



HELEN ALLINGHAM

21 NOVEMBER 2017 – 18 FEBRUARY 2018

WATTS GALLERY – ARTISTS' VILLAGE

This winter, Watts Gallery – Artists' Village presents the UK's first major public art gallery exhibition devoted to the artist Helen Allingham RWS (1848-1926).

Allingham is one of the most familiar and well-loved of Victorian artists – in 1890 she became the first woman to be admitted to full membership of the Royal Watercolour Society and her work was highly acclaimed by leading contemporary critics, including John Ruskin. Despite this success there have been few exhibitions dedicated to her work.

This exhibition will seek to reassert the reputation of Helen Allingham as a leading woman artist and as a key figure in Victorian art. Bringing together rarely seen works from private collections together with important paintings from public collections, the exhibition will demonstrate Allingham's extraordinary talent as a watercolourist and will examine how she became one of the most successful creative women of the nineteenth century.

Having moved to London aged just seventeen, Allingham trained at the Royal Female School of Art and the prestigious Royal Academy Schools. By 1870, she was pursuing a professional career as a graphic artist and children's book illustrator, becoming the only female founding member of *The Graphic*, a new illustrated weekly magazine. Illuminating Allingham's early career the exhibition will display an array of graphic works, including the illustrations to Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* when first published as a serial in the *Cornhill Magazine*.

Following her marriage to the renowned Irish poet William Allingham in 1874, Allingham began to focus on working in watercolour producing vivid depictions of rural England. As the boom of industrial development continued to threaten traditional rural life, Allingham's art captured unspoiled landscapes and historic cottage architecture in exquisite detail; she was passionately concerned for the preservation of the English countryside. In 1886 she became the first woman artist to be awarded a solo exhibition at the Fine Art Society entitled *Surrey Cottages*. Her depictions of Shere, Witley, Haslemere and other villages across the region will be included in the show. Many of these picturesque timber-framed cottages can still be identified today.

While living in Surrey, Allingham became friends with the leading Arts and Crafts gardener, Gertrude Jekyll, painting vibrant images of Jekyll's experimental planting at Munstead Wood. Preparatory studies of plants and flowers will be exhibited alongside a depiction of Jekyll's famous South Border in full bloom.

Widowed at the age of 41 Allingham took on the sole responsibility of bringing up her three young children, pursuing a professional career right up until her death in 1926 age 78.

Helen Allingham continues Watts Gallery Trust's programme of exhibitions devoted to pioneering women artists. Guest curated by the pre-eminent Allingham scholar Annabel Watts, it offers an unprecedented overview of the artist's work. It will be accompanied by the publication of a new edition of Annabel's book on Allingham. Drawing on extensive research, this publication seeks out the actual cottages painted by Helen Allingham a century ago, comparing how they look today with the original watercolours.

Dr Nicholas Tromans, Brice Curator, says: “Allingham was a hugely popular Victorian artist, and having got to know her work at first hand for this exhibition, I can see why. Her pictures are exquisite objects, expertly created. They also manage to evoke a very particular atmosphere, a sweetly melancholy depiction of a rural world which is somehow both real and dream-like.”

Guest curator Annabel Watts says: “There is much more to Helen Allingham’s cottage pictures than meets the eye; they represent her concern for the future of the English countryside. She witnessed for herself the unnecessary demolition of ancient buildings by unscrupulous landlords and her paintings serve as a permanent record of their existence whatever their fate might ultimately be.”

For further information please visit:

www.wattsgallery.org.uk @WattsGallery Facebook/wattsgalleryartistsvillage

Notes to editors:

Watts Gallery – Artists’ Village

George Frederic Watts OM RA (1817–1904) was widely considered to be the greatest painter of the Victorian age. He became the first living artist to have a solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and the artist’s donation of paintings made a significant contribution to the founding collections of Tate Britain and the National Portrait Gallery.

In 1890, with his second wife Mary Seton Watts (1849–1938), Watts moved to Compton, a hollow in the Surrey Hills located on the Pilgrims’ Way. Together they commissioned a country home and winter studios, Limnerslease, from leading Arts and Crafts architect Ernest George, and from 1891 they resided there.

What followed was the creation of a unique Artists’ Village, starting with the Grade I-listed Watts Chapel, an Arts and Crafts masterpiece designed by Mary and realised through a community arts project in the last decade of the 19th century. This led to the formation of the Compton Potters’ Art Guild, a social enterprise founded by Mary Watts that thrived in the village until the 1950s, selling at Liberty & Co and receiving commissions from eminent architects and designers. Finally, the Watts Gallery, the first purpose built art gallery in the UK dedicated to a single professional artist that opened its doors to the public in 1904. Together with Tate and the National Portrait Gallery, it provides a complete overview of G F Watts’ art and aspirations.

Over the course of the 20th century, Watts Gallery – Artists’ Village fell into disrepair and was placed on the English Heritage ‘At Risk’ Register. Thanks to support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and many generous donors, Watts Gallery – Artists’ Village has been rescued and restored. Today the Gallery, Studios, Chapel and Pottery Buildings attract over 65,000 annual visitors.