Study visit: visit a portrait gallery

For this task I visited the Watts Gallery, in Compton in August in order to focus on two or three personalities. My task was to observe the manner with which the artist portrayed the sitters and to consider where the pictures would have been originally displayed.

I also was required to identify how large the paintings are as well as whom they were intended for and their possible audience. I also needed to describe how their characters have been interpreted and what the overall effect is of the images.

The portraits that I have selected for special study are as follows: Mary Augusta, Lady Holland, c.1844 and Choosing (detail), 1864. Both are by the noted Victorian artist George Frederick Watts.

Mary Augusta, Lady Holland (1812-1889), was the daughter of the 8th Earl of Coventry. She married the Hon. Henry Edward Fox (1802-59) in 1833. He succeeded as 4th Baron Holland in 1840.

Watts was introduced to the Holland’s during his grand tour of Italy during the 1840s. Shortly after this they invited him to join them at their home, the Casa Feroni in Florence. Watts became close to Lady Holland during his four year stay and subsequently produced many portraits of her.

She had a lively disposition and as she had no children of her own she surrounded herself with artists, aristocrats and intellectuals. Watts set up a studio here from where he created many sketches of her and her acquaintances.

The measurements including the frame are: height x width = 91cm x 81 cm. So it’s of a fairly substantial size.

As a result of his close friendship with the Lady, he produced this half-length portrait which features Mary Augusta in a relaxed and carefree manner.

Due to his unique position Watts had privileged access to her and as a direct consequence was able to envisage her in all manner of situations and costumes.

This image is particularly lovely due to the romantic feel of her diaphanous gown and her flowing auburn hair. The handling of the paint is very light and delicate, which enhances her glowing complexion. Seen on display in the Gallery, the effect is dazzling.

I think the Lady would have been delighted with this portrait as it shows her to her full effect. The hues and the style are very alluring so I imagine this painting would have been on display in her boudoir for her and her husband to see. Although she entertained many of her friends and enjoyed lively discourse with them, the feeling overall is one of intimacy. So I am fairly certain that this portrait would be displayed privately.

This is one of my favourite portraits by Watts as the colours and ambiance seem to be perfectly in tune with the sitter. It is obvious that he had a lot of affection for Lady Holland and the feeling seems to have been mutual.
Choosing (detail), 1864 by G.F. Watts

Choosing (detail), 1864 is a Shakespearean–style portrait of the English actress Ellen Terry who is still remembered to do this day.

Her mode of attire is significant as she later became the leading English actress of the Victorian era and was one of Britain’s most important and versatile Shakespearean actors.

Ellen Terry first met Watts in the early 1860s when she visited his studio with her sister. Both girls were from a renowned acting family and were extremely attractive. Her sister was invited to have her portrait painted by him but he was so taken with Ellen that he instead produced a double portrait of both of the young ladies.

In 1864 Ellen married Watts but within a year the marriage had collapsed. It was a complete disaster as he was 30 years her senior and was much revered by everyone. He had firmly established his reputation as a portraitist and she felt completely overwhelmed. He painted this portrait of her soon after they married when she was just 17.

Although this portrait wasn’t on display in August when I visited I have seen it previously at The Watts Gallery during their exhibition: ‘Ellen Terry: The Painter’s Actress’. This is another of my favourite Watts’ portraits due to the richness of the hues and the tactile nature of her hair.

This portrait is particularly fascinating as the flowers are used to represent the difficulties of Ellen and Watts’ union.

The passionate but fragrance-free red camellias symbolise Ellen’s desire to return to the stage and the scented, but simplistic looking violets represent Ellen’s life with Watts.

One of the reasons for the failure of their marriage was his desire for her to give up her acting career but she desperately wished to return to the stage as it was her life and passion. The portrait is a very telling reminder of the struggles that they both encountered with each other.

The Shakespearean costume is an homage to Ellen due to her love of acting. After all, she had been acting from a young age. Watts’s depicts her in a flattering and youthful light, with plump and rosy cheeks amidst an exotic-looking garden.

Choosing was seen by many people as it was exhibited at The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition of 1865.

Choosing was “a favourite of all the portraits painted of her.” (National Portrait Gallery, 2015).

“She / chooses the gay scentless Camellia / while the sweetness of almost invisible / Violets is held close to her heart.” (National Portrait Gallery, 2015).