

G. F. WATTS: TWO LORDS CHANCELLOR
AND A BRIEF CORRESPONDENCE

George Frederick Watts (1811-1904) modeled his career and pictorial style on the great Venetians. Like them, he turned to literature and myth for inspiration, but the resulting work is often tainted by bogus mysticism and sentimentality. For many critics, his most enduring works are his portraits. Yet one of his biographers, Ronald Chapman, considered even the portraits flawed. "For the same fault of the allegories is present in the portraits -- overemphasis of the intellectual qualities at the expense of the pictorial. Instead of painting what was before him he not only ennobled -- legitimate enough in a grand mannerist -- but he also interpreted it."¹ In Academy Notes, John Ruskin observed "Mr. Watts' portraits are all conscientious and subtle; and of great present interest, yet not realistic enough to last."² Watts himself admits that his "work in that direction is very unequal."

We are nonetheless grateful for Watts' historically significant records of his contemporaries. His bid for fame by their means linked him firmly to the Italian Renaissance portraitists. Even though Tintoretto and Titian are evoked in the two portraits of lords chancellor which are presented here, these are clearly, in their characteristic sobriety and self-consciousness, nineteenth-century faces. Watts' myriad small brushstrokes and hesitant scumbling of the paint surface is as far removed from the Venice of the doges as are the rather dry color schemes in yellow-brown, green, and maroon, which he gradually evolved as a means for unifying the portrait series. Critics have said little about his sometimes naive yet nervous drawing style. Especially evident in the Lord Selborne and Lord Lyndhurst portraits, the rheumy eyes, heavy jowls, and sculptured "fine spread of forehead" of both old men emerge convincingly out of a highly individual technique.

We are fortunate in having four of Watts' letters, written in 1892 to Lady Sophia Matilda Palmer, daughter of Roundell Palmer, first Lord Selborne (1812-95).³ They enhance our understanding of the artist's way of working and his relationships with prominent patrons and sitters. Watts' reluctance to produce portraits is mentioned time and again in his correspondence, but never in a more roundabout way than in the first letter. He seems to have been incapable of rejecting commissions from anyone who approached him, and his planned gift of portraits to the nation, The Hall of Fame group, now a great treasure of the National Portrait Gallery, London, grew in a casual sort of way. He regretted not having painted Charles Darwin and Thomas Henry Huxley; he might have painted the Duke of Wellington, John