

REVIEWS

G.F. Watts: The Last Great Victorian by Veronica Franklin Gould. New Haven: Yale UP, 2004. 458 pp. + 42 colour plates, 239 b/w illus. ISBN 0-300-10577-0. \$65.00.

Representations of G.F. Watts: Art Making in Victorian Culture edited by Colin Trodd and Stephanie Brown. Aldershot, Hants, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004. 197 pp.+ 8 colour plates, 39 b/w illus. ISBN 0-7546-0598-1. \$99.95.

Few artists so celebrated in their own time have been as misunderstood within the subsequent art-historical discourse as the Victorian painter and sculptor G.F. Watts (1817-1904). Upon his death he was hailed as the “Titian” and the “Michelangelo” of the era, but after World War I, when notions of “Significant Form” and Franco-centric definitions of Modernism began to dominate both critical and popular taste, his reputation, along with those of other eminent Victorians, plunged dramatically. Prominent detractors like Virginia Woolf, whose parents had idolized him, associated him with the overly earnest pretentiousness of an outmoded past. Arguably, however, his reputation was even more tarnished by a spate of hagiographies, such as Hugh Macmillan’s *The Life and Work of G.F. Watts, R.A.* (1903) and *George Frederic Watts: Annals of an Artist’s Life* (1912), a three-volume compendium by his second wife, Mary Seton Watts. These celebratory tomes, which suppressed controversial aspects of his persona like the quasi-Bohemian character of his earlier years and his adamant agnosticism, positioned him firmly outside the aesthetically oriented Modernist canon. The reputation of Victorian art has, of course, seen a vigorous revival over the past several decades, yet as Richard Jeffries, Curator of the Watts Gallery, observes, Watts’s reputation remains shrouded by “clouds of malice and ignorance.” At last, on the hundredth anniversary of his death, two new, radically different books have laid the foundation for a reassessment of Watts and his art.

Veronica Franklin Gould’s biography, a large, handsome volume designed for a general audience as well as for scholars, chronicles Watts’s life in considerably more detail than any prior account. With ample small black-and-white images positioned within the text and two groupings of large colour images, it also offers the most comprehensive collection of documentary photographs and reproductions of his art. Gould, who edited two catalogues for exhibitions in the Watts Gallery, *Mary Seton Watts: Unsung Heroine of Art Nouveau* (1988) and *The Visions of G.F. Watts* (2004), is presently editing Watts’s letters and notebooks, which heavily inform her text. Her biography is divided into two sections. Part One, “Ascent to Olympus,” moves from Watts’s modest origins as the son of an unsuccessful piano tuner and inventor to the