



**John William Waterhouse RA (1849–1917)**

***Phyllis and Demophoön***

signed *J W Waterhouse* and dated *1905* on pedestal at lower right  
oil on canvas  
53 ½ x 36 in. (136.5 x 91.5 cm.)

### **Provenance**

Bought from the artist by Henry William ('Harry') Henderson Esq and remaining with him until his death in 1931.

Anonymous sale; [H.W. Henderson †]; Christie's, London, 11 May 1956, lot 88 (20 gns to Capt. R H H Saunders).

Anonymous sale; [Capt R H H Saunders]; Christie's, London, 2 August 1956, lot 333 (32 guineas to 'Dent' (picture dealer), by whom sold on to the Paris art market, 1957, where purchased by a private collector and by descent in the family until the present owner.

### **Exhibited**

London, Royal Academy, 1907, no. 232.

London, Royal Academy, *Exhibition of Works by Recently Deceased Members of the Royal Academy*, Winter 1922, no. 95, lent by H. W. Henderson Esq.

### **Literature**

R.E.D. Sketchley, 'The Art of J.W. Waterhouse, RA', *Art Journal*, Christmas Number, 1909, p. 23, full-page b/w illustration on p. 28.

A.L. Baldry, 'Some Recent Work by Mr. J.W. Waterhouse, R.A.', *The Studio*, 15 August 1911, 53: 221, pp. 180, 183, full-page b/w illustration on p. 182.

A. Hobson, *The Art and Life of J W Waterhouse, RA*, London, 1980, pp. 125–127, cat. 153, b/w illustration at pl. 124.

A. Hobson, *J W Waterhouse*, London, 1989, p. 89.

P. Trippi, *J W Waterhouse*, London, 2002, pp. 193–195, b/w illustration at pl. 165.

The rediscovery of J W Waterhouse's masterpiece *Phyllis and Demophoön*, which has not been seen in public for decades nor even illustrated in colour, is truly a cause for celebration. Beauty, rich colouring, and dynamic brushwork are skillfully employed by the artist to educe a touching subject that is quintessentially Waterhouse. Here, as in many of his mature masterworks, the artist chastely evokes the human passions of love, betrayal, remorse, and forgiveness as transmitted to us through myth, legend, and literature.

As with his treatments of *Ariadne* (1898), *Medea* (1907), and *Penelope* (1912), Waterhouse took as his source a narrative from Ovid's *Heroides*, a volume of poems recounting the ordeals that various women endure on account of the actions (or inactions) of men. After the conquest of Troy by the Greeks, the hero Demophoön, King of Athens and son of Theseus, during his journey home visited the Thracian court, where he fell in love with the Thracian king's daughter, Phyllis (perhaps we should have expected trouble to ensue, for his father Theseus had previously deserted Ariadne, daughter of the Cretan King Minos, on the island of Naxos). Demophoön falls in love with Phyllis and they agree to marry, but Demophoön is duty bound to return home and so departs, promising to return for Phyllis. Phyllis presents him with a casket asking him only to open it when he has given up all hope of returning to her. When he fails to keep his promise, one



tradition has it that Phyllis hangs herself in despair and the gods take pity on the unfortunate girl transforming her into an almond tree. Jolted into action after opening the casket Phyllis had given him, Demophoön returns to Thrace and remorsefully embraces the tree, which has remained barren until now. Suddenly, it sprouts the blossoms and leaves seen here, and although Phyllis emerges to forgive her faithless lover, she cannot regain human form.

Thanks to Waterhouse's characteristic discretion, viewers grasp the powerful pathos of this reunion without having to witness Phyllis's previous anguish or suicide. She gazes down intently, yet does not threaten, as she does in Edward Burne-Jones's earlier, and widely noticed, treatments of this story (1870 and 1882). In Burne-Jones's later version, *The Tree of Forgiveness*, 1882, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool (fig. 1), Phyllis embraces Demophoön aggressively, and the figures' Michelangelesque nudity adds an erotic tone to their re-encounter. By contrast, Waterhouse's reunion is restrained, even dignified.



Fig 1.

*Phyllis and Demophoön* demonstrates Waterhouse's longstanding fascination with another of Ovid's themes—metamorphoses—specifically the magical transformation of human beings into flowers, trees, and animals. He pursued this theme in earnest as early as 1893 with *A Hamadryad*,

continuing it right through until his death from liver cancer in 1917. Also evident here is Waterhouse's close association of women with flowers, variously their beauty, simplicity, inevitable decay, and function as vessels of new growth. These themes, along with the quintessentially Romantic one of unfulfilled love, were clearly on Waterhouse's mind in the mid-1900s: we know this because, at the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition of 1907, he exhibited both *Phyllis and Demophoön* and *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (fig. 2, Private Collection). In the latter, the Keatsian heroine buries her murdered lover's head in the plant that she waters with her tears. At the Academy a year later, Waterhouse exhibited *Apollo and Daphne* (fig. 3, Private Collection) in which the heroine eludes the amorous Greek god only by becoming a blossoming laurel tree.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Unusually for Waterhouse, a rich array of preparatory drawings and oil sketches for *Phyllis and Demophoön* have survived. Most intriguing is his decision—confirmed by several pencil drawings in his sketchbooks now in the Victoria and Albert Museum—to reverse the composition; in its earliest incarnation, the tree appears on the left, with Phyllis gazing downward toward our right (fig. 4), along with another showing Waterhouse's final arrangement (fig. 5). It is unclear why Waterhouse made this change, yet the final result is extremely satisfying: his composition pivots on the heartbreaking gaze exchanged by the lovers, a device he had been refining since his masterpieces of the previous decade, *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891, National Gallery of Victoria) and *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896, Manchester Art Gallery, fig. 6). In fact, Demophoön was modeled by the same beardless youth who posed as Hylas, raising the possibility that Waterhouse worked from older drawings he had kept in his studio, a chalk study of Demophoön's head was sold at auction, 1994.



Waterhouse's determination to get this composition right is further confirmed by the inclusion of three large, unsold oil studies in his 1926 studio sale (Hobson, *op.cit.*, 1980, nos. 154, 155, 156). Alas, all remain untraced, but it would be fascinating to compare them with this final version, which was signed and dated in 1905. It remains a mystery why Waterhouse did not send this painting to the Royal Academy's subsequent Summer Exhibition, which opened in May 1906, when he only submitted *The Danaïdes* (Aberdeen Art Gallery).

When it finally appeared at the Royal Academy in the summer of 1907, *Phyllis and Demophoön* was promptly acquired by Henry William ("Harry") Henderson (1862–1931), who lived at West Woodhay House, near Newbury, Berkshire. He had discovered Waterhouse's genius through his older brother, the financier Sir Alexander Henderson (1850–1934), who had been collecting this artist's work since the 1880s. Harry ultimately became an equally enthusiastic patron: at the Royal Academy in 1907 he bought not only *Phyllis and Demophoön*, but also *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*. He represented his extended family at Waterhouse's funeral in 1917, and ultimately owned nearly 20 works by his friend. Further research is needed into the deep friendships that Waterhouse formed with several of the Hendersons, and would perhaps shed light on some of his subject choices during his later career.



Fig 4.



Fig 5.

Finally, we must remark upon the extraordinary beauty of *Phyllis and Demophoön*. Here we admire Waterhouse's deft draftsmanship, particularly evident in the flesh and drapery, the delicate red and pink lake pigments he relished, the nearly vapourous effect of the delicate blue fabric that drapes Phyllis's lower body within the tree, the spiky, twisting tree branches that appear throughout his sketchbooks, and the Italian pines, babbling brook, green grass, purple crocuses and blue sky he preferred in his final decade. Together these elements blend into what Gleeson White, first editor of *The Studio* magazine, so eloquently described in his book *The Master Painters of Britain* (1898):

... Mr. Waterhouse has evolved a conventional treatment of his own, which, if at first it owed somewhat to the middle period of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, is now characterised by entirely distinct feeling. His types are not drawn from early Italian pictures; his costumes cannot be ascribed to any definite period. He does not attempt to make his background exactly like nature, nor to pose his models in studio light amid scenery painted in the

open. His pictures are decorative panels of colour, less conventional than tapestry, less flat than if they were mural decoration, but all the same, not openings through a wall looking into the real world or the world of fancy, but panels self-complete with beauty of line, beauty of mass, and beauty of colour as colour, without the relation of any of these qualities to natural fact insisted upon.

The reappearance from obscurity of *Phyllis and Demophoön*, a work which was previously only known from black and white illustrations, must rank as one of the most important rediscoveries of the late Victorian period and warrants a reappraisal of its position amongst the artist's *oeuvre*. The painting can certainly be acknowledged as one of the artist's most pleasing and successful works, presenting one of his favourite motifs, that of the metamorphosis of an ill-fated young woman, in a quintessentially discreet manner. This, combined with Waterhouse's exquisite use of colour and skillful draftsmanship, has resulted in a *tour de force*. Its rediscovery provides collectors with a rare opportunity to purchase one of Waterhouse's overlooked masterpieces.

We are grateful to Peter Trippi for his help in preparing this essay.



Fig 6.