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EST. 1817

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**Sir William Blake Richmond, RA** (London  
1842 – 1921)

*The Watchers*

Signed and inscribed '[W]atchers/W.B.  
Richmond' (on remnants of an old label attached  
to the reverse)

Oil on panel

11 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 24 in. (29.9 x 61 cm.)



## Provenance

Sir Edmund Verney, Claydon, Buckinghamshire.  
Thence by descent, until sold in 2018.

## Exhibited

Paris, Universal Exhibition, 1878, British Fine Art Section, no. 230, as *Angel Watchers*.  
London, New Gallery, *Works of Sir William B Richmond KGB*, 1900-1901, no. 182.

## Literature

Simon Reynolds, *William Blake Richmond, An Artist's Life 1842-1921*, Norwich, 1995, pp. 111 and 119,  
colour plate XIII.

Probably Richmond's most symbolically numinous painting is a small oil entitled *The Watchers*, or *Angels Watching over a Dead Painter*, started in 1873 and finished 1876. It depicts three completely naked angels, beautiful youths with large red wings, two seated on the floor and one leaning through a loggia window with the last light of evening over an Italianate landscape behind him. Behind the seated angels are frescoes of the *Resurrection* and the *Descent from the Cross*; beneath the window, on a bier, lies a corpse in a shroud, the artist, brilliantly lit in the evening light. This finely balanced if esoteric composition powerfully

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juxtaposes death with an eternal after-life, suggested in the twilight sky, and the very real corporeality of the naked bronzed youths in the foreground.'

(Simon Reynolds, *William Blake Richmond, An Artist's Life*, p. 111)

William Blake Richmond, son of the portraitist George Richmond RA, studied at the Royal Academy Schools in the early 1860s; influenced by his father and by Sir John Everett Millais, Richmond soon gained a reputation as a portraitist of children in the Pre-Raphaelite manner.

On 21 October 1864, Richmond married the beautiful Charlotte Foster; after an all too brief love affair, Charlotte died in his arms on 13 December 1865, taken by tuberculosis. Richmond himself contracted tuberculosis, but he largely recovered during his Italian sojourn in 1866-1869. Although Richmond remarried in 1867, Charlotte remained the great love of his life.

While in Rome, Richmond shed his Pre-Raphaelite style in favour of European Classicism, itself moving into Symbolism. His artistic influences were Frederic, Lord Leighton, Giovanni Costa, George Heming Mason and the master of emerging Symbolism, Arnold Böcklin. Richmond had started to paint on a gigantic scale in works such as *The Procession of Bacchus* of 1866-9 and *The Bowlers* of 1872.

In 1870 Richmond moved into Beaver Lodge, Hammersmith, but he was both unwell and yearning for his lost days in Rome. He had glorified that in Italy he could hire models who would pose in the nude; all his figures were, like Leighton's, first drawn in the nude. In 1872, the young Italian model Gaetano Meo, recommended by Mason, called at Beaver Lodge to see if he could sit for this renowned *Italophile*. A beautiful young lady received him and indicated where Richmond could be found in his studio. Asking Gaetano Meo how he got into the house, Richmond was astonished at Meo's description of the lady who let him in; at the time Clara, Mrs Richmond, was out. The introduction led Meo to become Richmond's chief model and lifelong friend. One day, leafing through Richmond's drawings, Meo found some of the late Charlotte; turning to his master he advised that this was the lady who had welcomed him. This was one of a number of reported ghostly sightings at Beaver Lodge.

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*The Watchers* was one of three works which Richmond included in the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1878, catalogued as *Angel Watchers*; this was the first Continental Exhibition in which Richmond participated.

The work remained unsold, Richmond noting in his diary on 23 December, 'The Watchers unsold, oh dear, it would help me to have a bit of help from outside'. European Symbolism was not welcome in Britain, especially before Leighton's growing success and the advent of the Grosvenor Gallery, and later the New Gallery (where Richmond included the present picture in his retrospective exhibition of 1900).

Fortunately, Captain Edmund Verney – a long standing family friend – came to Richmond's rescue in the spring of 1879 when he agreed to purchase *The Watchers* for £110 to include the £10 cost of the frame. Verney's wife, Lady Margaret Hay-Williams had died and *The Watchers* was to hang beneath Richmond's portrait of her, painted in 1873. He wrote, 'If you have it I shall be pleased to think of my pet picture in the hands of old friends'; and in a subsequent letter 'I value the place where the picture is to go, and I still more value the very kind and sincere pleasure that you say it will give to your wife'.

Simon Reynolds notes: 'I am convinced that *The Watchers* depicts the corpse of Charlotte, dead some ten years, with a very Italian background surrounding her; the naked angels are more than likely depictions of Gaetano Meo, welcomed as he was into the intimacy of Richmond's life'.