

## Mary Watts and Elena Polenova: Kindred Spirits of the Arts and Crafts Movement

KIRSTY ANSON  
*Oxford Brookes*

This article studies two important women of the Arts and Crafts Movement during the late nineteenth century, the Scottish artist Mary Watts and the Russian artist Elena Polenova, and considers similarities in their lives and works which have never before been observed. Though starting their careers in remote locations and cultures, their personal philosophies and consequent artistic choices brought about a striking convergence in their lives, culminating in the mutuality, not just of creative output, but also of direct personal links and acquaintances.

Starting with a broad consideration of the Arts and Crafts Movement, the paper locates the women within their respective national movements and notes shared elements within British and Russian Arts and Crafts ideologies. The article then addresses the role played in the women's thinking by the distinguished artistic networks into which they were linked. By extension, the study then considers the channels and degree of contact, influence and artistic exchange between different national groups and the extent to which the women can be said to have participated in a broad international movement. The paper reveals just how close the two women came to personal acquaintance. The tragic early death of Elena Polenova, the rise of the Russian avant-garde, and the Soviet art historical bias against her artistic movement, on the one hand, and Mary Watts's widowhood, subsequent career divergence, and the rise of British modernism on the other, combined to foreshorten their artistic careers and obscure their legacy for much of the twentieth century. Research for this project has brought about discussions between the English and Russian curators of Mary Watts and Elena Polenova's legacies towards a range of future collaborative enterprises.

### INTRODUCTION

The names of two late nineteenth-century female artists, Mary Watts (1849-1938) and Elena Polenova (1850-1898), have never been linked. Although of similar age and social background, they lived and worked in contrasting and distant cultures: Watts in England and Polenova in Russia. Accounts of the international Arts and Crafts Movement recognise the importance of their work within their respective countries, but the interesting resonances between the two women have never been explored. Thanks to changing artistic fashion and political revolution, not to mention the higher profiles of the male artists with whom they were intimately connected, their legacies remained obscure for much of the twentieth century. Watts was married to George Frederick Watts ('G. F. Watts') (1817-1904), and Polenova was the younger sister of Vassily Polenov ('Polenov') (1844-1927), both amongst the most esteemed painters of their day.

Despite their differing backgrounds, Figures 1 and 2 illustrate a curious similarity in their work – a robust and vigorous decorative approach combining natural forms with an interlace pattern. However, their formal sources were quite different; Scottish-born Watts took inspiration from her native Celtic art, the interlace pattern of which is well known, whilst Polenova drew from the folk, religious, and courtly



Figure 1, Elena Polenova, *Study for a Decorative Border*, 1880s, Abramtsevo



Figure 2, Mary Watts, *Design for Brass Panel*, 1891-93, Limnerslease, Compton

art of medieval Russia, which utilises a similar motif (Fig. 3 and 4).

Just as cultural migration in the early Christian period wove the interlace pattern from east to west, so were the works of Watts and Polenova interwoven through ideological and artistic interactions across Europe in the late nineteenth century. They both participated in the wave of national craft revivals then sweeping across Europe in response to the industrial revolution, and independently drew the interlace pattern from their respective Celtic and Slavic cultures. Watts, however, consciously used Celtic interlace as a decorative device to weave and unify motifs from other cultures into her symbolic patterns – a fitting analogy to explore the existence and convergence of common threads in the lives and works of these two women.

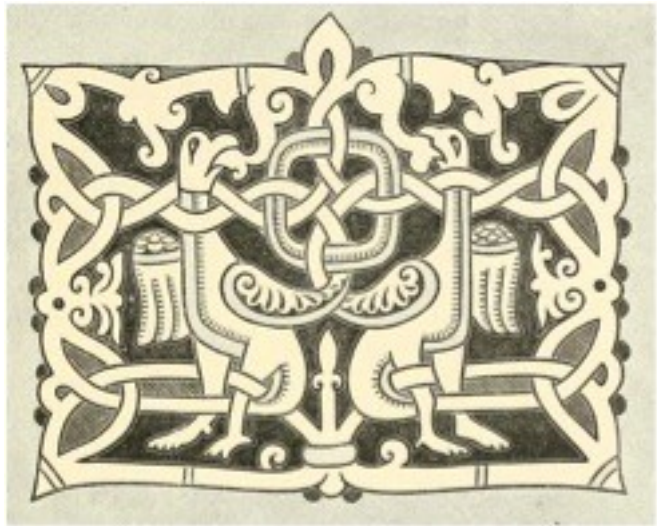


Figure 3, Russian Manuscript Decoration\*

The women were exact contemporaries, and they both developed artistic careers quite beyond the scope of conventional norms thanks in part to the privileged yet progressive circles in which they moved, but also to growing opportunities for women during the final decades of the nineteenth century. In an age of industrial revolution and dramatic social change, they sought to reconcile modernity with tradition by channelling the latest artistic trends into a social enterprise through the revival of traditional handicrafts. They both possessed an exceptional sense of pattern design and employed it to turn philanthropy into resounding artistic and commercial success.

With the materialism and perceived *fin de siècle* decadence and despair



Figure 4, *Traditional Russian Woodcarving*, The State Museum, St. Petersburg

of the late nineteenth century, they strove for spiritual regeneration and unity by enriching their applied arts with layers of symbolic meaning. In contrast to the languid and sultry mood of their Symbolist contemporaries, these women distinguished themselves by a commitment to social enterprise, firmly underpinned by their humanitarian outlook and love of traditional rural life. By using the artistic language of International Art Nouveau, they crossed social and national boundaries. The late 1890s saw the peak of their creativity as they embarked upon integrated artistic projects of the most innovative and ambitious type.

The 1890s also saw an interaction in the European art world, a period when Russian artists were actively looking abroad to enrich their native traditions. Whilst they often sought artistic inspiration from French fine art, they also looked towards Britain for literature and applied arts.

The article will introduce the two women within their own cultures and artistic movements and then consider the ideological and practical parallels in their approaches to art. Using the analogy of interlace, consideration will then be given to the mesh of artists and ideas to which they belonged and the extent to which their paths ran parallel in different artistic fields, ultimately analyzing if and where they ever intersected.<sup>1</sup>

## ARTS AND CRAFTS IN ENGLAND AND RUSSIA

The nineteenth century was a period of social and economic upheaval across Europe, as the industrial revolution created vast wealth but wrought havoc with traditional lifestyles and environments. By the middle of the century, concern was growing around the national decline of moral and aesthetic standards. John Ruskin, an English art critic, was a vociferous opponent of mechanical production and campaigned for a revival of traditional handicrafts and a return to the medieval guild system. He believed his workshop arrangement, which integrated design and handicraft, ensured the aesthetic quality and dignity of labour that the nineteenth-century factory production fundamentally lacked. Inspired by Ruskin, William Morris, an English artist, textile designer, and outspoken theorist and writer, dedicated his life to social and design reform. He envisaged a rural paradise where folk

<sup>1</sup>I would like to extend my thanks to Alison Smith and Anna Genina for introducing me to Polenovo, together with Mark Bills and Desna Greenhow at Watts Gallery for their insight into the life of Mary Watts, and also to Christiana Payne for her expert guidance.

might gather in 'workshops to do handwork in which working together is necessary or convenient; such work is often very pleasant'.<sup>2</sup> Aspiring to workshop principles, Morris revived a range of lost medieval designs and handicraft techniques for furniture and textiles, transforming the taste of a generation.

A collective of British designers, including William Morris and Walter Crane, launched the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1888. Its annual exhibitions in London were a showcase for the best in British ethical design and production.<sup>3</sup> In Anthea Callen's pioneering study of sexual division of labour within the Arts and Crafts movement she has shown how these prestigious urban Arts and Crafts groups constituted 'an elite club of men who held the most powerful jobs within art and design education'.<sup>4</sup> Women's participation was largely confined to rural areas, where they participated in countless workshops across the British Isles. Many belonged to the Home Arts and Industries Association, of which Watts was a driving force. Founded in 1884 by a group of aristocratic women, including Alexandra, Princess of Wales,<sup>5</sup> the Association existed to provide training and enhanced employment prospects for thousands of workers in deprived rural areas throughout Britain. The Association enabled women of all classes to participate in Arts and Crafts activities, often within their own homes and away from a male hierarchy. They could also participate in high-profile annual exhibitions at the Albert Hall in London, selling their wares in Bond Street shops.<sup>6</sup>

The dramatic effects of industrial revolution spread swiftly throughout Europe and prompted widespread interest in the Arts and Crafts ideals pioneered by Ruskin and Morris,<sup>7</sup> which were tailored to suit local needs. The resulting vernacular revivals were a staple of the International Arts and Crafts Movement, but, according to Pamela Todd, the essential difference between British and European Arts and Crafts movements, especially in Germany, was the latter's willingness to use machine technology contrary to the philosophy of Ruskin and Morris. In 1894, the journal *Art Moderne* lamented how in France, Belgium, and Germany furniture and decoration had 'fallen into the worst decadence' having been 'given up to industrialists who possess concern only for profits'.<sup>8</sup> The Russian movement resembled the British in that it insisted upon handicraft rather than machine production. Both movements were driven by a keen desire to provide a livelihood to, and thus sustain, rural communities, which were being destroyed by industrial revolution and encroaching urbanisation; the countryside also held associations of a more wholesome physical and moral existence. In Russia, rural life was held to embody

---

<sup>2</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. by Clive Wilmer (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Crawford, 'The Importance of the City', in *International Arts and Crafts*, ed. by Karen Livingstone and Linda Parry (London: V&A Publications, 2005), p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> Anthea Callen, *Women Artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Greensted, 'Nature and the Rural Idyll' in *International Arts and Crafts*, ed. by Karen Livingstone and Linda Parry (London: V&A Publications, 2005), p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Anthea Callen, 'Sexual Division of Labour in the Arts and Crafts Movement' in *A View from the Interior: Women and Design*, ed. by Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (London: The Women's Press, 1995), p. 160.

<sup>7</sup> Pamela Todd, *The Arts and Crafts Companion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Rosalind P. Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (London: Phaidon Press, 2006), p. 108.

the nation's unsullied and indigenous culture in contrast to Westernised urban culture, with which progressive thinkers were disillusioned. In Britain, aspirations for reinvigorating the rural economy were twinned with the ideologies of Ruskin and Morris who sought to unite artist and craftsman in a revival of medieval guild and workshop system. The resulting rural crafts in Britain and Russia fulfilled Ruskin's definition of a 'northern conception', which demanded the 'employment of rougher material, compelling the workman to seek for vigour of effect, rather than the refinement of texture or accuracy of form'.<sup>9</sup>

Russia had been largely isolated from Western culture until the eighteenth century, when Peter the Great established St. Petersburg on the basis of Western ideals. However, Czarist autocracy preserved the country's medieval feudal structure until as late as 1861, when serfdom was finally abolished. Industrial revolution therefore came late to Russia, but once underway, it was dramatic. By 1900, Moscow had a population of one million, making it the tenth largest city in the world.<sup>10</sup> Mass urban migration shattered rural communities, causing acute economic and social distress.

Intellectuals had been lamenting the fate of native Russian culture for decades, rejecting Western materialism and advancing the humble peasant's modest and pious nature as the true vessel of Russian character. Progressive thinkers saw the equation of a 'simple life' with social, political and aesthetic probity.<sup>11</sup> The new merchant middle class, many of whom were deeply pious and originally of humble social origin, championed national cultural life and patronised progressive new art styles reflecting Russian contemporary life, rather than westernized academic tradition.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, restoration of folk culture became a national concern: the Central Imperial Stroganov School of Technical Design was founded in 1860, based on the precedent of the South Kensington Museum, exhibiting traditional artefacts and running workshops in traditional crafts.<sup>13</sup>

The Russian Arts and Crafts Movement began at Abramtsevo, a country estate near Moscow (Fig.5). Under the enlightened patronage of estate owners and philanthropists, Savva Mamontov and his wife Elizaveta, craft workshops were established to instruct local peasants in traditional handicrafts, which, thanks to Polenova, became fashionable amongst the urban elite. Following the Abramtsevo model, aristocratic women established numerous rural workshops during the devastating famine in 1890-91. By the end of the nineteenth century, some seven and a half million country folk were engaged in and supported by craft revival activity.<sup>14</sup>

Rosalind Blakesley notes that paternalism and the involvement of many noble

<sup>9</sup> John Ruskin, 'The Nature of Gothic', in *The Stones of Venice*, ed. by J. G. Links (London: Da Capo Press, 2001), p. 155.

<sup>10</sup> Wendy R. Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia (Modern Architecture and Cultural Identity)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Louise McReynolds and Cathy Popkin, 'The Objective Eye and Common Good' in *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881-1940*, ed. by Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 134.

<sup>12</sup> David Jackson, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism in 19th century Russian painting* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, p. 160.

<sup>14</sup> Alison Hilton, *Russian Folk Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 220.



Figure 5, Abramtsevo, Russia

women was a particular feature of the Russian movement.<sup>15</sup> It has not been previously noted, however, that this feature, together with the movement's rural bias and commitment to traditional handicrafts, likens it to the work of the British Home Arts and Industries Association, with which Watts was so integrally involved.

#### MARY AND ELENA - ARTS AND CRAFTS PIONEERS



Figures 6 and 7, (Left) G. F. Watts, *Mary Watts*, 1887, Courtesy of Watts Gallery, (Right) *Photograph of Elena Polenova*, 1874, Courtesy of Polenovo Museum

the natural grandeur of the Scottish Highlands scattered with small villages and old stone churches, that she developed her intense affinity with the language and forms of ancient Celtic art.<sup>16</sup> Polenova was born into a similarly privileged family in cosmopolitan St. Petersburg. The Polenov family, however, had a country estate at Imochentsy, in the remote northern province of Karelia, where Polenova spent long

The parallel threads of artistic and social interlace connecting Watts and Polenova emerged almost simultaneously in the middle of the nineteenth century. Watts (née Fraser Tytler) was born in 1849 and Polenova in 1850, both into distinguished families. Watts's family were Scottish landed gentry and intellectuals, and she spent most of her childhood at the family estate at Aldourie near Inverness. It was here, inspired by

<sup>15</sup> Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, p. 165.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Bills, *An Artist's Village: G. F. and Mary Watts in Compton* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2011), p. 88.

periods.<sup>17</sup> It was here that her love of the Russian landscape and folklore developed, as she travelled deep into the countryside and encountered traditional communities.

Watts and Polenova both undertook artistic training, an appropriate accomplishment for gentlewomen. Moving amongst the artistic and social elite, Watts travelled to Dresden and Rome and then enrolled at the National Art Training School in Kensington before being admitted to the Slade School of Fine Art in 1873 where she studied naturalistic clay modelling under the French artist Aimee-Jules Dalou.<sup>18</sup> Polenova was one of the first Russian women artists to receive vocational art training and studied at the Imperial Society for Encouragement of the Arts in St. Petersburg under the tutelage of the leading Wanderers painter, Ivan Kramskoy in the 1870s.<sup>19</sup> She then travelled to Paris to study painting and ceramics.

Both women dedicated themselves to philanthropy and social enterprise. Her education complete, Watts left her elegant home in West London twice per week to travel to the slums of Whitechapel and to teach clay modelling to shoeblacks.<sup>20</sup> Polenova qualified as a governess and then, fuelled with humanitarian fervour, trained as a nurse to assist in the Russo-Turkish war.<sup>21</sup>

Barbara Alpern Engel's study of women in Russian society reveals how the Russian Orthodox tradition imparted a stern sense of moral duty, asceticism, and self-sacrifice, which persisted in women's social values regardless of their personal faith.<sup>22</sup> Protestant Evangelicalism in England also taught an exemplary personal morality and dedication to social engagement, as noted by Anthea Callen, who describes the philanthropic impulse and pervasive work ethic of Victorian middle class women.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, a Protestant commitment to secular charity work amongst noble women was also firmly established in Russia at the beginning of the century by the Empress Maria Fedorovna, who was of Prussian and Protestant origin.<sup>24</sup> Thus while Watts and Polenova emerged from radically different cultures, their social values were comparable. Veronica Franklin Gould describes Watts's socialist inclinations,<sup>25</sup> and indeed, as the final chapter of this paper suggests, Polenova would later be attracted to similar circles.

---

<sup>17</sup> Kristen M. Harkness, 'The Phantom of Inspiration: Elena Polenova, Mariia Iakunchikova and the Emergence of Modern Art in Russia' (Doctoral Dissertation: University of Pittsburgh, 2009), p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Veronica Franklin Gould, *Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938) Unsung Heroine of the Art Nouveau* (Farnham: Lund Humphries Publishers, 1998), p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Olga D. Atroshenko, 'The Road to Symbolism: Creative Biography of Elena Dmitrievna Polenova', in *Elena Polenova, exhibition catalogue*, ed. by E. A. Volkova (Moscow: Tretyakov Gallery, 2011), p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Franklin Gould, *Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938) Unsung Heroine*, p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Harkness, 'The Phantom of Inspiration', p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> Barbara Alpern Engel, *Women in Russia, 1700-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 83.

<sup>23</sup> Anthea Callen, *Women Artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 122.

<sup>25</sup> Veronica Franklin Gould, *Archibald Knox and Mary Seton Watts: Modern Celtic Art* (Farnham: Veronica Gould, 2005), p. 5.

Watts had been studying portrait painting with the celebrated portrait painter and Symbolist artist G.F. Watts, and despite their considerable age difference, in 1886 she became his wife. In 1891 they moved to Compton in the Surrey countryside, and with his support, Watts wholeheartedly embraced a life of philanthropy and rural social enterprise. Inspired by his symbolist art, she abandoned painting in order to devote herself fully to clay modelling as a 'modeller of ideas'.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, Polenova's career as an art teacher in St. Petersburg was curtailed by the premature death of her sister Vera in 1881. Devastated, she left the city and moved to join her brother Vassily who was working among the Abramtsevo artists' circle of Savva Mamontov.

Leaving the city represented the 'casting off' point for the two women, who were now ready to unite their educational and moral aspirations. Watts and Polenova were further blessed with formidable strength of character, which catalysed their engagement with, and meshing of, art and community to the lasting benefit of Compton and Abramtsevo, respectively.

### MARY WATTS AT COMPTON

'Giving money is one thing, but giving ourselves is the one great and necessary gift'. (Watts's diary, 24/25 November 1895).<sup>27</sup>



Figure 8, Mary Watts, *Compton Pottery Terracotta Garden Pot*, c. 1900

G. F. Watts shared his wife's total dedication to improving the lives of ordinary people. They were wholehearted supporters of the Home Arts and Industries Association, he as its major benefactor, and she in its direction and management. Watts's great opportunity for creative and social enterprise arose in 1894 when the Compton Parish Council purchased a plot of land for a new cemetery. She convinced her husband that they should create a cemetery chapel for the people of Compton.

She enlisted the advice of architect George Redmayne (1840-1912) to design the building and then devised an intricate scheme of symbolic decoration, modelled in terracotta and based on her beloved Celtic interlaced. The construction and decoration took place between 1896 and 1904.

<sup>26</sup> Franklin Gould, *Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938) Unsung Heroine*, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Bills, *An Artists' Village*, p. 67.





Figure 9, Mary Watts, *Compton Potters Art Guild Scroll Pot*, in production by 1903, terracotta, courtesy of Watts Gallery. (V&A Images)

In order to decorate the Compton Chapel, Watts established her own Home Arts evening class to teach clay modelling to the local villagers, opening her home for Thursday evening classes, which accommodated thirty to forty pupils aged ten to sixty years old. No fewer than seventy-three individuals contributed to the chapel decoration;<sup>28</sup> the chapel thus exemplified the finest arts and crafts principles of John Ruskin, who once observed that ‘a piece of terracotta wrought by human hand is worth all the stone in Carrara cut by machinery’.<sup>29</sup> The chapel was declared by Gleeson White in *The Studio* magazine as ‘so full of thought and art’, and he noted how ‘a certain impress of the craftsman’s hands on every inch separates it entirely from the modern building, ecclesiastical or domestic’.<sup>30</sup>

The Compton potters were keen to continue and extend their manufacture commercially. Despite her husband’s initial misgivings, Watts established the commercial Compton Pottery in 1900, which trained apprentice potters to produce a range of fashionable and award-winning terracotta home and garden wares according to her Celtic designs (Fig. 8). These were exhibited and sold at the prestigious London store Liberty (Fig. 9) and dispatched nationwide. The business boomed and reached the peak of its prosperity in 1929.<sup>31</sup>

After her husband’s death in 1904, Watts dedicated her life to cataloguing his works and writing his biography whilst continuing to supervise the commercial

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>29</sup> John Ruskin, *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1989), p. 56.

<sup>30</sup> Gleeson White, ‘A Mortuary Chapel in Compton’ *The Studio Magazine*, vol XIV (1998).

<sup>31</sup> Hilary Underwood, ‘Compton Pottery’, in Bills, *An Artists’ Village*, p. 113.

activities of the Potters Guild and its community of people. She died in 1938, but the potteries did not close until 1955. Her work transformed the lives and the local economy in Compton, and its legacy would survive her for many years.

### ELENA POLENOVA AT ABRAMTSEVO

‘To deprive myself of working for society in some form or another would be like depriving myself of healthy and nourishing food.’ (Letter from Polenova to her brother Vassily Polenov, 1878)<sup>32</sup>



Figure 10, Church of the Holy Saviour, Abramtsevo, 1881-83

Polenova arrived in Abramstevo in 1893 to join her older brother Vassily and other professionally trained artists working under the patronage of estate owner and art patron Savva Mamontov. The group actively researched and revived the exotic medieval designs of Old Muscovy, and in 1881-83 they pioneered the first serious Slav-ic architectural revival with the construction of an estate church (Fig. 10) based closely on the twelfth-century Church of the Saviour in Nereditsa, Novgorod.<sup>33</sup> This landmark project saw the artists experiment with painting, wood carving, and ceramics, and thus can be seen as the first arts and crafts project in Russia.

<sup>32</sup> Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia*, p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.



Figure 11, Detail of Figure 10

Moscow, with its medieval origins, was considered the seat of Russian nationhood and the cultural antithesis to westernised St. Petersburg. The artist Viktor Vasnetsov described the feeling of seeing the famous medieval St. Basil's cathedral in Moscow as knowing that he had come 'home'.<sup>34</sup> The estate at Abramtsevo, in addition to being in the heart of unspoiled Russian countryside and close to important Russian Orthodox shrines, had long-standing Slavophile associations. It had previously belonged to the influential intellectual, writer,

and spiritual leader of the movement, Sergei Aksakov.<sup>35</sup>

Mamontov's wife Elizaveta had established a craft workshop in order to train local people in traditional folk crafts and thus to enhance their economic prospects. Peasants had historically produced handicrafts during the unproductive winter months for use on the estate or for sale locally. The Abramtsevo workshop initially had no artistic input, and the product was mediocre. However, Polenova was appointed artistic director in 1885, and its fortunes were transformed by her wooden furniture designs.

Plentiful in supply, wood was the prime building and craft material that was traditionally painted or carved in faceted or inlaid decoration.<sup>36</sup> Polenova gathered a wide repertoire of authentic folklore patterns from which she created over 100 furniture designs between 1885 and 1893.<sup>37</sup>

Figure 12, Elena Polenova, *Wooden Bench carved in Abramtsevo*, Polenovo Museum, Russia

Bands of intricate chip carving alternated with stylised flowers, birds, and sunburst motifs – timeless folk designs that symbolised fertility and natural

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Spira, *The Avant Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2008), p. 40.

<sup>35</sup> Jackson, *The Wanderers*, p. 136.

<sup>36</sup> Hilton, *Russian Folk Art*, p. 63.

<sup>37</sup> Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia*, p. 39.



Figure 13, Detail of Figure 12

abundance (Figs. 12, 13, 14).<sup>38</sup> These were hand-made under her supervision by local men who, once they had completed a three-year training programme, were sent back to the villages and provided with the tools to continue independently.<sup>39</sup> Polenova's passion for authentic folk art and her natural facility for pattern design not only elevated the humble peasant craft into a fashion for the liberal urban elite, but it also served as inspiration to other noblewomen estate owners striving to alleviate the poverty and misery of rural communities.<sup>40</sup>

During the 1890s Polenova left Abramtsevo to develop a range of ornamental designs hand-woven from local materials for the women's embroidery workshops at Solomenko. In 1900, her designs held centre stage in the craft section of the Russian Pavilion of the *Paris Exposition Universelle* and won broad international recognition as 'the best and most modern in Russian decorative art'.<sup>41</sup> Her work contributed to the steady flow of Russian peasant goods to the West and continued to be reproduced for the next decade.<sup>42</sup>

Figure 14, Elena Polenova, *Wooden Cabinet carved at Abramtsevo, 1880s*, Vasnetsov House Museum, Russia

<sup>38</sup> Hilton, *Russian Folk Art*, p. 136.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>40</sup> Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia*, p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>42</sup> Orlando Figges, *Natasha's Dance* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 270; and Konstantin U. Narvoit, 'Abramtsevo Workshops and Moscow Folk Art Museum', in *Elena Polenova, Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. by E. A. Volkova (Moscow: Tretyakov Gallery, 2011), p. 186.

Despite their sophisticated artistic practice, Watts and Polenova always sought rural and social inclusion (by contrast, the Edinburgh muralist Phoebe Traquair, with whom Watts was sometimes compared, was known for her determination to work alone and was not linked to any rural community).<sup>43</sup> Although their domestic circumstances were different, neither Watts nor Polenova was faced with a conflict between career and children. They channelled their creative talent into art and philanthropy, producing works of such aesthetic and commercial appeal that, to borrow Wendy Salmond's phrase, any 'odour of charity' was utterly banished.<sup>44</sup> Their work was simultaneously recognised by the newly established Tate Gallery in London and Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow; Watts's Compton scroll pots were arranged around the central hallway of the Tate,<sup>45</sup> whilst Pavel Tretyakov, Henry Tate's Russian equivalent, purchased Elena's paintings and subsequently bequeathed them to the city of Moscow in the foundation of the Tretyakov Gallery.<sup>46</sup> The appeal of their work lay not only in its aesthetic attraction but also in the rich symbolism and spirituality with which they invested their designs.

#### SYMBOLIC LANGUAGES – 'A CURIOUS MIXTURE OF THE NORTH AND THE ORIENT'<sup>47</sup>



Figure 15, Mary Watts, *Moulded Gesso Ceiling Panel*, 1891, Limmerslease, Compton, Surrey

A British journalist wrote the words above in 1899 to describe Polenova's designs, but they would be equally appropriate for Watts's work; the two women were pursuing the same spiritual, even mystical, direction through the channel of vernacular revival or romantic nationalism in a pioneering synthesis of aestheticism and spirituality. And, quite independently, they were both blending northern and oriental influences. Watts was part of a Celtic artistic network – including Scottish, Welsh, and Manx designers –

who succeeded, thanks to the high profile promotion of the prestigious London store Liberty, in elevating Celtic design to the height of fashion during the 1890s. Her work was distinctive, however. Starting with a series of gesso panels for her new marital home, she created patterns combining Celtic interlace with motifs drawn from diverse ancient cultures such as Egypt and India (Fig. 15).

<sup>43</sup> Franklin Gould, *Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938) Unsung Heroine*, p. 58.

<sup>44</sup> Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia*, p. 57.

<sup>45</sup> Veronica Franklin Gould, *G.F. Watts, The Last Great Victorian* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 345.

<sup>46</sup> Jackson, *The Wanderers*, p. 30.

<sup>47</sup> Netta Peacock, 'A Log House Dining Room in Russia', *The Artist*, no. XXIV (Jan 1899), p. 8.

Meanwhile, in Russia, Polenova was pioneering the Slavic Revival style, or *Style Russe Moderne*. In their own ways, they were endeavouring to appeal to an essential spirituality suggested by the artistic languages of more primitive cultures that seemed innocent of the decadence and dogma associated with later religious traditions. In 1898 in *The Studio* magazine, Gleeson White described how Watts's chapel held 'symbolical lessons for the simplest person to read' and remarked that 'Christian it is, but theological it is not'.<sup>48</sup> Once again in *The Studio* in 1901, Netta Peacock described how Polenova's designs were 'expressive of the instinctive feeling of the people' and sought to 'express popular thought in a popular language'.<sup>49</sup> Both writers further noted the women's commitment to handicraft; Gleeson praised the 'vigour and fancy' and the 'rough, strong modelling' of Mary's terracotta reliefs, whilst Peacock described Elena's designs as 'far from "correct", or what we call "finished"', yet 'perfect treasures from an artistic point of view'.<sup>50</sup>



Figure 16, *Traditional Russian Folk Ornament*, Abramtsevo Museum Collection

Both women sought to adapt time-honoured designs for a modern world and thereby propagate ailing traditions. In her letter to James Morton in 1901, for whom she was designing hand-tufted rugs, Watts expressed her desire to 'carry forward the Celtic art [...] breathe its spirit [...] use it as a language in which our modern thoughts can be conveyed',<sup>51</sup> whilst Polenova strove to 'seize hold of folk art that is still living and give it a chance to devel-

op'.<sup>52</sup> Erudite in approach, they both studied ancient sources avidly in order to create a culturally authentic, yet highly individual and emotional, artistic language.

Like Watts, Polenova was keen to absorb new ideas from many different sources.<sup>53</sup> Watts studied ancient manuscripts, such as the Book of Kells,<sup>54</sup> for her artistic vocabulary, which she enriched with natural plant forms and completed with symbols from ancient cultures. Similarly, at Abramtsevo, Polenova conducted extensive research into local Russian folklore and folk art and travelled extensively in the countryside sketching architectural detail and gathering fragments of wood-

<sup>48</sup> White, 'A Mortuary Chapel in Compton', p. 235.

<sup>49</sup> Netta Peacock, 'The New Movement in Russian Art', *The Studio Magazine*, no. XXII (1901), pp. 268-276.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> 'Letter from Mary Watts to James Morton', March 1901, quoted in Franklin Gould, *Archibald Knox and Mary Seton Watts*, p. 18.

<sup>52</sup> 'Letter from E. Polenova to V. Polenov', quoted in Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia*, p. 28.

<sup>53</sup> Hilton, *Russian Folk Art*, p. 236.

<sup>54</sup> Desna Greenhow, 'Our Own Celtic Art', in *The Word in Pattern*, ed. by Mark Bills and Desna Greenhow (Surrey: The Society for the Arts and Crafts Movement in Surrey, 2012).

carving and textiles from peasant villages (Fig. 16).

Both women sought to produce subjective responses from viewers by expressing the spiritual ideas and the rich emotional atmosphere of a simpler life and earlier age.<sup>55</sup> Polenova said, 'I want to express [...] the Russian people's poetic view of Russian nature, that is, to explain to myself and others how the Russian landscape influenced Russian folk poetry and was expressed in it [...] I want to notice and express those imaginary artistic images that give life to the imagination of the Russian people'.<sup>56</sup> She gathered traditional folk tales while visiting remote villages, which she later illustrated in a series of children's books (Fig.17), powerfully evoking the charm she found in Russian landscape and folk culture.



Figure 17, Elena Polenova, *Illustration from 'Father Frost'*, 1888, Courtesy of Polenovo Museum

Watts was also searching for a spiritual language. Having been impressed by her encounter with ancient cultures during her honeymoon, she wrote in her diary of August 1896, 'Since Egypt, my desire to say something in art has been a casting back, to send out a shout from the heart again'.<sup>57</sup> As she explained to James Morton, she felt an affinity to Celtic art as 'the most emotional of styles' and adored its 'glory and passionate flow'.<sup>58</sup> The sense of trying to capture something subjective and intangible was, remarkably, described by them both as an 'aroma' of thought; Watts aspired to express her husband's inspirational and spiritual ideas, and in her journal of January 1891, wrote of her desire to put 'the aroma of his thought [...] into the silent language' of her symbols.<sup>59</sup> Polenova lamented the lack of available children's books that captured the aroma of the Rus-

sian fairy tale.<sup>60</sup> She even claimed to possess synaesthesia and see patterns through music.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Atroschenko, 'Road to Symbolism', p. 20.

<sup>56</sup> Natalya Polenova, 'E. D. Polenova', *Mir Isskustva*, 18-19, 1899, quoted in Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia*, p. 34.

<sup>57</sup> *Mary Watts diary*, 30 August 1896, quoted in Bills, *An Artists' Village*, p. 93.

<sup>58</sup> 'Letter from Mary Watts', 15 March 1901, quoted in Franklin Gould, *Archibald Knox and Mary Seton Watts*, p.18; and Franklin Gould, *Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938) Unsung Heroine*, p. 54.

<sup>59</sup> *Mary Watts Journal*, 25 January 1891, quoted in Franklin Gould, *Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938) Un- sung Heroine*, p. 36.

<sup>60</sup> 'Letter from E. Polenova to V. Stasov', 9 January 1897, quoted in Harkness, 'The Phantom of Inspi- ration', p. 241.

<sup>61</sup> Wendy Salmond, 'The Solomenko Embroidery Workshops', *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, vol 5 (1987), p 134.

Each of the women belonged to a vibrant network of important and progressive artists. As the wife of G.F. Watts, Watts was introduced to many eminent figures across British society. She sought advice from Walter Crane, the Arts and Crafts pioneer and champion of symbolic pattern design;<sup>62</sup> and Edward Burne-Jones was a close family friend and advised her on the chapel decoration. Additionally her pottery kiln was constructed with the advice of William de Morgan.<sup>63</sup> Watts's Scottish interests linked her with the Edinburgh group who were exploring Celtic revival, history, and myth.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Phoebe Traquair not only visited the Wattses in Compton but also included the figure of George Watts in her 1889-90 decoration for St. Mary's Cathedral Song School in Edinburgh.<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Cumming also notes in her comparative study of Mary Watts and Phoebe Traquair how Watts's fusion of Celtic Revivalism with broader cultural integration closely identifies her with Patrick Geddes, Edinburgh's leading figure in Celtic revival, social and educational reform.<sup>66</sup> According to Mark Bills, Walter Crane, William Morris, Edward-Burne-Jones, and William Lethaby were all close to the Edinburgh group and ideas flowed both ways.<sup>67</sup>

Polenova's brother Vassily was a member of the progressive Wanderers movement and an exponent of Russian landscape realism the 1870s.<sup>68</sup> He hosted regular artistic circles for experimentation and training, which, according to Harkness, constituted the nearest thing Russia had to the Pre-Raphaelite movement albeit more progressive in its inclusion of women.<sup>69</sup> Polenov built a retreat outside Moscow in 1890 just as the Wattses were establishing their artistic community at Compton.<sup>70</sup> Polenova was unmarried and spent a great deal of time in Polenov's circle during the 1890s as she embarked upon an intense exploration of symbolism with fellow artists Mikhail Vrubel and especially Viktor Vasnetsov who shared her passionate interest in Russian fairytale, epic, and ancient architecture.<sup>71</sup> The Wanderers were committed to a democratic art that was available to ordinary people just like George Watts, who regularly opened his gallery to all. Watts and Polenova were thus both able to draw artistic inspiration and support from a rich network of talent.

During the mid-1890s, Watts and Polenova graduated to ambitious, integrated schemes of fine art, craft, and symbolism. Influential thinkers in England such as Thomas Carlyle had for some years linked material environment with moral character,<sup>72</sup> leading theorists such as John Ruskin and William Morris to seek a symbolic

---

<sup>62</sup> Bills, *Artists' Village*, p. 68.

<sup>63</sup> Shelagh Wilson, 'Watts, Women, Philanthropy and the Home Arts', in *Representations of G.F. Watts: Art Making in Victorian Culture*, ed. by Colin Trodd and Stephanie Brown (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), p. 179.

<sup>64</sup> Bills, *Artists' Village*, p. 98.

<sup>65</sup> Franklin Gould, *G.F. Watts, Last Great Victorian*, p. 263.

<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Cumming, 'Patterns of Life: the art and design of Phoebe Anna Traquair and Mary Seton Watts', in *Women Artists and The Decorative Arts 1880-1935*, ed. by Bridget Elliott and Janice Hel-land (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), p. 21.

<sup>67</sup> Bills, *Artists' Village*, p. 98.

<sup>68</sup> Harkness, 'The Phantom of Inspiration', p. 81.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81; and Bills, *Artists' Village*, p. 26.

<sup>71</sup> Atroshenko, 'The Road to Symbolism', p. 21.

<sup>72</sup> Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, p. 12.



and moral meaning in decorative art.<sup>73</sup> Watts was consciously striving for an art that was vivid and expressive, and in her 1905 book *Word in Pattern*, she expressed her desire 'to revive that living quality which was in all decoration when patterns had meaning'.<sup>74</sup>

Watts and Polenova strove for a synthesis of spirituality and aestheticism. Watts's artistic triumph was the design and decoration of the Compton Cemetery Chapel (Fig.18), which she accomplished with the handiwork of the people of Compton and completed in 1904. Her aim was to 'create something completely beautiful – it should be dignified and simple in line and harmonious in colour – and suggestive in idea'.<sup>75</sup> Once again blending the North and the Orient, the chapel was built according to Byzantine design of a circle surmounted with a cross, decorated in Celtic style.

When reviewing the chapel for *The Studio* magazine in 1898, Gleeson White noted how 'the first sight of the Chapel suggests Oriental influence'.<sup>76</sup> The project



Figure 18, Mary Watts, Compton Cemetery Chapel, 1894-98

<sup>73</sup> Morna O'Neill, *Walter Crane: The Arts and Crafts, Painting and Politics* (London: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 22.

<sup>74</sup> Mary Watts, 'The Word in Pattern' in *The Word in Pattern (1905)* by Mary Seton Watts ed. by Mark Bills and Desna Greenhow (Surrey: The Society for the Arts and Crafts Movement in Surrey, 2012), p. 3.

<sup>75</sup> *Mary Watts Chapel Notebook*, quoted in Franklin Gould, *Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938) Unsung Heroine*, p. 20.

<sup>76</sup> White, 'A Mortuary Chapel', *The Studio Magazine*, p. 235.



Figure 19, Mary Watts, *Celtic Romanesque Portal*, 1894-98

inspired Watts to new artistic challenges, bringing together architecture, symbolic pattern making, clay and gesso relief modelling, painting, and gilding. It represented a total environment clothed in her symbolic decoration, offering the visitor messages of comfort and hope. The wooden door features a Celtic cross, and the surrounding archway (Fig. 19) is decorated in a symmetrical arrangement of symbolic terracotta reliefs. Around the arch, angels' faces alternately gaze up and down, expressing sorrow lightened by hope, and above a 'wall veil' features images from Isaiah expressing consolation and salvation.<sup>77</sup> An elaborate frieze that runs around

<sup>77</sup> Bills, *An Artists' Village*, p. 28.

the exterior, which Watts called *The Path of the Just* (Fig. 20), bears an intricate scheme of angels, crosses, trees, birds, and small animals that symbolise hope, truth, love, and light. Watts clothed the interior in a dramatic fusion of spiritual symbols and natural motifs, which she illuminated and energised through a decorative scheme of sumptuous and glowing colour, shimmering with gilded gesso reliefs (Figs. 21, 22). Gleeson White concluded that it was ‘the most original and perfect modern ecclesiastical edifice’ he had seen for many years.<sup>78</sup>



Figure 20, Mary Watts, *Path of the Just* Decorative Frieze, Compton Cemetery Chapel, 1894-98

Watts was a devout Christian, but always sought to convey universal spiritual ideas. Using Celtic interlace, she believed that the continual cords and knots offered the capacity to link and unify elements from diverse sources, demonstrating the ‘divine life and law, running through all things’.<sup>79</sup> The concepts of universality in world culture had gained theoretical momentum and were expounded in William Lethaby’s influential *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth* (1891), a key influence on Mary’s symbolic pattern design.<sup>80</sup>

Less is known about Polenova’s personal faith, but she did undertake a number of church commissions. The mood and decorative treatment – including interlace – of her illustration of St. Catherine (Fig. 23) could have been placed inside the Watts Cemetery Chapel. Polenova’s interest in symbolism intensified in the early 1890s as she began to fuse elements of landscape and folk art with fairy tale, diversifying beyond woodwork to book design and textiles. In Russia, the concept of universality, or Russian Soul, was felt to exist in the mystique of the forest and the austere beauty of the vast landscape with its timeless folk tradition. Jackson observes

<sup>78</sup> White, ‘A Mortuary Chapel’, *The Studio Magazine*, p. 235.

<sup>79</sup> Watts, ‘The Word in Pattern’ in *The Word in Pattern* by Mary Seton Watts 1905, eds. Mark Bills and Desna Greenhow (Surrey: The Society for the Arts and Crafts Movement in Surrey, 2012), p. 11.

<sup>80</sup> Cumming, ‘Patterns of Life’, in *Women Artists*, p. 20.



Figure 21, Mary Watts, *Painted and Gilded Gesso Relief Designs*, Compton Cemetery Chapel, 1901-04

that the Russian Motherland was the supreme signifier of Russian character across the social caste and ethnic spectrum.<sup>81</sup>

Christopher Ely maintains that the new, naturalistic approaches to landscape painting brought about by The Wanderers group constituted a founding myth of Russian national identity and elevated the Russian land to the status of a religion in and of itself.<sup>82</sup> The use of symbolic images had always been a feature of Russian spirituality, exemplified by the holy mystique of icon painting,<sup>83</sup> whilst traditional Russian folk and fairy tales served to rehearse profound and universal human concerns.<sup>84</sup> There was a widespread revival of interest in fairy tale due to harsh censorship imposed in the wake of the assassination of Alexander II in 1882, making realism challenging throughout the ensuing reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas II.<sup>85</sup> Polenova's Russian fairy tales

and landscapes were thus, according to Salmond, 'a tool for promoting concord within an empire of disparate nationalities'<sup>86</sup> and the 'direct emotional link they provided between the present and a vanished past'.<sup>87</sup> Elena pioneered the *Style Russe Moderne*, which visualised, or scented, the Russian Soul and crystallised a national identity during the fin de siècle period.<sup>88</sup>

To bring their spiritually engaging work into the modern world, both Watts and Polenova introduced elements of the fashionable Art Nouveau style. From its origins in Belgium and France, Jeremy Howard observes that Art Nouveau was often derided as superficial, narcissistic, and devoid of socio-political message, and it was mostly



Figure 22, Mary Watts, *Detail of Watts Chapel Interior*, 1901-04

<sup>81</sup> Jackson, *The Wanderers*, p. 119.

<sup>82</sup> Christopher Ely, *This Meagre Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), p. 23.

<sup>83</sup> Hilton, *Russian Folk Art*, p. 76.

<sup>84</sup> Jackson, *The Wanderers*, p. 144.

<sup>85</sup> Orlando Figges, *Natasha's Dance* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 202.

<sup>86</sup> Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia*, p. 5.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>88</sup> Wendy Salmond, 'The Russian Avant Garde of the 1890's: The Abramtsevo Circle', *The Journal of Walters Art Museum*, vol. 61-62 (2002-03), p. 9.



Figure 23, Elena Polenova, *Watercolour Study of St. Catherine*, 1880s, Abramtsevo

associated with objects of idle luxury.<sup>89</sup> In England it was often associated with the decadence and saturnine eroticism of Aubrey Beardsley. This unwholesome effect was apparent in much Continental Symbolist painting too, represented by the decadent literary subjects of Gustave Moreau, or the surreal world of Odilon Redon.

In a connection previously not explored, the Watts and Polenov circles distinguished themselves by a purer and intensely spiritual vision. George Watts's Symbolist paintings, despite their use of the nude, were ethereal and utterly chaste, and Andrew Wilton notes how his 1893 exhibition in Munich established English art as 'a purer, more spiritualized vision of beauty; an antidote to some of the more extreme images of French and Belgian Symbolism'.<sup>90</sup> Equally, Kristen Harkness observes that Russian symbolism favoured mysticism, but not in the eroticized European

mode, preferring myth, legend, fairytale, and magic to overt sensuality.<sup>91</sup>

David Jackson views Vasnetsov's scenes of twelfth-century epic as analogous to Victorian Arthurianism,<sup>92</sup> and his interest in the world of 'dreams, reverie, faith' can be further linked to the enchanted world of Burne-Jones, famously described by Dante Gabriel Rossetti as 'one of the nicest fellows in Dreamland'.<sup>93</sup> Like Burne-Jones, Vasnetsov undertook church commissions and blended Byzantine elements derived from his visits to Ravenna, Venice, and Sicily with native medieval motifs (Figs. 25, 26).<sup>94</sup>

Vasnetsov's *Sleeping Beauty* appears as a Slavic cousin of Burne-Jones's *Briar Rose*. However where the continental decadents were exclusive, or even reclusive, Watts and Polenova were modest and



Figure 24, Elena Polenova, *Winter Landscape*, Watercolour, 1882, Courtesy of Polenovo Museum

<sup>89</sup> Jeremy Howard, *Art Nouveau*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> Barbara Bryant, 'G.F. Watts and the Symbolist Vision' in *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones & Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860-1910*, ed. by Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone, (London, Tate Gallery Publications, 1997), p. 79.

<sup>91</sup> Harkness, 'The Phantom of Inspiration', p. 185.

<sup>92</sup> Jackson, *The Wanderers*, p. 142.

<sup>93</sup> Atroshenko, 'The Road to Symbolism', p. 22, and Christopher Wood, *Burne-Jones*, (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1998), p. 17.

<sup>94</sup> Spira, *The Avant Garde Icon*, p. 40.



Figure 25, Victor Vasnetsov, *Sleeping Beauty*, 1900-26.\*



Figure 26, Edward Burne-Jones, *Briar Rose, the Rose Bower*, 1890.\*

Both women always chose the innocent wild flowers of forest and meadow, never the decadent, hothouse roses of the MacDonald sisters at the Glasgow School, whose unsettling language perplexed British critics and was dubbed The Spook School.<sup>97</sup> Through her watercolours, Polenova strove to celebrate the beauty of primordial nature, showing wild flowers 'elegantly entangled with nettle, weeds and big burdock leaves' or to evoke 'the feeling of fresh air after rain'.<sup>98</sup> She loved the northern and central Russian nature, especially when expressed in 'slight, insignificant but deeply poetic little corners'.<sup>99</sup>

Watts also used wild flowers, inviting local children to paint a band of delicate blooms around

inclusive. Not only did they insist on a collaborative endeavour employing rural communities, but they also distinguished themselves for their robust, wholesome, regenerative, and spiritually pure renditions of Art Nouveau.<sup>95</sup> Salmond describes Polenova's stylised wild flowers as 'densely packed and magnified to create a space vibrating with its own organic life' and her designs of 'robust and aggressive vigour',<sup>96</sup> a quality clearly expressed in Figure 27 below. The same robust organic vigour is evident in Watts's work (Fig.28).



Figure 27, Elena Polenova, *The Beast*, 1895-98\*

<sup>95</sup> Elena's textile designs were produced on linen spun, woven, and embroidered by local women, and Mary's pottery was hand-made by Compton potters.

<sup>96</sup> Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia*, pp. 65-69.

<sup>97</sup> Howard, *Art Nouveau*, p. 57.

<sup>98</sup> Ella V. Paston, 'Elena Polenova and the Abramtsevo Circle', in *Elena Polenova, Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. by E. A. Volkova (Moscow: Tretyakov Gallery, 2011), p. 72.

<sup>99</sup> E. V. Sakharova, *Vassily Dmitrievich Polenov, Elena Dmitrievna Polenova* (Moscow: 1964) quoted in Ely, *This Meagre Nature*, p. 218.



Figure 28, *Moulded Gesso Relief Wildflowers*, Watts Cemetery Chapel, painted by local children, 1904.

Netta Peacock described ‘the brilliant blaze of colour concentrated in the bird, which glows as with an inward furnace, produces a pictorial expression full of magical influences at work’.<sup>100</sup>

Watts and Polenova sought, then, to express a universal spiritual language, composed of artistic vocabulary derived from their respective vernacular forms. Jeremy Howard coincidentally observes the resonance between the cultures of Elena and Mary in his international survey of Art Nouveau, and in defining the romantic Slavic revivalism of the Russian circle, described it as ‘akin to Celtic Romanticism’.<sup>101</sup> In 1899 describing Elena’s designs as ‘so essentially Russian’, Netta Peacock noted the ‘interlocking motifs also found in Celtic and Scan-

dinavian art’ and the ‘curious mixture of the North and the Orient, which is so strikingly contrasted in all things Russian’.<sup>102</sup> However, there is no evidence that either Watts or Polenova were aware of this similarity, and it was Netta Peacock herself, in her endeavours to bring Polenova to Britain, who brought their circles closer together.

the circumference of her chapel (Fig. 28), beneath which the roots of the Tree of Life swirl and coil with Art Nouveau whiplash (Fig. 29); the ribs of the vault are lined with the faces of children, possibly from the village (Fig. 30). Similarly, Polenova’s love of children is manifest in her choice of the fairy tale genre and her enchanting illustrations. In 1897 she designed a huge *panneau* for the dining room of M.F. Iakunchikova’s country estate, which featured the famous Russian firebird deep in a magical forest. British journalist



Figure 29, Mary Watts, *Art Nouveau Tree of Life*, Compton Cemetery Chapel, 1904.

<sup>100</sup> Peacock, ‘A Log House Dining Room’, *The Artist*, p. 6.

<sup>101</sup> Howard, *Art Nouveau*, p. 145.

<sup>102</sup> Peacock, ‘A Log House Dining Room’, *The Artist*, p. 8.



Figure 30, Mary Watts, *Children's Faces on Chapel Ceiling*, Watts Cemetery Chapel, 1904.

## INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGES AND INTERSECTIONS

Since the time of Peter the Great, Russia had been known for her ability to graft European ideas and precedents onto her own traditions, which Dostoevsky acknowledged in 1876, saying 'We Russians have two Motherlands: our Rus, and Europe'.<sup>103</sup> St. Petersburg had been built upon Europe's finest expertise, and significant foreign communities dwelt in the city. For other European coun-

tries, however, the latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed an unprecedented level of internationalization, with exhibitions in Paris and London propagating new ideas and attracting visitors from far afield.

During the 1890s, as Barbara Bryant observes, London became the 'nexus' for the display and cross-fertilisation of international Symbolist art, as the Grafton Gallery and other smaller venues encouraged a massive influx of foreign artists.<sup>104</sup> Although he was not a Symbolist artist, Vassily Verashchagin, the famous Russian war artist, exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1887 and notably paid a visit to George and Mary Watts.<sup>105</sup> Art Nouveau was itself an international movement, with Baillie Scott working in Poland and Hungary and Charles Rennie Mackintosh exhibiting in Moscow.<sup>106</sup> *The Studio* magazine publicized the works of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society across Europe and America, encouraging foreign designers to visit Britain.<sup>107</sup> Kelly observes that, by the turn of the century, artistic and academic worlds closely overlapped and saw themselves as part of an international community.<sup>108</sup>

British literary tradition was also firmly established in Russia. Dostoevsky observed that 'Shakespeare, Byron, Walter Scott and Dickens are dearer and more understandable to Russians than, for example, to Germans.'<sup>109</sup> Accordingly, in her examination of the impact of British literature upon Russian culture, Rachel Polonsky observes how the 1890s saw the wholesale importation of British artistic theories through translations of Ruskin and Morris, Pater, and others, which quickly influenced social and aesthetic debates.<sup>110</sup> The Russian writer Zinaida Vengerova met

<sup>103</sup> Kelly and Shepherd, *Constructing Russian Culture*, p. 190.

<sup>104</sup> Bryant, 'G. F. Watts', in *The Age of Rossetti*, p. 78.

<sup>105</sup> Franklin Gould, *G. F. Watts, Last Great Victorian*, p. 200.

<sup>106</sup> Howard, *Art Nouveau*, p. 3.

<sup>107</sup> Karen Livingstone, 'Origins and Development' in *International Arts and Crafts*, ed. by Karen Livingstone and Linda Parry (London: V&A Publications, 2005), p. 59.

<sup>108</sup> Kelly and Shepherd, *Constructing Russian Culture*, p. 7.

<sup>109</sup> Rachel Polonsky, *English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.



William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and Ford Madox Brown and wrote in Russia about English literature, eulogizing the Oxford and Pre-Raphaelite movements and crediting England with an aesthetic renaissance. The intense spirituality and religious symbolism of Pre-Raphaelite painting appealed to Russians who viewed them as the ‘ancestors of symbolism’ and a far greater inspiration than the French.<sup>111</sup>

Polenova was directly acquainted with British artists in Russia. Her brother Polenov invited two Englishwomen into his artistic group, Emily and Mary Shanks, daughters of an English merchant in Moscow, who were her frequent companions during 1891-92. Emily Shanks became the first female Wanderer exhibitor in 1894.<sup>112</sup> By the 1890s, Polenova had become intensely attuned to international movements in her search for new ideas to enrich native Russian art. She had become disenchanted with and wished to escape, ‘the terrible soporific artistic rut’ in which the conservative art establishment had confined Russian art.<sup>113</sup> She was attracted to the Symbolist Movement, attending lectures in Moscow on Western art trends and spent several months in Paris in 1898.

Pamela Todd observes how the Arts and Crafts movement brought about a golden age of children’s book illustrations and international renown for Walter Crane,<sup>114</sup> whose work was exhibited around Europe from 1886.<sup>115</sup> Polenova freely acknowledged the influence of Walter Crane’s children’s books on her designs.<sup>116</sup> Crane was also a key figure for Watts – his interest in symbolic pattern making, or ‘picture writing’ as he termed it,<sup>117</sup> together with his revival of gesso modelling, was an important influence on her Chapel designs.<sup>118</sup>

With her interest in Symbolist art, it is likely that Polenova was aware of George Watts and Edward Burne-Jones, both of whom were highly regarded in Paris. She visited the Paris Exhibition in 1889, the year that G.F. Watts exhibited eight ‘*fantaisies reveuses*’ – more major oil works than any other artist – and his portraits of Burne-Jones, Crane, and Violet Lindsay were the talk of St. Petersburg following an exhibition in February 1898.<sup>119</sup> Barbara Bryant observes that *The Studio* magazine ensured that many of the principal works of G.F. Watts and Burne-Jones were known to anyone with a serious interest in the visual arts.<sup>120</sup>

The 1890s in Russia were known as the Silver Age, thanks to a glorious and unprecedented flourishing of the arts under the patronage of new wealthy Russian merchants such as Savva Mamontov and Pavel Tretyakov. Central to the art

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., pp. 121-25.

<sup>112</sup> Harkness, ‘The Phantom of Inspiration’, p. 79.

<sup>113</sup> ‘Letter E. Polenova to V. Stasov’, 22 May 1898, in Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia*, p. 71.

<sup>114</sup> Todd, *Arts and Crafts Companion*, p. 285.

<sup>115</sup> O’Neill, *Walter Crane*, p. 166.

<sup>116</sup> Salmond, ‘Russian Avant Garde of the 1890’s’, *Journal of Walters Art Museum*, p. 9.

<sup>117</sup> O’Neill, *Walter Crane*, p. 10.

<sup>118</sup> Bills, *Artists’ Village*, p. 68.

<sup>119</sup> Bryant, ‘G. F. Watts’, in *The Age of Rossetti*, p. 76; and Franklin Gould, *G. F. Watts, The Last Great Victorian*, p. 316.

<sup>120</sup> Andrew Wilton, ‘Symbolism in Britain’, in *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones & Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860-1910*, ed. by Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1997), p. 32.

movement were Polenova and the Abramtsevo circle, whose romantic synthesis of Slavic and avant-garde styles was adopted by operatic impresario Sergei Diaghilev for the spectacular *Ballets Russes*. Diaghilev was committed to reconciling Russian and Western art. He was an energetic promoter of artistic collaboration, organizing a joint exhibition of British, Scottish, and German watercolours in St. Petersburg in 1897.<sup>121</sup>

Diaghilev's energy and determination lay behind the 1898 formation of The World of Art Group, which drove innovation in Russian art through regular exhibitions and publications combining Russian and Western art. World of Art became the centre of Russian Symbolism and the avant-garde. John Bowlt maintains that members of the group, like most Russian intelligentsia, travelled constantly and were as much at home in Paris and Munich as in St. Petersburg. They all read the same Western newspapers and journals, especially *The Studio* magazine.<sup>122</sup>

Diaghilev was a great admirer of Polenova's work and invited her to join the group as a founding member. She contributed many designs in preparation for the venture but died of complications arising from a head injury just before its official launch. Her tragic death was recognized as a momentous loss to the early modern art movement, and the World of Art group did much to promote her designs, dedicating a special posthumous display to her within their first exhibition in St. Petersburg in 1899.

How close did Watts and Polenova come to actually meeting? It is clear that Watts never visited Russia, nor did Polenova reach England. However, as Polenova's interest in international art grew, so did her determination to visit, work, and exhibit in Britain. Both of their voices certainly blended through the journalistic world, especially *The Studio* and *Artist* magazines, to which they both contributed and which, in turn, reported on their work. It is therefore reasonable to assume that they may at least have read about one another. *The Artist* magazine published an article in July 1898 featuring Watts's Chapel door and noting its 'mystical symbolism' and, just four months later, published the article by Netta Peacock, which noted the 'curious mixture of the North and the Orient' evident in the Russianness of Polenova's designs.<sup>123</sup>

The British journalist Netta Peacock was a key conduit between the British and Russian artistic worlds, acting as a go-between, reporting on annual Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society shows for St. Petersburg journals, and writing about foreign developments in Britain.<sup>124</sup> She moved between Britain, France, and Russia and became friendly with Polenova whilst they were both in Paris in 1898. She was an admirer of Polenova's *Style Russe Moderne*, writing an extensive article about her designs in 1899 for *The Artist* and later about 'The New Movement in Russian Decorative Art' for *The Studio* magazine in 1901.<sup>125</sup>

<sup>121</sup> John E. Bowlt, *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early Twentieth Century and the 'World of Art' Group* (Newtonville: Oriental Research Partners, 1982), p. 51.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>123</sup> Peacock, 'A Log House Dining Room in Russia', *The Artist*; and 'The New Movement in Russian Art', *The Studio Magazine*.

<sup>124</sup> Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia*, p. 69.

<sup>125</sup> Peacock, 'A Log House Dining Room in Russia', *The Artist*; and Peacock, 'The New Movement in Russian Art', *The Studio Magazine*, p. 268.

Following the publication of Polenova's designs in *The Artist*, Peacock wrote that British artists were fascinated by the ethnic and Symbolist project and with Russian applied art, which was utterly new to British eyes.<sup>126</sup> Peacock knew Walter Crane personally, a figure of great importance to both women artists, and had discussed Polenova's designs with him at length. She reported to Polenova that Crane was enchanted with their originality and was keen to meet her.<sup>127</sup>

Polenova was desperate to come to Britain, and in 1899 Peacock was organising a several-month-long visit to Edinburgh, the heart of the Celtic Revival. Previously unpublished letters in the Tretyakov Gallery archive reveal that Peacock arranged board at University Hall, Edinburgh for twenty-five shillings a week and was corresponding with Lady Geddes, wife of Sir Patrick, whom she described to Polenova as 'the leading man in the educational and socialistic movement in Edinburgh'.<sup>128</sup> Despite her Compton base, as Desna Greenhow observes, Watts remained firmly wedded to her Scottish identity all her life, and Mark Bills and Elizabeth Cumming have both emphasised her closeness to Geddes and the Edinburgh movement.<sup>129</sup> Had Polenova lived and worked in Edinburgh, their paths might so easily have crossed, but her untimely death limited their affinity to the wider mesh of artistic relations.

This remarkable period of cultural exchange was all too brief. The *Style Russe Moderne* and Russian craft revival, like the British movement, gradually fell out of fashion, swept away by avant-garde styles and the commercial advantage of mass-produced goods. Following the Russian Revolution, the World of Art movement was derided by Soviet art historians as decadent, and according to West and Petrov, 'the Silver Age was dramatically cut off and expunged from public memory'.<sup>130</sup>

It is only now, facilitated by a new political era in Russia, the trend for new art historical approaches to the careers of female artists, and a revival of interest in the Silver Age that connections can be re-established.

## CONCLUSION

In the twenty-first century, tribute is once again being paid to the women's remarkable talent for art, craft, social, and commercial enterprise. In late 2011, the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow held its first exhibition dedicated to Polenova since 1903, and in England, the Watts's home is soon to be transformed into an exhibition centre dedicated to Mary Watts's life and works and the perpetuation of her commitment to social enterprise and the teaching of art. Perhaps more exciting still, and as a result of this research, a working relationship has been established between the

<sup>126</sup> Atroshenko, 'The Road to Symbolism', p. 23.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> 'Peacock to Polenova', letter 6 July 1898, Tretyakov Gallery, No. 54/8409.

<sup>129</sup> Bills, *Artists' Village*, p. 98; Cumming, 'Patterns of Life', *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts*, p. 21; and Greenhow, 'Our Own Celtic Art', *Word in Pattern*, p. 29.

<sup>130</sup> James L. West and Iurii A. Petrov, *Merchant Moscow: Images of Russia's Vanished Bourgeoisie* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 4.

Watts Gallery and the Polenovo Museum. Polenova's ardent desire to work and exhibit in England was never realized in her lifetime, but the new era of cultural exchange promises to resume the relationships which were so tragically forestalled by her premature death.

Watts and Polenova never met, but their ideals, talents, personal qualities, and artistic circles were so alike that, had they known one another in the nineteenth century, they would certainly have recognised a kindred spirit, not just of Arts and Crafts, but also of Symbolism and Art Nouveau.

*This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial-Share-alike CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 UK: England & Wales License. Under the terms of this license, you are allowed to build upon this work non-commercially, but must give the original author credit and license your new creation under the identical terms. To view a full copy of this license, visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View.*

---

\* Unattributed images are the property of the author. Images marked with an asterisk (\*) have been taken from Wikimedia Commons and are of the public domain.