Analyse a Formal Portrait: Choosing (detail), 1864 by George Frederick Watts

Choosing (detail) is one of the earliest portraits of Ellen Terry (1847-1928), an important figure within British Society, who became the leading Victorian and Edwardian actress of her generation. This portrait dates from 1864, the same year she married the famous artist G. F. Watts (1817-1904). The painting is believed to have been painted within a few days of their marriage and within a week of Ellen’s 17th birthday. Watts seems to have created this portrait of Ellen as a tribute to their union and her love for the stage.

Ellen is pictured in her Wedding gown— a brown dress of an Italianate style, with full ruched sleeves clutching some violets close to her heart. The allegorical symbols he employs are appropriate as the painting serves as a warning towards the folly of vanity. Ellen is envisaged by Watts as an Eve-like figure torn between her love for acting and her marriage to him. (The sweetly-scented violets represent simplicity, innocence and devotion, whilst the fragrance-free lush camellias symbolise her vanity for life on the stage). The artist’s aim is to warn the viewer of the empty vanity of the theatre and his desire to rescue her from a life of shame and indecency. In fact a document which was produced at the time of the divorce in 1865 stated that: “although considerably older than his intended wife he admired her very much, and hoped to influence, guide and cultivate a very artistic and peculiar nature and to remove an impulsive young girl from the dangers and temptations of the stage.” (National Portrait Gallery, 2015). There is little doubt therefore that he loved Ellen and wanted to prevent her from a life of ruin and a complete loss of respectability. His reasons and motivations seem noble as in those days an acting career was considered hazardous for women as it lacked the acceptability that it enjoys today.

It seems to me that the significance of the visual clues may not have been widely understood at the time as current commentators seemed to have appreciated the image for its beauty rather than for its stern warning of the folly of vanities. Emilie Barrington (Mrs Russell Barrington), visited the Royal Academy of Arts in 1865 and commented on the portrait: “yet another gem I remember … I had only then seen it once, on the walls of The Academy – the painting on panel called “Choosing” another of those pictures which once seen is never forgotten. A beautiful fair girl’s head and a perfect throat.
stretching forward towards a branch of camellias, a hand slid caressingly under one of the deep pink flowers” (National Portrait Gallery, 2015). So no one could deny its beauty or Watts’ skill in terms of creating memorable portraits, but the allegorical themes seem to have passed most people by.

Watt’s ability to render her elegant upturned features and poise meant that some contemporary viewers were able to instantly recognise her. For example, Walford Graham Robertson pointedly suggested: “that throat is Ellen Terry’s throat, the eager, impulsive movement entirely hers, the whole thing inspired by her.” (National Portrait Gallery, 2015). Watts seems to have captured a brief moment in time, just as Ellen turns her head to capture the scent of the camellias which engulf her. This gesture/pose was to become a recurring feature in his works due to its inherent sensuality and elegance which can be evidenced in many of his allegorical works, such as those which represent the goddess Clytie.

I believe Watts painted the portrait for his own benefit and personal enjoyment as there aren’t any records to indicate to the contrary. I think it is a highly successful portrait as it veers towards the devotional and is emblematic of Eve and her struggles in the Garden of Eden, torn between two different sources of temptation.

It seems to me that the viewer feels the intensity of his feelings for Ellen due to the delicacy with which he depicts her luminous peaches and cream complexion and her sun-kissed golden hair. The portrait possesses a certain radiance due to the intensity of the pigments used and the stunning composition. Furthermore, his use of the complimentary hues of scarlet and viridian conjure up Eve in the Garden of Eden and the verdant nature of the foliage which surrounds her. When it is viewed in the environs of the Gallery it represents a stunning achievement and is one of his best-known and popular works.

The fact that Watts decided to picture her in her wedding dress is poignant as she later became the leading Shakespearean actor of the era and as such wore Renaissance and Italianate costumes in her many stage roles. She was also a muse for some of the leading artists of the day, such as John Singer Sargent (who envisaged her as Lady Macbeth) and Julia Margaret Cameron (who portrayed her as a romantic during Ellen’s honeymoon with Watts).

Finally, I believe that the painter’s allusions would have been easily understandable to an educated elite as Watts was part of a bohemian and aristocratic society who would have been aware of the tensions between the illustrious artist and his inspiring and vivacious sitter. He also shared
lodgings with his patrons and friends, Sara and Thoby Princep so it seems very likely that they would have been aware of what he was trying to create. Frequent visitors were: Alfred Lord Tennyson (a close friend of Watts), Julia Margaret Cameron, Robert Browning and many others.

After their divorce in 1865, Ellen remained a frequent source of inspiration for Watts due to her ability to adopt different guises and for her youth and beauty.

References:


