

Exercise: Visit to a Cast Gallery

For this task I must visit a cast gallery and examine the size of the works that I may never have had the opportunity to see for myself (e.g. Michelangelo's *David* at the V&A). I must also reflect on the models which these casts have provided for western students of painting and sculpture over the centuries.

I must also consider how taking casts translates an image from medium into another, something that I've noticed previously in looking at paintings, prints and photographic reproductions.

I visited the Watts Gallery on the 18th August 2015 to observe some of Watts's sculptures in more detail. As I have been a volunteer at the Gallery since 2014, I already have a good understanding of his oeuvre, but this exercise allowed me to hone in on some of his other important works. The Sculpture Gallery houses G.F. Watts' personal collection of plaster casts and other sculptures which he used as models for his paintings. This represents a fascinating aspect of the artist's career as he revisited sculpture towards the end of his life once his reputation as a portraitist was well-established.

Watts began his career aged ten as an apprentice to the sculptor William Behnes in London, where he learnt to carve all manner of sculptures. While undertaking his apprenticeship he regularly visited the British Museum to study the Elgin Marbles which were to influence him for the rest of his life. The drawings he produced provided a reference for paintings such as *The Genius of Greek Poetry*, c.1857-78 and *Ariadne in Naxos*, 1875.

The room itself is dominated by two of the largest sculptures ever produced in England. The first is *Physical Energy*, an enormous gesso grosso model of a figure on a galloping horse. The other is his famous *Monument to Lord Tennyson* which captures the personality of his dear friend, the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson. I will discuss these two large-scale sculptures later on and in more depth in the final assignment piece.

Clytie, 1865-9, G.F. Watts



Figure 1 *Clytie*, bronze, 1881, G.F.Watts.

The bronze version of *Clytie* has the following dimensions: height 87 cm x width 57 cm and a depth of 38 cm. It is a life size model of a half-length female nude, twisting to capture a glimpse of her amour over her shoulder.

Due to its popularity as a piece of sculpture, once the original marble sculpture had been exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1868, many other replicas were produced in stone, bronze and also as paintings.

It is difficult to know which came first, the painting or the sculpture. However Watts frequently utilised his collection of plaster casts and sculptures to form the basis for his paintings, so it is likely that the sculpture was modelled prior to the painting.

The sculpture and painting describe the moment when the mythological character of

Clytie turns her head towards the sun to watch the moment when her lover Helios

crosses the sun. Clytie was a nymph who was in love with Helios the sun god, who did not return her love. So she was transformed into a sunflower forever destined to turn her head towards him as he passed through the sky each day. Her turned head signifies also Watts' interest in the emotional expressiveness of necks.

The theme of Clytie and Helios has been popular in art and literature since classical times. Clytie is described according to Ovid as: "She turns, always, towards the sun; though her roots hold her fast, her love remains unaltered" (The Victorian Web, 2012). This narrative has also inspired many artists and students such as Watts's contemporary and great friend, the artist Frederick Lord Leighton.

In my opinion, the bronze model is particularly wonderful to behold as it designed in the round and as a result the aspect changes as one navigates around the piece. It was beautifully illuminated on my visit by the substantial roof lights which flooded the Gallery with natural light and cast delightful shadows over her form. The twisting movement of her torso is particularly compelling and her transformation into a sunflower is hinted at by the delicately furled petals which envelope her bust.



Figure 2 Side view of *Clytie*, pencil, 2016, Lucy Dean.

The sculpture has beautiful sensuous qualities as the artist loved to display his model's necks as he admired the inherent eroticism of this pose.

This sculpture has been likened to his other works of his first wife Ellen Terry. During his brief marriage to her he captured her in a number of poses to suggest the eroticism of her neck.

This cast has been a model for western students and artists over the centuries since it was first exhibited by Watts at the Royal Academy and was so popular that many replicas have since been made. Watts produced a special model for the writer George Eliot, who enthusiastically received it as: 'the finest present I ever had in all my life' (Watts Gallery, n.d.).

Taking a cast is certainly a means of translating an image from one medium to another which Watts seems to have done with apparent ease. In my view the sculptural versions of *Clytie* (in both bronze and marble) are more successful than his drawings and paintings as the latter can sometimes seem overworked. Although he established his reputation as a portrait painter I feel with *Clytie* that he truly excelled himself. It is highly erotic and romantic, and as a three dimensional piece it is visually captivating as a unified whole. In my opinion the painted version lacks the strong visual impact of the sculptural versions and as a result the original story of *Clytie's* passion for Helios is unclear.



Figure 3 *Clytie*, oil on panel, 1865-9, G.F. Watts.

Bibliography:

Brown, S. (2007) *G.F. Watts, Physical Energy, Sculpture and Site*. Studies in the Art of George Frederick Watts. Compton, Watts Gallery.

"Clytie, 1865-9." Postcard. Compton: Watts Gallery Artists Village, n.d. Print.

"Isabel Goldsmith Patino Gallery Room Guide." Chart. *Clytie*. Compton: Watts Gallery, n.d. Print.

"Monument to Lord Tennyson 1898-1903." Chart. Compton: Watts Gallery Artists Village, n.d. Print.

"Sculpture Gallery Room Guide." Chart. Compton: Watts Gallery Artists Village, n.d. Print.

The Victorian Web. (2012) *Desiring Women: Myth, Love and Leighton's Clytie*. Available from:

<http://www.victorianweb.org/victorian/painting/leighton/paintings/clytie.html> [Accessed 18th August 2015 & 28th February 2016]

Watts Gallery. (2016) *Bust of Clytie*. Available from: <http://www.wattsgallery.org.uk/en-gb/collections/highlights-permanent-collection/#item-1302> [Accessed 18th August 2015 & 28th February 2016]

Watts Gallery. (2016) *Clytie also known as Sunflower*. Available from:

<http://wattsgallery.adlibsoft.com/detail.aspx?parentpreref=> [Accessed 18th August 2015 & 28th February 2016]