

# Cambridge Military Hospital

## Mary Watts Frieze Panels

After the First World War, Mary Watts decorated the Chapel of the Cambridge Military Hospital at Aldershot. These gesso panels were later donated to Watts Gallery Trust after the Chapel closed in 1996.



# Cambridge Military Hospital and Chapel



Image: Historic postcard of Cambridge Military Hospital

The Cambridge Military Hospital was built from 1875 -1879 by the architects Messrs Martin & Wells and is an important example of early military pavilion ward hospital design. The hospital was the third major army hospital built in England during the Victorian era and is named after Prince George, Duke of Cambridge. It was made to accommodate two hundred and sixty-eight beds. Messrs Martin & Wells modelled the hospital on Florence Nightingale's designs of Herbert Hospital in Woolwich.

The hospital overlooks Wellesley to the north and Aldershot to the south. It is now a grade II listed building which has been converted into modern accommodation.

The Chapel was built in 1894 on the South side of the area surrounding the hospital. Originally the building was made up of two chambers, the mortuary and the chapel. Later, following the First World War Mary Watts was asked to decorate the Chapel.

## The Chapel decoration



Prior to Mary Watts' involvement, the interior of the Chapel was decorated with dark oak panels and painted a pale blue. The only embellishing feature was a banner reading 'I am the resurrection and the life'.

The Cambridge Military Hospital treated many casualties during the First World War. It was therefore decided that the interior of the chapel should be redecorated to transform it into a 'fitting resting place' for soldiers of the Great War. Having gained admiration for her work on the Watts Chapel, Mary Watts was invited to design a new interior.

The chapel was decorated by Mary Watts in an Art Nouveau style using the same techniques as in the interior of the Watts Chapel. The care taken in the work, which was described by local news as "a labour of love," displays the Wattses ethos of *Art for All*. Exactly when Mary Watts started her work on the Aldershot panels is unknown. However, the Aldershot News noted that the project was complete by 1920, just two years after the end of the war. The large vibrant gesso panels, much admired at the time of their creation, are a further testament to the skill and ability of Mary Watts as an artist.



When the Cambridge Military Hospital and the Chapel were closed in 1996 the panels were donated to Watts Gallery Trust. A conservation assessment revealed damage to the edges of the gesso panels and evidence of non-original overpaint. In preparation for display at Watts studios the panels have been conserved.



Images: Photographs of panels in Cambridge military hospital chapel , Watts Gallery Trust archive

## The conservation



Over fourteen months the panels were conserved and custom mounts created. During this process layers of overpainting were removed and conservators were able to expose the original paint work and gilding by Mary Watts. The original paint layer indicates that Mary Watts worked with others on the panels. These collaborators would likely have been villagers of Compton or workers from Compton Pottery.



The panels edges show evidence of the material Mary Watts used including felt and sash cord, soaked in plaster to build up the pieces. The gesso grosso material and stretcher structure is also visible at the back.



Conserving these large decorative friezes has provided a better understanding of the techniques used by Mary Watts and her collaborators, which would have also been used in the interior decoration of the Watts Chapel.



Images: Photographs taken during conservation work

# The Panels

## Detail and design



Images: Photographs of the altar panels

### The Altar:

The altar was constructed from breeze blocks with the terracotta panels made by the Potters' Arts Guild assembled and added on site. The altar was made up of three decorated panels that were divided by fluted columns. Each column was topped with a highly decorated boss, these protrusions were embellished with alternating leaf and insect designs.

Written at the time, possibly by Mary Watts herself is this description about the altar:

*The ALTAR, itself a symbol of the first sacrament and the only one instituted by Christ Himself - carries these symbolic thoughts -*

*The DOVE - the presence of the Holy Ghost*

*The PEACOCK - the hope of immortality*

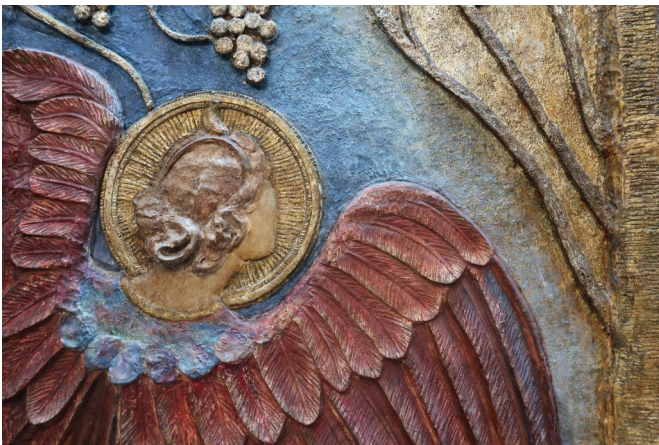
*The VINE - the Christian Tree of Life*

*The POMEGRANATE - the heart casting out its seed for the renewal of life eternal.*

The letters in the centre panel (A and W) may represent the words "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the First and the Last."

At the back of the altar, separating the cross and candles, were two panels also decorated with pomegranates and falling vines matching the larger panels below.

It is recorded that the altar panels were made with the assistance of a 'Miss Bell'. This is evidenced by the varied quality of different sections which suggest Mary Watts worked in part with 'Miss Bell' copying to create the other half.



### The Wall Panels:

Prior to the decoration of the panels, wooden frames were made ready to attach to the walls of the Chapel and sent to Limnerslease to be worked on by Mary Watts. The panels were constructed using chicken wire, with a layer of canvas stretched over the top, and a plaster and hemp layer added. The gesso grosso was then built up in thin layers to create the decoration. The raised decoration was made using felt and woven cord with further gesso layers added on top before the final stages of painting and gilding. Once installed in the Chapel, the joins were filled with gesso and the decoration completed.

The theme of the decoration is “the passing of life through suffering to song and praise in paradise.” The story begins on the end wall, opposite the altar with the parable of the fiery furnace as told in the book of Daniel, which was to show the “type of war experienced in the 1914-18 conflict.” Both side walls present the ‘Song of the three Holy Children,’ the children shown as angels with a banner flowing between them. The frieze leads from this to the figure of Christ above the altar, standing in glory with his hands raised in blessing.