

**“That most detestable picture”**: The Reception of G. F. Watts’s *The Spirit of Christianity* in Australasia

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Fig. 1. G. F. Watts. *The Spirit of Christianity*. 1872-75. Oil on canvas, 27.3 x 15.24 cm. Tate Britain, London.

George Frederick Watts's *Dedicated to all the Churches* (1875), which became better known as *The Spirit of Christianity*, was one of 238 paintings brought to Australasia for the occasion of Melbourne's Centennial International Exhibition in 1888-90. While the painting was barely commented on in Melbourne newspapers, it was possibly the most discussed picture shown at the New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition held in Dunedin the following year, from 1889-90. One of this "poet-painter's" more obscure works, *The Spirit of Christianity* was considered noteworthy for its value, £3000, and was highly praised by Malcolm Ross, the art reviewer for the *Otago Witness*, as well as William Mathew Hodgkins, local art aficionado and organiser of the Fine Arts Court. Yet it seems that it was not held in such high esteem by everyone. In the same edition of the *Otago Witness* in which Hodgkins published a letter to the editor in its defence, the weekly news writer described the painting as "puzzle-headed in conception, glary and sprawly in execution, and with a visible suggestion about it of something closely approaching repulsiveness."<sup>1</sup> It was elsewhere reported as "that most detestable picture" and the consensus at the close of the exhibition was that it was a painting to which "everyone will say farewell without a pang."<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I explore the role *The Spirit of Christianity*, and other British paintings that toured to Australasia, were expected to play in the education and civilisation of exhibition visitors. In particular, this article will consider the role of colonial taste, and what the reception of Watts's painting might tell us about the understanding of "High Art" by the "enlightened" versus the "common" colonist.

### **"It wouldn't be much without the pictures"<sup>3</sup>**

On 1 August 1888, the doors to the Melbourne Centennial Exhibition were ceremonially unlocked by the Governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Loch.<sup>4</sup> The exhibition celebrated 100 years of Australian settlement, and had a much greater focus on art and culture than that staged ten years earlier in 1880. By this time, the centrality accorded Fine Arts Courts at international exhibitions was taken for granted. Their role in educating and enlightening visitors, as well as improving standards of taste, was seen to be as important to the exhibitions as the display of manufactured and industrial products. As Paul Greenhalgh notes, the fine arts offered a perfect counterpart to industry, and raised the status of an exhibition from that of trade fair, to a broader and richer cultural experience.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "The Week," *Otago Witness*, 5 Dec. 1889, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> "Exhibition Notes, No. XI," *Southland Times*, 20 Feb. 1890, p. 2; "The Week," *Otago Witness*, 17 April 1890, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> "The Centennial Exhibition: Gossip of the Courts," *Australasian Supplement*, 18 Aug. 1888, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Notably, Sir Henry Loch's wife was Elizabeth Lady Loch, who was a great supporter of the Melbourne art scene and committed to "helping the taste which is so bad." In Alison Inglis, "Aestheticism and Empire: The Grosvenor Gallery Intercolonial Exhibition in Melbourne, 1887." In *Seize the Day: Exhibitions, Australia and the World*, ed. K. Darian-Smith, R. Gillespie, C. Jordan, and E. Willis, Melbourne, Monash University ePress, 2008, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> P. Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: the "Expositions universelles," Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1951-1939*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988, p. 199.

Consequently, on the opening of the Melbourne exhibition it was observed that “it wouldn’t be much without the pictures,” and that the galleries offered “rich and beautiful adornment” as well



Fig. 2. Charles Walters. View in British Loan Gallery.  
Albumen print, 1889. State Library of Victoria: H96.160/1858.

as educational opportunities.<sup>6</sup> A key attraction of the fine arts displays was a remarkable collection of modern British art constituting “238 pictures, 3 pieces of marble sculpture, 3 bronzes, and some Royal Windsor tapestry.”<sup>7</sup> This loan collection was brought together under the watchful eye of the Prince of Wales, who inspected the works in London before they were shipped to Australia on 17 June 1888.<sup>8</sup> The shipment included paintings by J. M. W. Turner, John Constable, Nicholas Chevalier, Edwin Long, Frederick Leighton, Edwin Landseer and J. E. Millais loaned from public and private collections, but other artists also

contributed their works to the exhibition. It was anticipated that “[o]ne of the most important parts of the exhibition will be the collection of works of Mr. G. F. Watts, R.A., which will include the *Spirit of Christianity*, *Hope*, *Mammon*, and *Love and Life*, as well as portraits of the president of the Royal Academy, the late Matthew Arnold, J. T. Notley and Robert Browning.”<sup>9</sup>

A “preview” of the pictures to be sent noted that “quality and not quantity” had been the guiding principle and that the collection of pictures would be most useful “for the art student wishing to study the various technical methods of men who have played a great part in the development of contemporary art.”<sup>10</sup> The quality of the collection was reinforced by reviews once the exhibition opened, and it was generally considered that the British Gallery was the only court in which the best pictures could be seen.<sup>11</sup> For lovers of British landscape, reviewers were particularly impressed with the generous loan by Lord Armstrong of two paintings by Constable, one of which was “as fresh and juicy in colour as on the day it was painted,”<sup>12</sup> but the three paintings by

<sup>6</sup> “The Centennial Exhibition: Gossip of the Courts,” *Australasian Supplement*, 18 Aug. 1888, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Official Record of the Centennial International Exhibition, Melbourne, 1888-1889*, Melbourne: Sands & McDougall, 1890, p. 216.

<sup>8</sup> “The English Collection of Pictures,” *The Age (Melbourne)*, 12 June 1888, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> “The British Pictures for the Melbourne Exhibition,” *The Age*, 11 June 1888, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> “The British Art Collection for the Exhibition,” *Argus* 9 June 1888, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> “The Fine Art Collection at the Exhibition,” *Argus*, 2 Aug. 1888, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> “The Fine Art Collection at the Exhibition,” *ibid.*

Turner disappointed, being “dingy, heavy, and almost indecipherable.”<sup>13</sup> Watts again received special mention in one of the first reviews of the Fine Art Collection:

Mr. G. F. Watts’s contribution is a splendid one. No painter of our own times, in England, has so strongly-marked an individuality, none has been truer to his own convictions, or more faithful to his own ideal. He has looked upon the practice of his art as a sort of priesthood, to which a man should consecrate all the faculties of his mind and body, in disregard of merely sordid considerations, and the loftiness of his aims is reflected in everything he undertakes. ... Of Mr. Watts’s acknowledged skill and eminence in portraiture there are no less than six examples, and all of them, with one exception, representing men of high intellectual distinction.<sup>14</sup>

This largely favourable review did comment that “the meaning of his symbolical pictures is occasionally hard to penetrate, as in the monumental composition entitled ‘To All Churches.’” Subsequent reviews paid less attention to Watts than to his Pre-Raphaelite and academic contemporaries. Two religious works by Holman Hunt were included in the exhibition, *The Scapegoat*, loaned by Lord Brassey, and *The Shadow of Death*, loaned by Thomas Agnew and Sons. These paintings divided critics, who were perhaps primed by reactions to Holman Hunt’s work as part of the Grosvenor Gallery Intercolonial exhibition a year earlier.<sup>15</sup> While some offered fulsome praise of the admittedly un-naturalistic palette in *The Scapegoat*, others considered it would “receive open ridicule rather than assumed reverence, were it shown as the work of an unrenowned, obscure novice.”<sup>16</sup> Watts’s paintings possibly benefited from this “scapegoat” offered by Holman Hunt, and his allegorical paintings were rather benignly dismissed as “too mystical to catch the popular eye.”<sup>17</sup>

In Dunedin, however, no paintings by Holman Hunt were exhibited as part of the New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition in 1889-90. This was the second international exhibition hosted by Dunedin, and whereas the Melbourne exhibition had marked a century of white settlement, New Zealand was celebrating only fifty years of colonisation.<sup>18</sup> The Dunedin Exhibition was a committee-driven venture, but drew on Government support for several courts. In particular, it was asked to negotiate the loan of British pictures on show at the Melbourne Exhibition,<sup>19</sup> and subsequently decided to request only a portion of the British collection due to the cost of shipping and insurance. While many of the works by the more prominent artists shown at

<sup>13</sup> “In the Art Galleries,” *Otago Daily Times*, 10 Dec. 1888, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> “The Fine Art Collection at the Exhibition,” *Argus*, 2 Aug. 1888, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Holman Hunt’s *The Triumph of the Innocents* was one of 158 works brought out to Melbourne for the Grosvenor Gallery Intercolonial Exhibition in 1887. It caused a flurry of critical responses in newspapers and raised many of the same questions about the reception of works of art as this case study of Watts’s work does. See, for example, “The Triumph of the Innocents: Letter to the Argus Editor,” *The Argus*, 25 Nov. 1887, p. 8. For a discussion of the Grosvenor Gallery Intercolonial Exhibition, see Inglis, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> “Melbourne Centennial Exhibition,” *Launceston Examiner*, 24 Aug. 1888, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> “In the art galleries,” *Otago Daily Times*, 10 Dec., 1888, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> The first was in association with the New Zealand Exhibition hosted in Dunedin in 1865. See Rebecca Rice, “A Red-letter Day: Evaluating Progress in New Zealand’s Art at Dunedin’s International Exhibitions 1865 and 1889,” in Marta Filipova (ed.) *Cultures of International Exhibitions 1840-1940: Great Exhibitions in the Margins*, London, Ashgate, 2015, pp. 231-50.

<sup>19</sup> “The New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition,” *Otago Witness*, 28 Nov. 1889, p. 15.

Melbourne, such as Turner, Constable and Alma Tadema, were not obtained for Dunedin, it was nonetheless touted as the best collection yet seen in the colony.<sup>20</sup> Further, as no city in New Zealand had hosted any exhibition approaching the calibre of Melbourne's Grosvenor Gallery Intercolonial Exhibition of 1887, this collection offered New Zealanders their first opportunity to see contemporary British painting in the flesh.



Fig. 3. David Alexander de Maus, Picture Gallery, New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition, Dunedin 1889-90. Albumen print, ATL: PA1-o-761-10 (showing Edwin Long's *Pharoah's daughter*).

The arts reviewer for the *Otago Witness*, Malcolm Ross, surmised that there was “probably no section of the exhibition that will give so much genuine pleasure and be of such benefit to the community as the Art department.”<sup>21</sup> He noted that cultivation of the arts would potentially have a refining and elevating effect on a young colony, one which could hardly be overestimated. As Ann Galbally explains in her history of the National Gallery of Victoria, early cultural exhibitions and displays typically had civilising and moralising ambitions as well as educational ones, whereas nationalistic impulses came later.<sup>22</sup> The educational potential had been heavily invoked in negotiations to secure the British works of art for exhibition in Dunedin. However, the *Otago Witness* questioned the definition of those “educational” influences and how they might be gained through “uninstructed inspection of beautiful paintings.”<sup>23</sup> This writer concluded that for those who did not have a vocation in the arts, the effect of such a display was likely to be one

<sup>20</sup> A list of the works travelling by the *SS Rimutaka* from Melbourne to Dunedin was published in the *Otago Witness*, “The Art Collections,” 1 Aug. 1889, p. 10. This suggests that only 34 of the 238 paintings originally secured for Melbourne travelled to Dunedin for the *New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition*.

<sup>21</sup> Malcolm Ross, “The Art Gallery: No. 1—Introductory,” *Otago Witness*, 28 Nov. 1889, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> Ann Galbally, *The Collections of the National Gallery of Victoria*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 13-33.

<sup>23</sup> “The Week,” *Otago Witness*, 5 Dec. 1889, p. 25.

that stimulated the emotions and not the intellect. This criticism embodies the challenging role of works of art at such exhibitions—how effective were they at fulfilling the educational mission assigned to them?

Watts's paintings, particularly *The Spirit of Christianity*, repeatedly served as a touchstone in this debate throughout the course of the Dunedin exhibition. By the 1880s, Watts's reputation had reached a high point on a global scale: he had been awarded the Légion d'Honneur for his works exhibited in Paris and was one of three contemporary British artists immortalised through his self-portrait in the Uffizi Gallery; he had the first solo retrospective exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1881 and the first "blockbuster" exhibition of a solo British artist at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1884; he received a range of honours, and in 1885 he refused the offer of a baronetcy.<sup>24</sup> Yet, seemingly flying in the face of this high esteem, local critics were not afraid to voice their discontent with his painting, which supposedly stood at the pinnacle of cultural achievement. Such criticism was largely directed at two aspects of Watts's work: firstly, its aesthetically challenging qualities, and secondly, its obscure meaning. Consequently, accounts of Watts's work were often couched in terms which acknowledged his status, yet maintained its incomprehensibility.



Fig. 4. J. P. Mayall, *Watts in the Gallery at Little Holland House*. Photogravure from F. G. Stephens (ed.), *Artists at Home Photographed by J. P. Mayall*, London 1884, pl. [14]. Reproduced in Trodd and Brown, pl. 32.

To be fair, this was not an altogether unusual reaction to Watts's allegorical pictures, which often stretched the capacity of his audience. London critics had previously commented that in his allegorical works "he lives in a strange air, which can hardly be breathed by healthy human art..."<sup>25</sup> Watts too was conscious of the challenges this branch of his work posed. He was not interested in an art that was merely "beautiful" and aesthetically pleasing, but "made a plea for 'art that corresponds to the highest literature, both in intention and effect, which must be demanded of our artists, poems painted on canvas, judged and criticized as are the poems written on paper.'"<sup>26</sup> Watts was obsessed with his paintings' lack of market potential and was resigned to his symbolical paintings having three options:

<sup>24</sup> Wilfred Blunt, *A Biography of George Frederick Watts: "England's Michelangelo."* London, Hamish Hamilton, 1975; Barbara Coffey Bryant, "Watts, George Frederic (1817–1904)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, OUP, 2004; online edn, May 2007; Veronica Gould, *G. F. Watts: The Last Great Victorian*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Blunt, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

<sup>26</sup> Watts, cited in Barbara Coffey Bryant, "G. F. Watts and the Symbolist Vision," in Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone (eds), *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860-1910*, London, Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997, p. 72.

to be presented as a gift to the nation, to be sold for 2-3,000 guineas (a price he saw as being fair recompense for his work), or to be preserved as “life insurance after his death.”<sup>27</sup> *The Spirit of Christianity* represented Watts’s attempt to address contemporaneous widespread religious dissent from a position of religious tolerance.

The painting depicts an anguished androgynous figure with head uplifted, one hand reaching towards the heart and the other towards the viewer. The figure is majestically draped in red robes, and the upper half of the painting is suffused with a radiant glow, lit as if by some celestial fire. Four cherubs huddle, apparently covering, within the figure’s skirts, suspended, putti-like, on clouds which barely float above a slither of dark land.<sup>28</sup> The painting exhibits Watts’s stylistic tendency to diffuse the boundaries of linear form, softening focus and creating a hazy atmosphere, thereby adding to the ambiguity of the image.<sup>29</sup> The painting was first exhibited at the Royal Academy exhibition in London in 1875 when even Watts was surprised that John Ruskin found it worthy of guarded praise. Ruskin wrote “Here, at least, is one picture meant to teach; nor failing of its purpose, if we read it rightly.”<sup>30</sup>



Fig. 5. Photographer unknown, *NZ and South Seas Exhibition* 1889-1890. Fine Arts Court, J. H. Scott Album, Hocken Library, c/n E3315/42 (showing *The Spirit of Christianity* in the centre, right-hand wall).

<sup>27</sup> Gould, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>28</sup> There are two versions of this painting: the smaller, measuring 91.4 x 53.3 cm is in the collection of Watts Gallery, Compton, and the larger, 27.3 x 15.24 cm, was presented by Watts to the Tate Gallery in 1897. The version in Watts Gallery has five cherubs. That which is now in the Tate, and which travelled to Australia and New Zealand, has four cherubs.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, the discussion of Watts’s “visionary” style of painting in Bryant, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>30</sup> John Ruskin, “Notes on some of the Principal Pictures exhibited in the Royal Academy 1875,” in *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds), Vol. 25, London, George Allen, 1891, p. 175.

Given the limited exposure of a colonial audience to the breadth and depth of Watts's practice, or indeed the broader developments in nineteenth-century British painting, it was perhaps unreasonable to expect "high" art of this calibre to serve an educational purpose in the context of the Dunedin exhibition. Watts saw picture galleries as serving only those who already had a highly developed sense of art, but believed that education was the means by which a population unused to art galleries could be sensitised to enjoy paintings. Both Ross and Hodgkins also admitted that the picture was unlikely to be one that would appeal to popular taste. To this end, Hodgkins published a letter in the newspaper hoping to provide the general public with some tools to access or decode the painting. He quoted from Cosmo Monkhouse, who described the painting as an allegory, representing the Supreme Being, neither male nor female, gathering together his/her children, the churches, in a manner designed to show that the "disputes of all the creeds are but as the quarrels of children in the sight of God, and so to shame mankind into tolerance."<sup>31</sup>

This message was clearly missed by many members of the public, and a flurry of letters to the editor of the *Otago Daily Times* followed, no less than five in two weeks. The first assumed the pseudonym of "A Plain Man," which was subsequently adopted by later contributors, including "Another Plain Man."<sup>32</sup> The first "Plain Man" responded to Ross's assertion that *The Spirit of Christianity* was an example of the highest art, by admitting that he, as well as many readers of the *Otago Daily Times*, might be "blind to the beautiful":

I would not wonder if that sublime picture the "Spirit of Christianity" excites only laughter in 99 out of every hundred of them. Amongst such heathens your art missionary has his work before him. He has virgin soil to work on. Having never before had the opportunity of seeing famous pictures we cannot compare them with other pictures. We are apt to take Nature herself as our standard. We know no better.<sup>33</sup>

A reviewer from *The Tuapeka Times* could not see any link between the title and the painting and questioned whether it would ever be possible for an artist to express the "spirit of Christianity." For this individual the "spirit of Christianity" concerned the qualities of sympathy and compassion taught by the church: an unquestionably noble and invincible spirit that could achieve great things throughout the globe. It was the spirit that had "crossed the burning Karoo of Africa, and the frozen plains of America; it has brought comfort and peace to the Brahmin on the banks of the Ganges, the slave of Mississippi ...."<sup>34</sup> Ironically, by conceptualising the spirit of Christianity in this way, the writer *had* actually tapped into Watts's meaning: that the "spirit" of Christianity should, at a time of loss of faith in conventional religion, be perceived as greater than the individual creeds under which the churches functioned on an administrative and

<sup>31</sup> William Hodgkins, "G. F. Watts' Picture 'The Spirit of Christianity,'" *Otago Witness*, 5 Dec. 1889, p. 20. He quotes from Cosmo Monkhouse's essay "The Watts Exhibition," *Magazine of Art*, Vol. 5 (1882): 177-83, which has been republished on "The Victorian Web" [web link](#).

<sup>32</sup> Opinions voiced include: "Your Art Critic," *ODT*, 7 Dec. 1889, p. 2; "Your Art Critic and 'Plain Man,'" *ODT*, 12 Dec. 1889, p. 6; "Art Criticism," *ODT*, 12 Dec. 1889, p. 5; "High Art," *ODT*, 19 Dec. 1889, p. 1; "Art Notice," *ODT*, 19 Dec. 1889, p. 1. In my study of the exhibition of art at International Exhibitions this level of engagement on the part of the public was unprecedented. See Rebecca Rice, "Picturing Progress in Paradise: New Zealand on Display at International Exhibitions 1873-1886." MA in Art History, Victoria University of Wellington, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> "Your Art Critic," *ODT*, 7 Dec. 1889, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> W. A. R., *Tuapeka Times*, 5 Feb. 1890, p. 5.

practical level, and which often caused conflict and bickering between different sects. But for this writer, voicing a public critique of the infrastructure of the Church would be blasphemous.<sup>35</sup> However, as Michael Wheeler notes in relation to Watts's religious paintings, "[t]he poet, like the visionary painter, was freer than the preacher to express ideas outside the establishment box."<sup>36</sup> So Watts was able to make apparent his opposition to Christian dogmatism and sectarianism because of his privileged position as visionary bohemian artist and social commentator since the late 1840s. Interestingly an article reflecting on "progress" in Christianity published in the *Otago Witness* in the 1890s suggested that one of the more liberal and progressive developments of the previous fifty years was the emergence of an anti-dogmatic spirit, whereby the singularity of creeds was seen as petty and narrow-minded and in which a broader view of Christianity was required.<sup>37</sup> Another possible explanation for the imagery in Watts's painting that was not expressed at the time is that the central figure could be an allegory of Charity, the virtue held up as the ultimate perfection of the human spirit. Charity typically holds two or more babies, nurturing and protecting them, as does the central figure in *The Spirit of Christianity*.<sup>38</sup> This interpretation also aligns with Watts's description of the figure as "the symbol of compassionate tenderness."<sup>39</sup> If Watts's painting had been read in light of either of these insights by its local audience in the summer of 1889-90, one wonders whether its reception might have been any different.

Hence the problem of Watts's painting; its meaning was unclear, his works exhibited what Paul Barlow describes as a "pointless meaningfulness."<sup>40</sup> But to compound this, his style was equally unintelligible to a local audience. This stood in contrast to his Pre-Raphaelite contemporary Holman Hunt, who, Gould asserts, sealed his reputation as "the" religious painter of their age with *The Shadow of Death*, painted just two years prior to *The Spirit of Christianity*.<sup>41</sup> While it is hard to know how New Zealand audiences might have received Holman Hunt's paintings had they travelled from Melbourne for inclusion in the Dunedin exhibition, they encountered another of Hunt's paintings almost fifteen years later. From 1905-06, a copy, commissioned by Charles Booth, of Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World* toured the colonies. While its reception in Canada was lacklustre, in Australia and New Zealand the turnstiles spun constantly. In his "biography" of the painting, Jeremy Maas suggests that reception varied according to the dominant religion in each city, suggesting Catholics and Presbyterians took least kindly to

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<sup>35</sup> W. A. R., *Tuapeka Times*, *ibid*.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Wheeler, "The Possibility of Watts: Religion and Spirituality in Victorian England," in *G. F. Watts: Victorian Visionary. Highlights from the Watts Gallery Collection*, eds. Mark Bills and Barbara Bryant, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2008, p. 52.

<sup>37</sup> "Half a Century's Progress in Religion and Theology," *Otago Witness*, 5 Nov. 1896, p. 20.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, William Bouguereau's *Charity*, c. 1878, oil on canvas. Northampton: Smith College Museum of Art. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this alternative interpretation of the painting.

<sup>39</sup> Barbara Bryant, "Catalogue—the 1870s," in Bills and Bryant, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Barlow, "The Pointless Meaningfulness of Watts's Work," eds. Colin Trodd and Stephanie Brown. *Representations of G. F. Watts: Artmaking in Victorian Culture*. Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004, pp. 29-48.

<sup>41</sup> Gould, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

Holman Hunt's conception of Christ.<sup>42</sup> However, a more recent assessment by Geoff Troughton disputes this conclusion, for despite its strong Scottish heritage and Presbyterian presence, the painting was a hit in Dunedin with 120,000 estimated visitors to the painting in a city with a population of only 52,020. The hugely positive reception of *The Light of the World* stood in stark contrast to the miscomprehension of Watts's painting fifteen years earlier.<sup>43</sup>

Arguably, the Christian message in *The Light of the World* is less obscure than in Hunt's other religious paintings, and the style more accessible for a popular audience. *The Light of the World* is demonstrative of what Ruskin referred to as the "realistic" school of modern English painting. It is carefully painted with a high degree of detail and is laden with symbolism that could be easily read by audiences, for example: the lantern as the light of consciousness; the weed-choked door without a handle as the closed mind; the figure itself with halo, and crown of thorns clearly representing Christ. The painting was clearly understood as a "sermon in oils," its imagery drawn from a well-known biblical text, Revelation 3:20: "Behold I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come to him and sup with him, and he with me."<sup>44</sup>

In contrast, Watts's painting was characterised by Ruskin as "mythic," using "symbolic figures to represent only general truths, or abstract ideas."<sup>45</sup> Watts's children are ill-defined, awkwardly arranged under the robes of the central adult figure who is neither clearly male, nor female, neither Christ, nor Mary. Compositionally, the painting appears to be inspired by counter-Reformation paintings of the Assumption or Ascension featuring *putti* and majestic figures borne aloft on clouds. However, its difference from these exemplars can be read as clumsy.

Stylistically, his painting is "anti-academic." Rather than carefully blending colours, Watts laid pigments side by side on the canvas and often avoided varnishing his pictures so that the "purity of the ground" might be preserved. In his description of this painting for Dunedin readers, Hodgkins defended Watts's unfamiliar technique, suggesting that, in a few years, peculiarities present in the picture may become less unpleasant.<sup>46</sup> However, as one writer noted, this long-term potential hardly presented a "hopeful view for those who are attending our Exhibition of 1889 in search of present educational influences in the Art Gallery."<sup>47</sup>

In this rubbing up of "educated" versus "popular" opinions, Pierre Bourdieu's theories of "taste" and the processes of distinction are clearly applicable. The cultivated taste (based on "hidden" knowledge) of Hodgkins and Ross, those in possession of a cultivated habitus, contrasted with the "barbarous" (read popular) taste of the general public.<sup>48</sup> The problem exaggerated by Watts's

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<sup>42</sup> Jeremy Maas, *Holman Hunt and The Light of the World*, London and Berkeley, Scolar Press, 1984, pp. 147-48. See also the article in Part 1 of this Special Issue: Bronwyn Hughes, "New Light on *The Light of the World*," *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, Vol. 22.2, 2018, pp. 96-116.

<sup>43</sup> For an excellent account of the painting's tour to the Antipodes, see Geoff Troughton, "*The Light of the World* at the End of the World, 1906," *Journal of New Zealand Art History*, Vol. 28, 2007, pp. 1-15.

<sup>44</sup> Troughton, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>45</sup> Ruskin, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>46</sup> Hodgkins, "G. F. Watts' Picture 'The Spirit of Christianity,'" *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>47</sup> "The Week," *The Otago Witness*, 5 Dec. 1889, p. 25.

<sup>48</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Darbel, and Dominique Schnapper, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public*, trans. Caroline Beattie and Nick Merriman, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990, pp. 109-10.

painting concerned a difference in the way “representation” is valued by the two public factions: artistic versus popular. For a popular audience, artistic quality was measured by a painting’s “readability,” that is, how successfully it represented its chosen subject, whereas for the artist, value lay in the act of representation itself. The artistic opinion demonstrates what Bourdieu describes as a “properly aesthetic mode of perception,” one which was dependent on the autonomy of art and the privileging of the artist’s personality and their vision.<sup>49</sup> So for Hodgkins and Ross, an understanding of the artist’s broader *oeuvre* and intention was necessary to an understanding of his art, whereas a less artistically educated audience required that the artwork did the work for them.

The distance between an “educated” and “uneducated” viewpoint was most amusingly illustrated in a “review” published by a Dunedin writer with the pseudonym John Fusskin, who wrote:

If you are of the salt of the earth upon which whose blessed vision the beauties of art flow in as in a benediction refreshing the spirit like a douche in the dog days, you will go down on your knees and give thanks that you are not one of the herd of swine to whose ears the tuneful pipe of art is as a voice crying in the wilderness; and if you have not the true savour, go on your knees all the same and pray for a spirit of regeneration—pray that the scales of Philistinism may fall from your eyes, and that you may cease to be the unintelligent pagan you are.<sup>50</sup>

Then begins the art lesson:

Observe the toe nail of the left foot of the right hand child. Perhaps you never have observed it? *Probably* you never have observed it, or observed one out of the hundred exquisitenesses that are being presented to your purblind eyes at every step you take on God’s fair earth.<sup>51</sup>

The language used by critics to attempt to endear the public to works of art that might seem challenging often verged on the ridiculous. By asking the reader to pay attention to a toe-nail, the importance of learning how to look at a painting was both highlighted, and simultaneously mocked.

So if Watts’s work was challenging for a popular audience, what might its value have been for colonial artists, observing and learning from the “masterpieces” on show? Notably, accounts of New Zealand’s art at the Dunedin Exhibition lacked the self-congratulatory tone that had dominated previous reviews. In particular, the dependence on landscape as the dominant pictorial genre came under criticism. While Edmund Gouldsmith, E. A. Gifford and James Crowe Richmond were singled out for their work which rose above the tedious and repetitive views of the local landscape, overall it was suggested that:

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<sup>49</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Manet and the Institutionalization of Anomie,” in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993, p. 239.

<sup>50</sup> John Fusskin, “Art Notes for the Use of Students,” *Otago Witness*, 10 April 1890, p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> Fusskin, *ibid.*

if more attention were given to work in which the “figure” had place, it would vary the monotony of so much mere landscape work ... doubtless the magnificent scenery of our colony is largely responsible for what may be termed the landscape bias of our painters; but in the galleries are many fine examples by British artists of figure and landscape in combination, which show very conclusively the advantages to be had by uniting the two branches of study ....<sup>52</sup>



Fig. 6. David Alexander de Maus, Picture Gallery, *New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition*, Dunedin 1889-90. Albumen print, PA1-o-761-01 (showing New Zealand pictures).

Ross similarly observed that New Zealand artists had a natural advantage with landscape painting “for our beautiful lake scenery, with towering snow-capped mountains, provides splendid material for pencil as well as pen,” but noted that “it is in *genre* painting that we are most behindhand.”<sup>53</sup> He accounted for this lack by citing the difficulties involved in studying art in the colonies, suggesting that while the printing press had made the study of literature and poetry feasible in this “out-of-the-way corner of the world,” art was different. He described New Zealand’s art students as “struggling in the dark,” and suggested the exhibition provided an unprecedented opportunity to study works of art in the flesh, to provide inspiration and models for learning. Yet the difficulties outlined thus far in relation to Watts rendered him a problematic model. The kinds of works that were considered more likely to appeal both to popular taste and to serve as models for future artists are arguably exemplified by those works purchased from the exhibition for the germinal Dunedin Public Art Gallery collection. The four works were: Robert Allan’s Harbour view, *Kirkwall, Orkney* (1888), Ernest Waterlow’s *Sunny Hours* (c. 1888), a rural scene of women in fields, William McKay’s *November Pastoral* (c. 1888) (deaccessioned, no pictorial record), and Stanhope Forbes’s *Preparations for market* (Fig. 7).

<sup>52</sup> John H. Scott, Chairman of Jurors, in D. Harris Hastings, ed. *Official Record of the New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition Held at Dunedin, 1889-90*, Wellington, Government Printer, 1891, p. 293.

<sup>53</sup> Malcolm Ross, “The Art Gallery, No. X: New Zealand Pictures,” *Otago Witness*, 27 Feb. 1890, p. 17.



Fig. 7. Stanhope Forbes, *Preparations for the Market, Quimperle, Brittany*, 1883. Oil on canvas, 168.9 x 134 cm. Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased by public subscription for £150 from *NZ and South Seas Exhibition* in 1890.

Three of these works have as their subject a picturesque rural or agricultural theme—combining figure and landscape in the manner suggested by the judges as being worthy of emulation. This was a pictorial tradition that colonial New Zealand artists had already embraced. For example, at London’s Colonial and Indian Exhibition in 1886, Peter Power exhibited *A New Zealand Homestead*, a “typical bush home with a well painted flock of sheep in the foreground.”<sup>54</sup> Benjamin A. Branfill exhibited *After a long day on the sheep run* and *Sheep-shearing on the Waimea plains* and James Peele sent a series of oil paintings based on seasonal agricultural themes.<sup>55</sup> These paintings though, rather than demonstrating a direct response to the local or an engagement with modern themes emerging in British painting, represent a transplantation of the “rural idyll” genre, popular in British nineteenth-century landscapes, to the New Zealand context.<sup>56</sup> The legacy of this influence was reinforced by the acquisition of these paintings for local collections. The predilection for idyllic naturalism was also apparent in Melbourne, as Alison Inglis notes in her account of the Grosvenor Gallery Intercolonial exhibition, yet they were more ambitious in terms of figurative purchases, having purchased Watts’s impressive *Love and death* (Fig. 8) as well as his *Portrait of Tennyson*.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> “Colonial and Indian Exhibition. No. VI. The New Zealand Court. The Pictures,” *New Zealand Herald*, 3 Aug. 1886, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> These had the descriptive titles: *Spring morning: a farmer taking his crossbred ewes with early spring lambs to market*, *Summer noon: a Merry Christmas on the Canterbury ocean beach – a farmer’s family spending their summer holiday*, *Autumn afternoon, the wheat harvest with school children coming home*, and *Winter evening: Sou-wester coming up; ploughman knocking off work; girl returning with the cows*. *Colonial and Indian Exhibition, London, 1886: Catalogue of New Zealand Exhibits*, London, William Clowes & Sons, 1886, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> Landscape and rural subjects in nineteenth-century British painting were popularised by the work of John Constable and J. M. W. Turner, and this genre continued to grow in appeal for an urban market nostalgic in response to the changes wrought by industrialism. See, for example, Rosemary Treble, “The Victorian Picture of the Country,” in *The Rural Idyll*, ed. G. E. Mingay, London, Routledge, 1989, pp. 50-60. The current location of those New Zealand works mentioned in this paragraph is unknown, so an evaluation of their content is only provisional and based on newspaper descriptions or the descriptive nature of the titles.

<sup>57</sup> Inglis, *op. cit.*, p. 11.



Fig. 8. G. F. Watts, *Love and Death*, c. 1887. Oil on canvas, 114.3 x 57.3 cm. National Gallery of Victoria. Purchased 1888.

Watts's painting represented a genre with greater moral and aesthetic ambitions, more akin to history painting than landscape. For Australasian artists, in particular New Zealanders, there was little support or incentive to produce works on this scale or of this calibre. History painting relied on a high level of study and patronage, which was not yet well developed in New Zealand at least. There was little state support for history painting as the New Zealand government tended to foster and promote works of art of a more illustrative nature that showcased either the landscape or Māori. Given the works purchased from the exhibition were acquired by public subscription it is therefore unsurprising that they reflected more popular taste. A *Southland Times* reporter most likely represented the interests of the general public when they stated they would "rather give £150 for a Landseer painting of a dead rabbit surrounded by dogs, than 150 pence for the ... four thumping children with leprous looking hides ... in that most detestable picture, *The Spirit of Christianity*."<sup>58</sup>

In summing up the impact of the exhibition, one critic wrote:

But we doubt the "Education"; and fortunately it does not matter much, so long as we all see, admire, and learn to love the beautiful creations of the "new masters" which have now been placed within our reach.<sup>59</sup>

However, from the critical accounts, it seems that Watts's painting was unlikely to provide succour for colonial eyes seeking the beautiful, and any immediate influence on artists was to be more readily drawn from the work of Stanhope Forbes rather than Watts. But it should also be noted by way of conclusion that the incomprehension of Watts's symbolical paintings was not limited to a colonial audience. During the course of the exhibition, a Northern England paper was cited for having asked Watts "but what does it mean?" To this he replied "I am well contented that it should suggest somewhat different ideas to different minds."<sup>60</sup> But just how different some of those ideas might have been may have surprised even Watts. My favourite remains that reported in the *Otago Witness*, whereby a woman reportedly exclaimed in front of the painting:

*Eh, dear me! Four at a birth; puir thing!*<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> "Exhibition Notes, no. XI," *Southland Times*, 20 Feb. 1890, p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> "The Week," *Otago Witness*, 5 Dec. 1889, p. 25.

<sup>60</sup> "The Week," *Otago Witness*, 17 April 1890, p. 24.

<sup>61</sup> "Miscellaneous," *Otago Witness*, 13 Feb. 1890, p. 19.

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