

John William WATERHOUSE (Rome 1849 - London 1917)

Day Dreams

Watercolour, heightened with bodycolour, over an underdrawing in pencil.
Framing lines in pencil, and with watercolour tests in the margins.
Signed J. W. WATERHOUSE at the lower right.
457 x 269 mm. (18 x 10 5/8 in.) [image]
501 x 333 mm. (19 3/4 x 13 1/8 in.) [sheet]

John William Waterhouse's watercolours represent a very small but significant aspect of his oeuvre; of the nearly four hundred works listed in Anthony Hobson's pioneering monograph of 1980, only twelve are watercolours. The artist seems to have used the medium for studies for his larger paintings, and also produced a number of independent, finished compositions, such as the present example, which are usually set in Italy. He was elected to the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours in 1883 and exhibited there for several years before resigning in 1889. In a review of the Institute's exhibition of 1885, in The Magazine of Art, one critic noted that 'Mr. J. W. Waterhouse's unnamed and beautifully liquid little drawing makes us regret this artist's prolonged abstention from water-colours.' Waterhouse may have continued to produce watercolours for his own pleasure throughout his later career, but none seem to have been exhibited in public after 1890.

Between 1877 and his marriage in 1883 Waterhouse made several trips to Italy, and this charming watercolour would seem to have been inspired by his travels. Sent by the artist to the annual watercolour exhibition at the artist-run Dudley Gallery in London in 1879, the present sheet was singled out in a

review in The Illustrated London News, which noted that 'Delicate artistic qualities are noticeable in "Day Dreams" (615), by J. W. Waterhouse – an Italian girl seated against a white wall, holding a fan of peacock's feathers.' Long thought to be lost and only recently rediscovered, this watercolour has remained unseen since the Dudley Galley exhibition in 1879.

In its composition, the present watercolour is closely related to Waterhouse's later painting Flora of c.1890, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1891 and now lost; this was one of a small group of canvases whose settings seem to have been based on one of several trips that the artist made to Capri in the late 1880's and early 1890's. Both Day Dreams and Flora depict women holding fans of peacock feathers, which, as one modern scholar has noted, 'had become an Aesthetic emblem of beauty.'

It is of works such as Day Dreams that the critic A. L. Baldry wrote, 'In all the work which he executed during this period of youthful enthusiasm he was concerned most of all with the presentation of colour under effects of brilliant light. To ensure the exactness of chromatic statement which seemed to him to be of chief importance, he painted this series of pictures out of doors, posing his models in the bright sunlight, and working unhampered by the conventions and limitations of the studio. It was not merely that he studied his subjects in the open air...[but that] the pictures were actually painted on the spot, and were kept free from any influences that might disturb the vividness of the impression which he wished to convey.'

Provenance:

Arthur Tooth and Sons, Ltd., London.

Exhibitions

London, The Dudley Gallery, 1879, no.615 (priced at £40).

Literature:

Anon., 'The Dudley Gallery', The Illustrated London News, 8 March 1879, p.234 ('Delicate artistic qualities are noticeable in "Day Dreams" (615), by J. W. Waterhouse – an Italian girl seated against a white wall, holding a fan of peacock's feathers.'); Anthony Hobson, The Art and Life of J. W. Waterhouse, R.A., London, 1980, p.197, no.325; Narim Bender, J. W. Waterhouse: 93 Drawings, 2014, illustrated pp.61-62.

Artist description:

The son of an English painter working in Rome, John William Waterhouse lived in Italy until he was about five years old. (Throughout his life, he was known among family and close friends as 'Nino', short for 'Giovannino'.) He trained with his father before entering the Royal Academy Schools in 1870, aged twenty-one. He began exhibiting at the Society of British Artists in 1872, and made his debut at the Royal Academy two years later, with a painting of Sleep and his Half-Brother Death. He also began showing at the Dudley Gallery in 1875. In much of Waterhouse's early work, the influence of the classicizing paintings of Lawrence Alma-Tadema is evident; these works proved to be commercially successful and earned the artist a steady income.

The 1880's saw a distinct change in Waterhouse's style, with the yearly exhibition at the Royal Academy of a succession of large, dramatic canvases of historical or literary subjects. These grand and imposing canvases - Diogenes (1882), The Favourites of the Emperor Honorius (1883), Consulting the Oracle (1884), Saint Eulalia (1885), The Magic Circle (1886), Mariamne (1887) and The Lady of Shalott (1888) – resulted in the precocious artist reaching the heights of his public fame. Waterhouse was elected an Associate Member of the Royal Academy in 1885, at a relatively young age for such an

honour, rising to full Membership in 1893. He continued to exhibit large-scale subject pictures – generally of beautiful women from mythology, literature or poetry, with titles such as Circe, Danaë, Hylas and the Nymphs, Ariadne, Echo and Narcissus, Ophelia, Flora and the Zephyrs and La Belle Dame sans Merci - in which his mastery of colour and figure drawing is readily evident. Waterhouse was also a gifted portrait painter, always of women, although only a handful of these works were exhibited.