



Portrait of Mrs Louis Huth

Date

c. 1857-1858

Primary Maker

George Frederic Watts

Medium

Oil on canvas

Dimensions

195 x 105.5 cm

Description

This fine full-length portrait of Helen Rose Huth (1837-1924) was painted by Watts at a time when he redefined his objectives as a portrait painter. It enjoyed considerable status as part of the noted collection of modern art featuring the work of Watts and Whistler that the sitter and her husband formed after their marriage in 1855. Helen Rose Huth, née Ogilvy, was the daughter of a Scottish merchant. Her husband Louis Huth (1821-1903), was the Director of the London Assurance for Fire, Life and Marine Assurance and a man of considerable wealth. The couple shared a passion for art collecting, in

particular, modern art and in the 1850s Louis Huth belonged to the Fine Arts Club, a breeding ground for educated connoisseurs. Together, Helen and Louis Huth formed an extraordinary collection of modern paintings and decorative arts. Commissioning Watts to portray his wife resulted in a grand manner exercise that underlined the future aspirations of the young collector. Louis Huth commissioned the first of a series of oil portraits of his wife soon after their marriage in 1855. The first by Watts is a relatively straightforward portrait of the young bride looking like a young girl (formerly Ashmolean Museum). It was followed by this full length portrait that possesses all the elements of eighteenth-century portraiture but yet has a strong contemporary dimension evident in the fashionable dress worn by the subject and the setting of a Victorian garden with blooming rhododendrons. The inclusion of the pug dog, while reminiscent of works by Hogarth or Landseer, would seem to add a personal note to the work as the interaction between Helen and the dog, suggests that he was her actual pet. The tonality of the painting is also very modern in terms of the clear blue spring sky and the whitish-blue outfit of the subject. By 1868 with the completion of their new country house, Possingworth in Sussex, with its grand picture gallery, the Huths further indulged their collecting, buying several more works from Watts. Huth also patronised Whistler,

commissioning another full-length portrait of his wife, eventually entitled *Arrangement in Black, No. 2: Portrait of Mrs. Louis Huth* (1872-3; private collection), which in its study of black on black was seemingly conceived as a direct contrast to Watts's sunny, optimistic outdoor study, full of light and colour. Whistler famously required numerous sittings from the delicate Helen, and when she complained that Watts never treated her that way, Whistler retorted: "And still, you know, you come to me!". Her comment sheds a light on the interaction between sitter and portraitist. All told, Watts painted four portraits of Helen, which seems to indicate a real rapport between her and the artist, an interpretation born out by the fact that in about 1866 Watts also painted Helen's sister Elizabeth when she was due to marry and leave the country. Ever attuned to the emotional attachment between the sitters, the artist believed that this portrait would serve as a comfort for Helen. Helen Rose Huth, nee Ogilvy, was the daughter of Thomas Ogilvy, a merchant from Corrimony, Inverness-shire, and Elizabeth Ogilvy, nee Wilson. She married the collector and Director of the London Assurance for Fire, Life and Marine Assurance, Louis Huth, who died in 1905. In 1907 she married Archibald Barwell How (1860-1947), son of William and Louisa Katharine How (nee Ardil), who was a classical scholar, a lecturer (1884) and Fellow (1886-1919) at Exeter College, Cambridge. He was Bursar of the College from 1892-1919, and became an Honorary fellow on his retirement in 1919.