

Letter to the Editor

“Watts rhymes with Pots”: John Wolseley and G. F. Watts’s brush pot by Mary Watts.



Figs. 1 (front, left) and 2 (reverse, below). Mary Seton Watts (attributed), *Watts’s Brush Pot*, c. 1885-1900, terracotta vase, height 20.4 cm. John Wolseley Collection. Photo: Jane Brown.



The first of the two-part special issue of the *AJVS* devoted to the subject of Pre-Raphaelitism in Australasia discussed in some detail the various personal and familial ties that existed between the Pre-Raphaelites and the Antipodes, which resulted in a number of works of art making their way to the colonies in the luggage of family members and friends. This information prompted the contemporary artist, John Wolseley (1938-),¹ to write to one of the editors, Alison Inglis, about an art object he had inherited from his father, and subsequently brought with him to Australia when he emigrated here from England in 1976. The letter, dated 19 June 2018, and titled “Watts rhymes with Pots,” is set out below, with footnotes and a short commentary by Alison Inglis.

¹ For details of John Wolseley’s career, see Sasha Grishin, *John Wolseley: Land Marks II*, Fishermans Bend, Craftsman House, 2006; Cathy Leahy, et al., *John Wolseley: Heartlands & headwaters*, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, 2015; website: <https://australiangalleries.com.au/artists/john-wolseley/>

Watts rhymes with Pots

Here is a brief account of Mr. Watts' Pot and how it came to be in my Whipstick Forest Studio, far from Compton in Surrey.² My father, was, as you know, an Edwardian painter of sunlit beaches, children, cliff tops, farmhouses and rather wooden portraits. He always told me that he had purchased the pot with some other items from Watts' studio sale.³ Apparently this was in 1939 when I was only one and we were living in London. I have always assumed the pot was made by Mary Watts for her husband. The pot is not signed in any way but does have the following inscriptions. On one side it reads: *I Was Made For Mr Watts helped Him in His Trade/Proud Am I Among the Pots. Glad that I was Made*; while on the other side the verse continues, *Queen Am I among the Pots no Matter What You Says/Held the Brush of Mr Watts, Many Many Days*. The Pot itself is quite capacious and stands 20cm high. On each side two stumpy-headed dragons form the double handles with their serpent mouths gripping the top and their wings forming the lower handle on each side. One side of the pot is decorated with a night scene of a large stylized barn owl with two smaller owls beneath its swirling wings against a background of stars. While on the other side a lark is singing as the sun rises and again there are two smaller Celtic cockerels beneath its wings. The pot itself is made from rough terracotta with the surface decoration and handles in white clay with black painted details. There is a certain amount of wear and tear, particularly along the bottom edge and one of the dragons has lost its beady eyeballs but generally the pot has survived well. For many years it was in my father's study and then in my own studio at Nettlecombe in Somerset. More recently it has made its way to Australia and once again is fulfilling its original function as a receptacle for paint brushes.

Kind regards

John

Since writing this letter, John Wolseley has been in communication with the Watts Gallery in Compton,⁴ who put him in touch with ceramics experts Hilary Calvert and Louise Boreham. They were pleased to include the brush pot in their recent book *Mary Seton Watts and the Compton Pottery* (2019), noting that it may have been designed by Mary Watts early in her career as an artist, when she was teaching classes in clay modelling at the boys' club at St. Jude's School, Whitechapel in the mid-1880s. They speculate that "Mary may have made the pot as a demonstration, or she could have suggested that the boys make it as a tribute to 'Mr. Watts.'"⁵

² "Mr. Watts" is the artist, G. F. Watts (1870-1904), who married his second wife Mary Seton Watts (née Fraser-Tytler) (1849-1938) in 1886.

³ John Wolseley notes: "One was a refectory table, another was a hand-painted Italian tile with a scene of the prodigal son." The brush pot can be identified in the Limnerslease sale catalogue: *Limnerslease, Compton, near Guildford, Surrey: The Residence of the Late G. F. Watts, R.A.: Catalogue of the Whole of the Valuable Contents of the Residence ... which Messrs Nicholas Will Sell by Auction on the Premises ...*, 13-15 March, 1939, p. 11, lot 185: "An embossed pottery 2-handle vase (8 in. high) Note: An inscription to the frieze denotes its use as the artist's (G. F. Watts, R. A.) brush pot."

⁴ Watts Gallery—Artists' Village: <https://www.wattsgallery.org.uk/>

⁵ Hilary Calvert and Louise Boreham, *Mary Seton Watts and the Compton Pottery*, London, Philip Wilson Publishers, 2019, pp. 10-11.

An alternative date for the pot could perhaps be identified from a brief reference in Mary Watts' diary, when she writes on 11 February 1898: "Began my pot for Signor's birthday" (Signor being the name given G. F. Watts by his close friends).⁶ This birthday pot is not mentioned again in the diary, but the brush pot is known to have been in existence soon afterwards, as it can be seen in a photograph of the studio c. 1900, at Limnerslease, the Watts property at Compton—on the bench on the left side of the room (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. *The Studio at Limnerslease, c. 1900, photograph.* © Watts Gallery Trust.

At this time, 1898, Mary Watts was overseeing the completion of her great creative endeavour, namely the design and building of a terracotta chapel for the new cemetery in Compton.⁷ Certain similarities—such as elaborately embellished surfaces and symbolic elements combined with text—can be discerned between the decoration of the Watts Chapel and the brush pot. Both feature stylised symbolic birds: in the Chapel, one of these is “the bird of truth,” the owl, “the bird of wisdom, whose eye can see through darkness”;⁸ while on the brush pot, owls appear surrounded by stars, representing Night, which are matched on the pot's other side by a Lark and cockerels, set against rays of the sun, representing Day.

This delightfully quirky brush pot clearly meant a great deal to Watts and his wife, for it remained at Limnerslease until her death in 1938. Today, it continues to be valued

⁶ Desna Greenhow (ed.), *The Diary of Mary Watts 1887-1904, Victorian Progressive and Artistic Visionary*, London, Lund Humphries / Watts Gallery, 2016, p. 183.

⁷ Mark Bills et al., *An Artists' Village: G. F. Watts and Mary Watts at Compton*, London, Philip Wilson, 2011, pp. 67-101.

⁸ Mark Bills, *Watts Chapel: A Guide to the Symbols of Mary Watts' Arts and Crafts Masterpiece*, London, Philip Wilson, 2010, p. 49.

as “a Queen of Pots”—and as a recent photograph of John Wolseley’s studio in the Whipstick Forest reveals (Fig. 4)—can be seen still holding brushes, helping an artist “in his trade.”



Fig. 4. *John Wolseley's Studio*, Whipstick Forest, 2018.
Image: The artist.