominion Kipling's "Appellation of the 'Lady of the Snows'" – a title which gave great offence to Canadians – are among Canada's greatest assets […][223]

However, the character never became a popular personification. Kipling's poem caused an uproar among Canadians, the motivations behind this use of symbolism are Seton Watts's. When he sent it to the Royal Victoria College, the governor general censored the name to "the Queen's banner"[224] as to not create offence. Following Salahub's identification of the figure as an allegory of Canada, Seton Watts disregarded the general anger towards the appellation. This translates a colonist attitude; she used the symbolism which inspired her regardless of her viewership. She combined this allegory of Canada with the seraphs figures she has used before. *Our Lady of the Snows* is almost identical to the seraphs adorning the walls of the Watts Cemetery Chapel. (Fig. 25) The clothing, facial expressions and general appearance are so similar that it is safe to say that the artist regarded them as the same beings. She uses the allegory to instate Canada as feminine and a messenger of feminine values. This symbolism goes against Lord Grey's masculine vision of the empire, which explains why he sent it to a women's college.

[221] Johnny Canuck was introduced in 1869 in a satirical cartoon by John Henry Walker and was portrayed as a simple-minded and sympathetic lumberjack.
[222] Salahub, "Governor General Grey's 'Little Scheme': Majesty in Canada," p. 104.
[223] Lord Grey to King Edward, 31 December 1906, quoted in Salahub, "Governor General Grey's 'Little Scheme': Majesty in Canada," p. 105.
[224] Salahub, "The Distribution of Cultural Identity: A Canadian Case Study," p. 511.

Fig. 25 – Mary Seton Watts, *Seraphs in the Watts Cemetery Chapel,* 1896-98, Watts Gallery Trust.

In her exposé on the chapel's symbolism, Mary Seton Watts refers to the seraphs as "winged messengers,"[225] carriers of virtues. In both compositions, she pairs the messengers with the seven gifts of the spirits, which implies an association between the two in the artist's mind. When representing these seraphs, Watts gives them an androgynous appearance. She is also careful to use a gender-neutral language when referring to them. They are spiritual guides and models of aspiration. There is nothing in the seraph figures of the two banners for Grey that identifies them as different "beings" than the ones inside the Watts Cemetery Chapel. Additionally, if the banners

[225] Seton Watts, *The Word in the Pattern,* p. 30.

did represent Saint George, Seton Watts would have included some of his attributes, objects she designed for the Compton Pottery Guild prove as such. A series of clay plaques of saints designed by Seton Watts, produced and sold by the Compton Pottery Guild contains a representation of Saint George. Here, Saint George, although cohesive with the rest of her oeuvre, also follows traditional representations of the saint. (Fig. 26) He is represented in an armour; he bears England's flag on his shield, and she included the dragon at the bottom of the composition.

Fig. 26 - *Saint George and the Dragon*, Compton Pottery Guild, Pottery plaque, 19 x 12 cm, Watts Gallery Trust.

As for *Spirit of the Flowers of the Nation,* Jennifer Salahub suggested that this second banner might have been the one intended to present Saint George.[226] However, the figure in this second banner shares more similarities with the chapel's seraphs than the Saint-George designed in pottery. Furthermore, if that was the case, *Spirit of the Flowers of the Nation* would have been sent in lieu of *Our Lady of the Snows.* Perhaps, Lord Grey's interpretation of the figure as a young Saint George was wishful thinking. Another point to note is that Seton Watts was not the only artist who sent multiple banners. Lady Mary Meynell and Lady Wantage, Lord Grey's cousin and aunt respectively, also sent more than one, but both respected the governor general's theme and made multiple representations of Saint George.[227] Research has failed these objects so far, because instead of trying to understand why Seton Watts's banners are different from the rest, the efforts were limited to justifying their belonging within the group.

The symbolism used in both banners made by Watts establishes a dialogue with her beliefs and her socio-political values. Symbols such as the pelican, (Fig. 27) which she used in *Our Lady of the Snows*, as well as in the decor of the Watts Cemetery Chapel, were also used by suffragists. Dr Lucy Ella Rose noted the words used by Seton Watts in the banners and wrote that "[She] used symbols and images that came to form part of a progressive visual culture, entering into a politically charged iconographic vocabulary."[228] Seton Watts's generous use of words in the Grey banners echoes the suffragist banners, inspiring and demanding change. The other banners in Lord Grey's commission feature very little text or none at all. The bold words present on both of Seton Watts's banners are in line with suffragist banners, where words were sewn into the fabric as demands for the improvement of women's life.

[226] Salahub, "The Distribution of Cultural Identity: A Canadian Case Study," p. 511.
[227] Salahub, "Embroidering the Ties of Empire: The Lord Grey Banners," p. 150-151.
[228] Rose, *Suffragist Artists in Partnership,* p. 30.

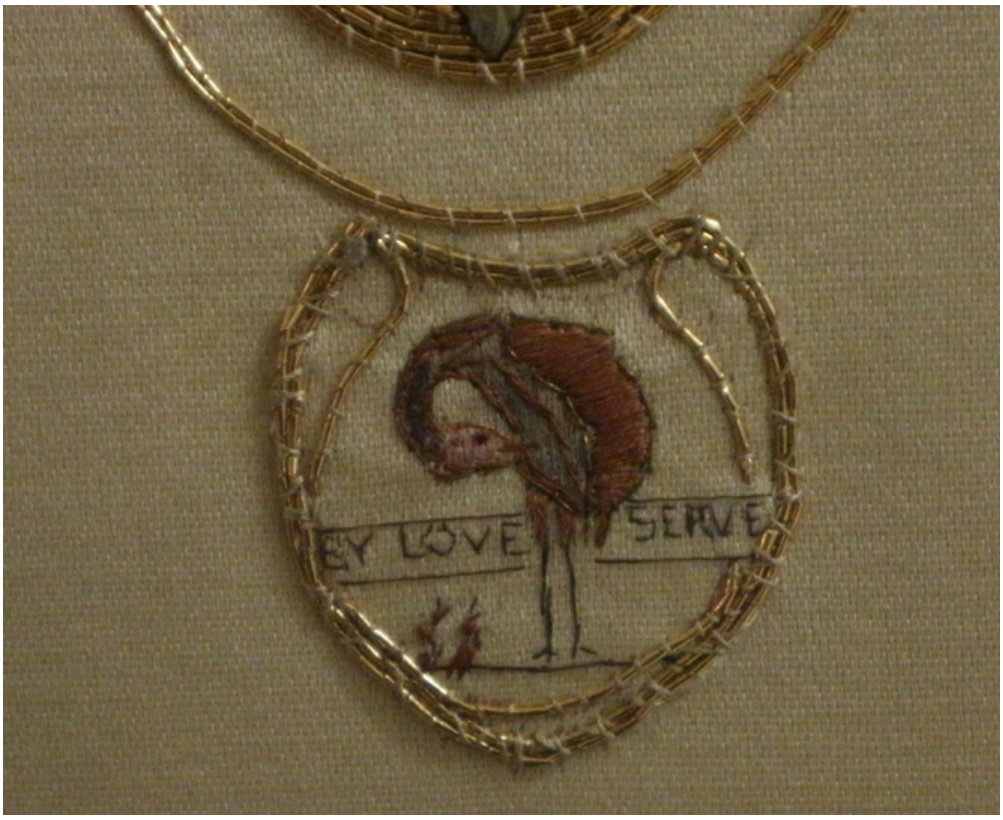

Fig. 27 – *Pelican.*

The Divine Feminine

A closer look at Seton Watts's design of the seraph in *Our Lady of the Snows* reveals a detail that sets it apart from her other interpretations of winged beings. The way she frames the figure with the wings creates a shape that brings to mind a mandorla. The mandorla is an ancient pagan symbol associated with the divine feminine and fertility. Although minimalist in design, the almond or egg-shaped halo was created to suggest the shape of the vulva. Similar symbols can be seen in a multitude of ancient cultures. In Hinduism, the *yoni*, meaning vulva and womb in Sanskrit, is sometimes used to represent the goddess Shakti. The *yoni* takes many different forms, including this egg-like shape.[229] When the shape was assimilated into Christianity, there was an

[229] Frueh, Joanna (2003), "Vaginal Aesthetics," *Hypathia*, Vol. 18, No. 4 p. 140.

attempt to remove any association with female sexuality.[230] The symbol was renamed *vesica piscis*, meaning "bladder of a fish" in Latin. The popular use of the *vesica piscis* coincided with the beginning of the cult of Mary. It became a general representation of birth and rebirth as it was linked to the Virgin's womb and to the resurrection of Jesus.[231] The geometry of the symbol was used to argue its innocence, thus removing any direct sexual or anatomical association, although it did remain suggestive.[232] Art historian Ann E. Pearson remarks that although there was an effort from the Church to erase the tradition behind the mandorla, the original symbolism remains.

> As [the mandorla and the *vesica piscis*] are not anatomically explicit, they are acceptable as they linger below the level of conscious awareness, but draw power from recollection of ancient ideas that associated women's reproductive power with the creative power of the divine.[233]

The use of vulvar and vaginal metaphors in art and literature by women can be found in multiple cultures. Feminine sexuality was seen as shameful and as something to be hidden. By including the mandorla in art, the female body is reappropriated by the female artists. Further in her argument, Pearson notes Shirley Ardener's study of iconography in African societies. She explains that "occasions of female [sic] shame may be recast into their opposite and how sexual display and vulgarity are used in that transformation."[234] As such, many suffragist artists and authors followed this heritage of female empowerment, far preceding the theorization of feminist art that began in the 1970s.[235] Mary Seton Watts's vast knowledge of and interest in ancient cultures and symbolism tie her to this iconographic tradition. While researching ancient symbolism for the gesso panels of

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[230] Pearson, Ann E. (2001), *Revealing and Concealing: Persistence of Vaginal Iconography in Medieval Imagery: The Mandorla, the* Vesica Piscis*, the Rose, Sheela-Na-Gigs and the Double-Tailed Mermaid,* PhD diss., University of Ottawa, p. 63.
[231] Todorova, Rostislava (2016), "The Aureole and the Mandorla: Aspects of the Symbol of the Sacral from Ancient Cultures to Christianity," in Ivo Topalilov & Biser Georgiev, Eds., *Transition from Late Paganism to Early Christianity in the Architecture and Art in the Balkans*, Shumen: Shumen University Press, p. 210.
[232] Pearson, *Revealing and Concealing: Persistence of Vaginal Iconography in Medieval Imagery: The Mandorla, the* Vesica Piscis*, the Rose, Sheela-Na-Gigs and the Double-Tailed Mermaid,* p. 93.
[233] Pearson, *Revealing and Concealing: Persistence of Vaginal Iconography in Medieval Imagery: The Mandorla, the* Vesica Piscis*, the Rose, Sheela-Na-Gigs and the Double-Tailed Mermaid,* p. 63.
[234] Pearson, *Revealing and Concealing: Persistence of Vaginal Iconography in Medieval Imagery: The Mandorla, the* Vesica Piscis*, the Rose, Sheela-Na-Gigs and the Double-Tailed Mermaid* p. 54.
[235] The beginning of the theorization of feminist art history is largely attributed to Linda Nochlin's essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" first published in 1971.

Limnerslease, she documented studying *The Handbook of Christian Symbolism*[236] which features a mandorla (Fig. 28) and its meaning.[237] It is therefore knowingly that she surrounded the seraph with a mandorla in her *Our Lady of the Snows*. She deliberately opened an iconological dialogue between the divine feminine and the seraph. By shaping the wings into a mandorla and strategically placing the crown, Seton Watts inscribed herself within a feminine tradition present in countless cultures. Moreover, the impact of the image is furthered by the medium born of another feminine heritage, needlework.

[236] W. & G. Audsley (1865), *The Handbook of Christian Symbolism,* London: Day & Son Ltd, 145p.
[237]Greenhow, Desna (2012), "'Our own Celtic art': The Contribution of Mary Watts's Background and Times to her Choice of Decoration in Watts Chapel," in Mark Bills & Desna Greenhow. eds. *The Word in the Pattern: A Facsimile with Accompanying Essays on Mary Watts's Cemetery Chapel Drawn from the Watts Gallery Symposium 2010,* Lymington: The Society for the Arts and Crafts Movement in Surrey, p. 26.

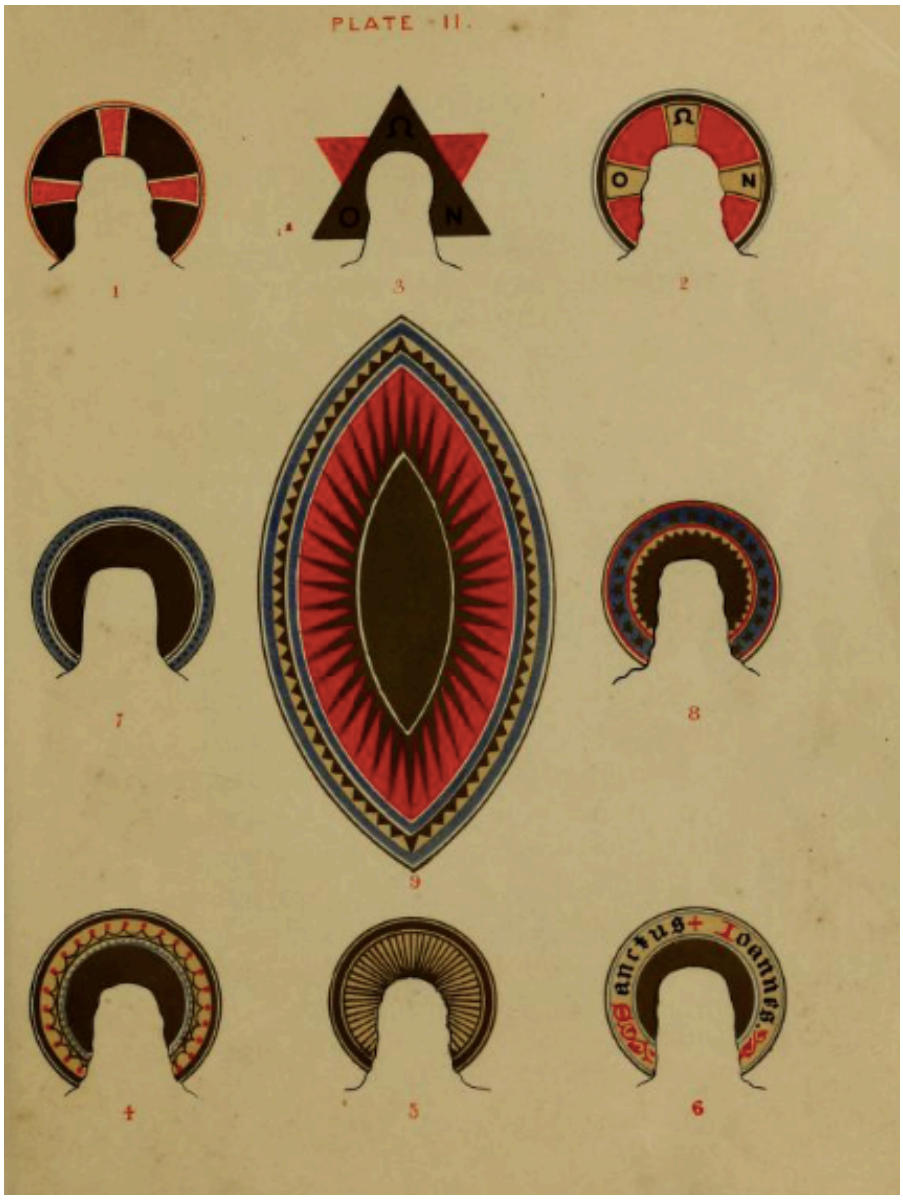

Fig. 28 - W. & G. Audsley (1865), *The Handbook of Christian Symbolism,* London: Day & Son Ltd, p. 11.

Threads of Power

The choice of banners, and therefore needlework as a medium, for Lord Grey's commission is peculiar considering needlework's association with domesticity and femininity. In her research on the commission, Jennifer Salahub explains that the governor general's education would earn him a particular appreciation of banners. His references for banners would be medieval embroideries and tapestries, objects associated with knights and chivalry, that exhibited tales of military exploits, or that illustrated mythological characters. These masculine values seem to be in tension with the feminine practice of embroidery. Grey resolved this tension by displaying the banners as if they were paintings. Banners are in the same object family as flags, they are meant to be seen on both sides, and many of the banners received in Ottawa were finished on the reverse, meaning that the back was designed to be visible. Regardless, the governor general had all of them fixed in frames and hung as paintings. Although, he commissioned objects with a very specific tradition and materiality, he chose to display them as paintings.

For Mary Seton Watts, banners represented a very different tradition, one intimately linked with the suffragist movement. In office in Canada since 1904, Lord Grey was far from the effervescent suffragist activity happening in England and it is possible that he was unaware of this use of them. When Seton Watts received the commission for the banners, it is very likely that she associated the project with suffragist banners. Seton Watts's symbolism in *Our Lady of the Snows* confirms this position. The generous use of gold thread throughout the banner follows Mary Lowndes's stylistic recommendations that. Other recommendations included the use of mottos, flowers and honouring illustrious women. Seton Watts's repeated use of flowers, birds and scrolls echoes the pictures and illustrations of banners in Lowndes's album.[238] (Fig. 29 & 30)

[238] Lowndes, Mary (1908), *Mary Lowndes Album*, LSE Digital Library.

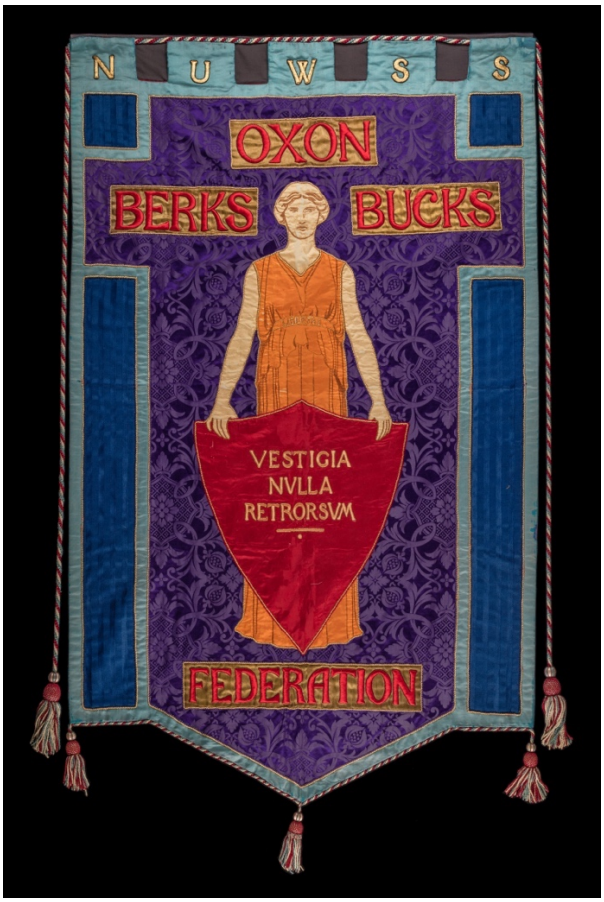

Fig. 29 - Oxon Berks Bucks Federation NUWSS, *Suffrage Banner,* 1899, LSE Library.
Fig. 30 - Designed by Miss Burton, Embroidered by Miss Gosling, *Suffrage Banner*, 1911, LSE Library.

By comparing Watts's banner to others known to be a part of Grey's commission, there is a noticeable difference in the subject, techniques, and materials. The banner created by Agnes Sephton, for instance, includes a representation of Saint George that has characteristics that links it to medieval heraldic banners.[239] (Fig. 31) The characters are illustrated in a similar fashion and the banner itself imitates this tradition. Multiple borders surround the scene and tassels adorn the superior part of the banner. The scene Sephton included has a narrative aspect. These elements are recurring in all the banners except Seton Watts's. *Our Lady of the Snows*' central figure has an

[239] Library and Archives Canada Blog (2013), "Unravelling the Mystery of the Lord Grey Banner," [Online]: https://thediscoverblog.com/2013/11/14/unravelling-the-mystery-of-the-lord-grey-banner/

almost iconic quality to it. Words occupy an important portion of the design, an element that is absent or very discreet in other banners from the commission. The banner itself does not have any of the traditional characteristics of a heraldic banner. Consequently, all these iconographic elements place *Our Lady of the Snows* closer to suffragist banners than the other works that are of the same commission. Bringing *Our Lady of the Snows* in dialogue with the suffragist banners enriches our understanding of the object, of its power and purpose.

Fig. 31 - Agnes Sephton, *Banner commissioned by Lord Grey*, 1907, 240 x 180 cm, Library and Archives Canada Blog, Ottawa.

A Scheme Within a Scheme

Mary Seton Watts's disregard for Lord Grey's requests was far from innocent. The governor general's scheme inspired her to orchestrate a scheme herself. The commission of a banner in 1906 presented itself as an opportunity for the suffragist artist. She did respect many of the terms of the commission, for instance to represent a sentiment of unity between Canada and Great Britain. By including this detail, she agrees with the governor general's vision of an agreeable relationship between the two countries. As she explained in the official description of the banner she sent to Grey, she included maple leaves and roses intertwined with ribbons and floating scrolls on both sides of the seraph. The leaves represent Canada, and the flowers, Britain. The ribbons twist in a way that creates a Celtic heart knot which adds another element symbolizing unity. But Seton Watts's acquiescence with Grey's demands ended there, for she did not include a representation of Saint George and the Dragon in either of her banners. Her disregard could have jeopardized her career. The commission was high profile, requested by a governor general, and on behalf of Queen Alexandra. Sources from the time indicate that Grey was indeed distraught by Watts's works. While he wished for the banners to be "where the students pass to and fro everyday of their lives for three years,"[240] he gave different instructions to McGill's principal regarding Seton Watts's banner:

> It is a really beautiful bit of work, but the symbolism is of a character which will only appeal to cultured minds. I think the best place for it would be some position in your library. It should be in a hall of silence as its atmosphere suggests worship, and not in a place of bustle.[241]

Grey appreciated the quality of the work but was displeased with how it disregarded his stipulations. He was able to find a place for one of them, *Our Lady of the Snows*, but he kept *Spirit of the Flowers of the Nation* hidden in Ottawa's Government house until he returned in England for good.

What could be Watts's motive for disregarding the wishes of a patron and thus risk her career? It is important to remember Watts's involvement in women's suffrage and her extensive

[240] Lord Grey, Letter March 13, 1906, quoted in Salahub, "Embroidering the Ties of Empire," p. 146.
[241] Lord Grey, Letter to William Peterson, January 5, 1907.

knowledge of symbols. Her book *The Word in the Pattern* proves just how much detail was involved in her development of an iconographic program. She is clear about the relationship between design and symbolism: "In line and color should represent ideas."[242] Watts makes a point to tell her reader (and viewer) that every line and colour that she has used in her designs work together to convey an idea. These discrepancies imply an underlying motivation for her to defy Grey. Her wish to convey "a full-rounded inspiration to give to the children there… 'The Spirit of the years to come'"[243] materializes in the form of an object exemplary of women's skill and expertise. Seton Watts reinvested an undervalued feminine tradition and showcased this art form usually hidden within the domestic space. She used symbols evoking the fight for women's rights to inspire the younger generation to pursue it. Lord Grey, inadvertently, offered Seton Watts the opportunity to use his scheme to benefit her own cause. The minuteness in design and execution of this banner establishes the object as a "mistresspiece"[244] and the woman behind it as a gifted artist, a fierce activist, and a remarkable woman whose legacy should be widely recognized.

[242] Seton Watts, *The Word in the Pattern*, p. 29.
[243] Seton Watts, Journal July 29, 1906.
[244] Term coined by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock in *Old Mistresses* (1981), London: Bloomsbury Academic, 256p.

Conclusion

> It is a curious mystery how strong the similarity is between love and art. I believe a picture must be specially poetical to have this influence… it is so for me certainly.[245]
>
> Mary Seton Watts

Mary Seton Watts left behind a vast heritage of artistic and caritative work. The impact she had on her community persisted long after her death and her social involvement benefitted generations of women and aspiring artists. Her extraordinary career and success were achieved through her relentless hard work and iconographic innovations. Her constant assertion of her agency as an artist and as an active political agent made her into an exceptional woman of her time.[246] Art and politics cohabitated symbiotically and fed each other. Art was present in her activist work, just as politics existed in her artistic work. Throughout her career, Mary Seton Watts restated on many occasion that her personal artistic vision prevailed over tradition, expectations and demands. She refused to be subjected to societal and artistic expectations, thus asserting her character in every aspect of her life. Through words and image, Seton Watts continuously proclaimed her agency and proved that regardless of the obstacles, she would not be silenced.

This thesis has analyzed *Our Lady of the Snows* to exhibit the unity between art and personal beliefs in Seton Watts's life and work. The banner stands at the intersection of these two worlds which she always considered as one. A close technical and symbolic reading of the banner has brought to light elements of the composition which have been ignored in previous readings of the work. The importance of banners in the struggle for women's suffrage is a key element to understanding this work and the iconographic scheme that Seton Watts developed for the banner. Needlework itself, at the hands of a suffragist artist, became inscribed into a heritage of feminine craft. The subversive symbolism used by Seton Watts, such as a seraph in a mandorla, is also crucial to understanding her motivations behind the execution of this banner. The Watts Cemetery Chapel as well as the gesso panels she made for her residence and her description of her symbolic program in *The Word in the Pattern* indicate that she used great care in the creation of her designs

[245] Mary Seton Watts quoted in McMahon, Mary (2013), *The Making of Mary Seton Watts,* Compton: Watts Gallery, 62p.
[246] I borrow the term "exceptional woman" from Mary D. Sheriff (1996), *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 368p.

and that the communication of ideas was paramount to her. Similar care and attention need to be devoted to the analysis of *Our Lady of the Snows* and its accompanying banner, *Spirit of the Flowers of the Nation*. The group effort by a team of women, the bold statements, birds, symbols of love and hope, and the reclaiming of traditionally feminine forms are all elements evocative of suffragist banners. This close reading of *Our Lady of the Snows* has reintroduced Seton Watts's political action in the study of this work. An engaged look at *Our Lady of the Snows* reveals how the banner is representative of Mary Seton Watts's agency as an artist, activist and feminist, which she achieved through the intersection of these three spheres of her life. The almost mythological image of the Victorian woman is challenged in Seton Watts's journals. She relates her opinions and ambitions, revealing a character at the opposite of the "angel in the house." Her writtings offer a direct look at how she felt about this social construction:

> Lives with no end or aim, lived in ministering to one domineering spirit. The very convention of the life demanding silence, no resistance, a life-long martyrdom, where all looks luxurious & happy. It is a suffering that naturally I feel a great sympathy for. 'Oh, mothers,' I feel inclined to say, 'make your children live their own lives, not yours. The Home tie is often a halter.'[247]

This thesis rectifies long unchallenged beliefs that she was but an assistant to her husband, while presenting all the contradictions of her character. Her feminist activism was paired with a devotion to establishing her husband's glory. She used the advantages her marriage to an important artist procured to benefit her own artistic endeavours. Through every medium she practiced, she asserted her autonomy as an artist. Seton Watts always made the materials serve her intent, never letting rules or tradition limit her expression. She willed paint, gesso, terracotta and silk to embody what she wanted to communicate in image. Her numerous projects of a benevolent nature stand as a testament to her concern for others. She effectively used art to benefit the causes she believed in. Whether she designed for herself or for others, she worked with the same devotion and attention. "The artistic [instinct] cannot die."

Mary Seton Watts's awareness of her environment and community transpires through choices she made. Her values and concern for others was intrinsic to her spiritual vision and to her practice. She used her success and influence to better her community. The guilds she created

[247] Seton Watts, Journal January 11, 1891.

offered opportunities, from learning a craft, to management positions. The impact of women artists in the suffrage movement was invaluable. Their visibility as professional women and the images they propagated within communities stirred the general opinion. “I begin to design and think.”

By departing from the governor general’s demands, Mary Seton Watts asserted her autonomy as an artist. She reclaimed needlework, a practice with a history of oppression, to benefit the fight for women’s rights. The banners she sent to Lord Grey in response to his patriarchal scheme are emblematic of her attitude towards artistic creation. *Our Lady of the Snows* stands as a culmination of all the choices she made regarding her art and her values. She conquered every obstacle that was put in front of her and challenged every limit. “I dare say what I think.”

While the original objective of this research was to reclaim and assert Mary Seton Watts’s agency, delving deeper into her journals and reading her writings that describe her vision, it was quickly revealed that she does not need her agency reclaimed, but unearthed. She continuously defended her autonomy and her agency regardless of others’ expectations of her. As a further step towards this unearthing, I contacted McGill University. At my request, they have agreed to provide *Our Lady of the Snows* with proper identification recalling the history of the banner and how it relates to Royal Victoria College. The banner was sent there because of the establishment’s female student body. How Seton Watts felt about *Our Lady of the Snows*’ presence at Royal Victoria College is unknown,[248] however I like to think the banner had found belonging among women who, just like Seton Watts, resisted social pressure and pursued higher education.

[248] Seton Watts did know that *Our Lady of the Snows* ended up at Royal Victoria College and that this was a college for women, as is ascertained by a letter from Lord Grey to Mary Seton Watts, April 27, 1907, in which he commented on “your lovely Lily on stage in Montreal.” Letter quoted in Paterson, Elaine Cheasley (2020), “’Our Lady of the Snows’: Settlement, Empire, and ‘The Children of Canada’ in the Needlework of Mary Seton Watts (1848-1938),” in Johanna Amos & Lisa Binkley, eds. *Stitiching the Self: Identity and the Needle Arts*, London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, p. 204.

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