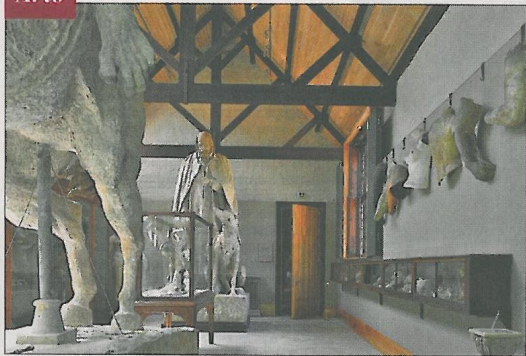


Arts



Stunning new light on Watts

A spectacular revamp of his gallery displays his paintings as never before, writes **Richard Dormant**

GALLERY

GEORGE FREDERICK WATTS

WATTS GALLERY, COMPTON

This spring saw the opening of two new art galleries in Margate and Wakefield, a striking extension to the Holburne Museum in Bath, and – just this week – the newly renovated Watts Gallery on the outskirts of the tiny village of Compton, outside Guildford in Surrey. Of the four projects, the Watts Gallery is the one that serves the collection best.

The Victorian artist George Frederick Watts and his wife Mary founded the gallery in 1904 to display more than 200 of his oil paintings as well as his drawings, sketchbooks and sculpture. By the end of the 20th century, the Grade II* Arts and Crafts building was in desperate need of repair. The £11 million that was raised through the generosity of the Heritage Lottery Fund and private donors was used to preserve, restore, improve and endow the gallery – but not to enlarge it in any significant way.

The architects ZMMA (Adam Zambory-Moldovan and Lucy Clark) essentially took a building that was falling down and put it back together, but they deliberately refrained from changing its architectural footprint. Many of their most dramatic interventions – the lowering of the floor in one gallery, the redesign of the original windows and skylights throughout, and the creation of a small space linking the original building with the sculpture gallery – are so effectively realised that they aren't immediately obvious, even to those who knew the gallery well.

The one space where they pull out all the stops is where Watts's huge sculptural models for the equestrian statue *Physical Energy* and Tennyson loom up, monumental ghosts, from floor to ceiling. Here, a glass wall brings light and greenery from the outside in, and offers visitors walking from the car park their first glimpse of what's to come.

This is the place to say that I've been a trustee of the gallery for the last 15 years. I'll never forget my first sight of the long low building, the wisteria covered entrance and the sepia coloured galleries that time seemed to have passed by. That was 40 years ago – and the highest compliment I can pay

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Top left: a glimpse inside the newly designed gallery
Above: Watts's 'Hope' (c. 1885-86)

the architects, the curator Mark Bills, and lighting designer Charles Marsden-Smedley is that they've not only banished the dingy, gloom and bone-chilling cold, but have also used light, colour and texture to create a visual experience that is as intense as I've had in any gallery anywhere.

In fact, the most profound change is not to the building at all, but to the art displayed in it. Set against rich red fabric or sea green walls under ceilings glazed with metallic silver paint, the pictures have never looked better. By showing them against these saturated colours and lowering the levels of artificial light and natural light, the display makes us see Watts's paintings as they've never been seen before.

I've always been somewhat ambivalent about Watts as a painter. His best-known pictures aren't the problem. His achingly sensitive self portrait at age 17; the powerful social realist masterpieces *Found Drowned* and *Under a Dry Arch*; the isolated masterpieces like that fog-bound homage to Turner and Whistler, *A Sea Ghost*: all these are easy to admire and would look wonderful wherever they were shown.

But I've always had difficulty with the allegorical and symbolist pictures for which Watts was best known during his lifetime. I could appreciate pictures like *The All-Pervading*, *Hope*, *The Court of Death* and *Time, Death, and Judgement*, for their compositions and literary subject matter, but their purely pictorial qualities – colour, brushwork, and paint texture – left me cold.

I now realise that I'd simply never seen these works displayed and lit as they should be. In their new setting, their monumental scale and powerfully modelled forms can be seen as the painted equivalents of Watts's sculptures.

An even bigger revelation is that each is a colouristic tour de force, in which dense skeins of light blue, indigo, silvery greys, greens and soft

yellows are imperceptibly woven together. In the past, they had been over-lit and too often shown against drab background colours. Their chromatic subtleties simply didn't register. Watts was often compared to Titian in his lifetime. Only now, can I see what the Victorians meant.

What the architects have done at the Watts Gallery will, I predict, make their names. But their achievement would be far less visible than if the curator had not created a stunningly successful hang and then lit it to perfection.

Perdita Hunt, the director, was ultimately responsible for seeing the project through, with the chairman of the board of trustees Richard Ormond, who was the driving force. They all deserve our thanks. Do go. A fast train from Waterloo leaves on the hour and half hour and will get you to Guildford in 30 minutes, then grab a taxi.

www.wattsgallery.org.uk