

MISS MURIEL FOSTER:
THE JOHN WILLIAM WATERHOUSE MODEL

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She has been called the “unknown model” or the “mysterious model” even though original portrayals of her of considerable value hang in private collections and in major museums and galleries around the world. Moreover, colourful reproductions grace homeowner’s walls and pages of books by the tens of thousands, but who among viewers who admire her beauty know her name?

“Who was she?” Christopher Wood asked in 1981: “One cannot help speculating about the identity of the mysterious and beautiful model who reappears so often in ... Waterhouse’s pictures.... It remains one of the few Pre-Raphaelite mysteries, and one that will probably never be solved” (148).

The Royal Academy of Arts, London, owns one of the most famous and most viewed paintings of her, Waterhouse’s 1901 Diploma Picture *A Mermaid* (fig. 1), prominently displayed for nearly a century and admired by millions. The Academy didn’t know her name. We asked, and we searched through their archives, and we made inquiries of other galleries and museums and other Waterhouse researchers but only two we could find knew.

The name of the favourite sitter of John William Waterhouse from 1893 to beyond the turn of the century is “Miss Muriel Foster,” known only by name from a single inscription on a 4.75 x 4.5-inch pencil sketch for Waterhouse’s 1905 *Lamia* (fig. 2). A reference to the sketch is found in a 1966 auction catalogue of Mr. Charles Ede of Folio Fine Art Ltd., London (Hobson, *Art*, 197). It was fortunate that Waterhouse inscribed the name of his favourite model of many paintings over many years on that one drawing, perhaps only as an afterthought, as no other notation of her name--or the names of any of his models--is known on any other of Waterhouse’s many works.

The current location of the sketch is unknown. It was listed as “A Portrait Study of a Girl” auctioned to a Mr. J.A.C. Nicholl in lot 8 as one of twenty-one studies of “Heads of Girls.” This was in the 23 July 1926 Christie’s sale of “The Remaining Works of the late J.W. Waterhouse, Esq. R.A.” Subsequently, Charles