

**For immediate release:**

## ***A Russian Fairytale: The Art and Craft of Elena Polenova***

**Watts Gallery Exhibition**

**18 November 2014 to 8 February 2015**

*“My idea is daring but terribly alluring. In a series of watercolours I would like to express the Russian people’s poetic view of nature – the close link between the soil and the art that grows from it. I will work with fairytales, songs, poetic superstitions. I wish to bring to light and express the images that feed Russian imagination.”*

(Elena Polenova, 1886)

*A Russian Fairytale: The Art and Craft of Elena Polenova* will be the first major retrospective outside Russia to explore the career of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russian painter and designer, Elena Polenova. Showcasing furniture designed by Elena alongside her paintings of landscapes and folk-tale illustrations, the exhibition will demonstrate Polenova’s important role in the Russian craft revival of the 1880s.

Elena Polenova was part of the generation of artists who rediscovered the folk traditions of the Moscow region – its wooden architecture, furniture and children’s toys; its icons and peasant decorations; and its vibrant tradition of folk stories and fairytales.

Elena Polenova was the younger sister of one of Russia’s most famous artists, Vasily Polenov (1844 – 1927). During the 1870s and 1880s, Elena and Vasily spent time at Abramtsevo, an artistic colony located in a rural setting outside Moscow, that sought to recapture the quality and spirit of medieval Russian art. Here, Polenova reinterpreted traditional folk patterns and developed these into fashionable designs for handmade wooden furniture produced by local people in carpentry workshops run by Polenova, the results of their labours being sold in chic Moscow boutiques.

Although Elena Polenova (1850 – 1898) and Mary Watts (1849 – 1938) never met, extraordinary parallels between the two artists’ creative lives have contributed to a partnership between the Polenov State Museum in Russia and Watts Gallery. This exhibition celebrates the partnership and is the culmination of a series of initiatives between both organisations during the Anglo-Russian Year of Culture 2014.

Just as Elena worked with local craftsmen to produce furniture, at the same time in England, Mary Watts became involved with the Home Arts and Industries Association, a pre-cursor to the Arts and Crafts Movement. Like Abramtsevo, the Association sought to revive traditional crafts that were under threat from mechanisation.

Mary taught clay-modelling to shoe-blacks in London’s East End, and when Mary and her husband, the great Victorian artist George Frederic Watts (1817 – 1904) moved to the village of Compton in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Mary recognised that craft skills could inspire and importantly return much needed employment to this rural community.

Having found a seam of clay in the grounds of Limnerslease, the Arts and Crafts house and studios designed by Ernest George for the recently married G.F. and Mary Watts, Mary encouraged local people

to attend free terracotta modelling classes. Led by Mary and with their newly learned skills, 70 villagers collaborated to create the Grade I-listed Watts Cemetery Chapel.

Mary then helped the villagers to establish the Compton Potters' Arts Guild, a pottery co-operative that became highly esteemed, supplying Liberty & Co and receiving commissions from, amongst others, Lutyens and Clough Williams-Ellis. The Compton Pottery flourished and provided employment in the village until 1956.

Nicholas Tromans, Curator, Watts Gallery, said: "The artistic and ideological affinities between Elena Polenova and Mary Watts are fascinating. Both looked to the folk art traditions of their native countries in order to make dynamic contributions to modern art and design across a very broad range of media from book illustrations to architecture."

"At Polenovo, Russia we have discovered a parallel artists' village which shares with Compton a vision of Art for All. This exhibition is part of a programme of initiatives that will explore the Arts & Crafts movement and ethos across Europe, to increase opportunities for new audiences to enjoy and discover artistic legacies that have an enduring and unique sense of place."

Natalia Murray, lecturer at the Courtauld Institute, who will curate the exhibition in collaboration with Nicholas Tromans, added: "Elena Polenova was a leading figure in the Arts and Crafts movement in Russia, arguably its most important member. The movement began in the 1880s with initiatives to revive national traditions in art, such as those of Russia's medieval and pagan past, and Russian 'folk' or peasant art. Polenova was also a talented watercolourist, textile designer and illustrator of children's fairy tales."

"Ultimately, Polenova's artistic reworking of traditional Russian folk culture was of seminal importance in the early development of Modernist art in Russia."

For further information, [www.wattsgallery.org.uk](http://www.wattsgallery.org.uk).

- ENDS -

#### **FOR FURTHER PRESS INFORMATION:**

**Tamsin Williams – Wigwam – [tamsin@wigwampr.com](mailto:tamsin@wigwampr.com) – 01483 563562 – 07939 651252**

#### **Notes to Editors:**

##### **Watts Gallery and Polenovo**

Having identified a shared vision, Watts Gallery and Polenovo are embarking on a number of joint activities to promote their founding artists and explore the international links of the Arts & Crafts movement.

Watts Gallery Trust is currently aiming to secure the home and studio of G F Watts to complete an Artists' Village consisting of the Watts Gallery, the Old Pottery, the Chapel and Limnerslease – the Watts house and studio. As part of this campaign, Watts Gallery Trustees are proposing the development of Compton as a centre for exploring the international Arts & Crafts movement. This development has been encouraged and fostered by the V&A museum in London and relationships with Poland, Ireland, Scotland and the US have been instigated. The relationship with Polenovo forms part of this development.

Polenovo is a very successful visitor destination and unique in being the only family run arts heritage site in Russia. It remains largely unknown abroad, however, and the Polenov family wish to establish international connections for the museum and raise its profile on an international stage.

## **Abramtsevo**

Originally owned by author Sergei Aksakov, other writers and artists — such as Nikolai Gogol — at first came there as his guests. Under Aksakov, visitors to the estate discussed ways of ridding Russian art of Western influences to revive a purely national style. In 1870, eleven years after Aksakov's death, it was purchased by Savva Mamontov, a wealthy industrialist and patron of the arts.

Under Mamontov, Russian themes and folk art flourished there. During the 1870s and 1880s, Abramtsevo hosted a colony of artists who sought to recapture the quality and spirit of medieval Russian art in the manner parallel to the Arts and Crafts movement in Great Britain. Several workshops were set up there to produce handmade furniture, ceramic tiles, and silks imbued with traditional Russian imagery and themes.

Working together in a cooperative spirit, the artists Vasily Polenov and Viktor Vasnetsov designed a plain but picturesque church, with murals painted by Polenov, Vasnetsov and his brother, a gilded iconostasis by Illya Repin and Mikhail Nesterov, and folklore-inspired sculptures by Viktor Hartmann and Mark Antokolsky.

Towards the turn of the 20th Century, drama and opera on Russian folklore themes were produced in Abramtsevo by the likes of Konstantin Stanislavsky, with sets contributed by Vasnetsov, Mikhail Vrubel and other distinguished artists.

## **Home Arts and Industries Association**

The Home Arts and Industries Association was an organisation that functioned as a precursor to the Art Workers Guild in the development of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain. It was founded in 1884 by Eglantyne Louisa Jebb who was inspired by an initiative of Charles Godfrey Leland in Philadelphia. Another leading member was the designer Mary Fraser Tytler (later Mary Watts). The organisation sought to revive traditional rural crafts which were threatened by the mechanisation of production and by increasing urbanization. In conformity with the thinking of John Ruskin and with Arts and Crafts philosophy, supporters believed that flourishing traditional crafts helped sustain rural communities and provided workers with far more personal satisfaction than was possible for factory workers. The Association funded schools and organised marketing opportunities for craftspeople

## **The Anglo-Russian Year of Culture 2014**

The Anglo-Russian Year of Culture aims to:

- Encourage a greater understanding and appreciation of each other's cultural life and achievements;
- Encourage recognition of the rich and diverse cultural history of the other and the inspiration this can provide for current and future generations;
- Encourage both countries to recognise the importance of inspiring young people to participate in the development of stronger, positive relations between their peoples, their institutions and their governments.

The definition of “culture” includes the arts and creative industries; education; science and language.

