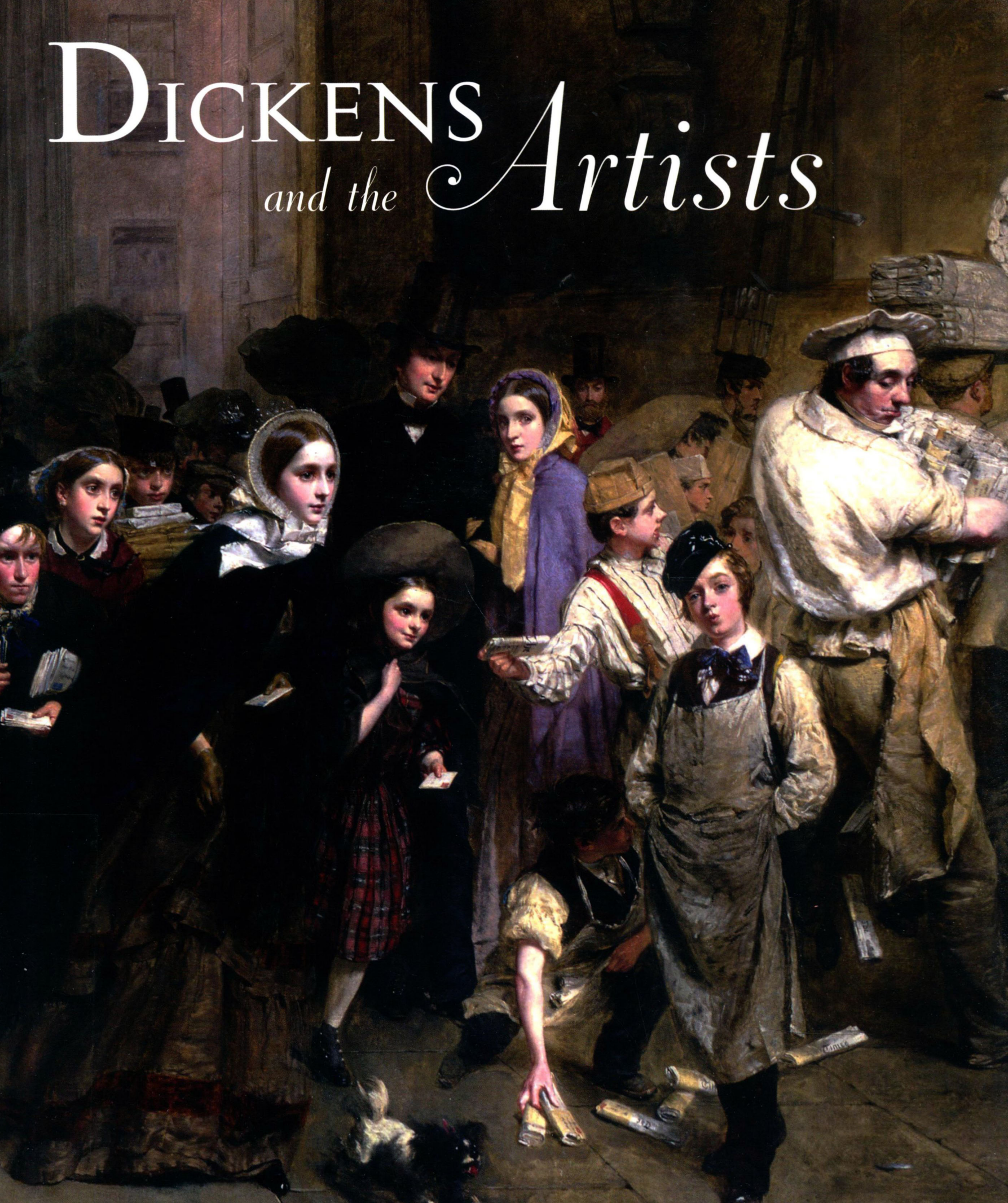
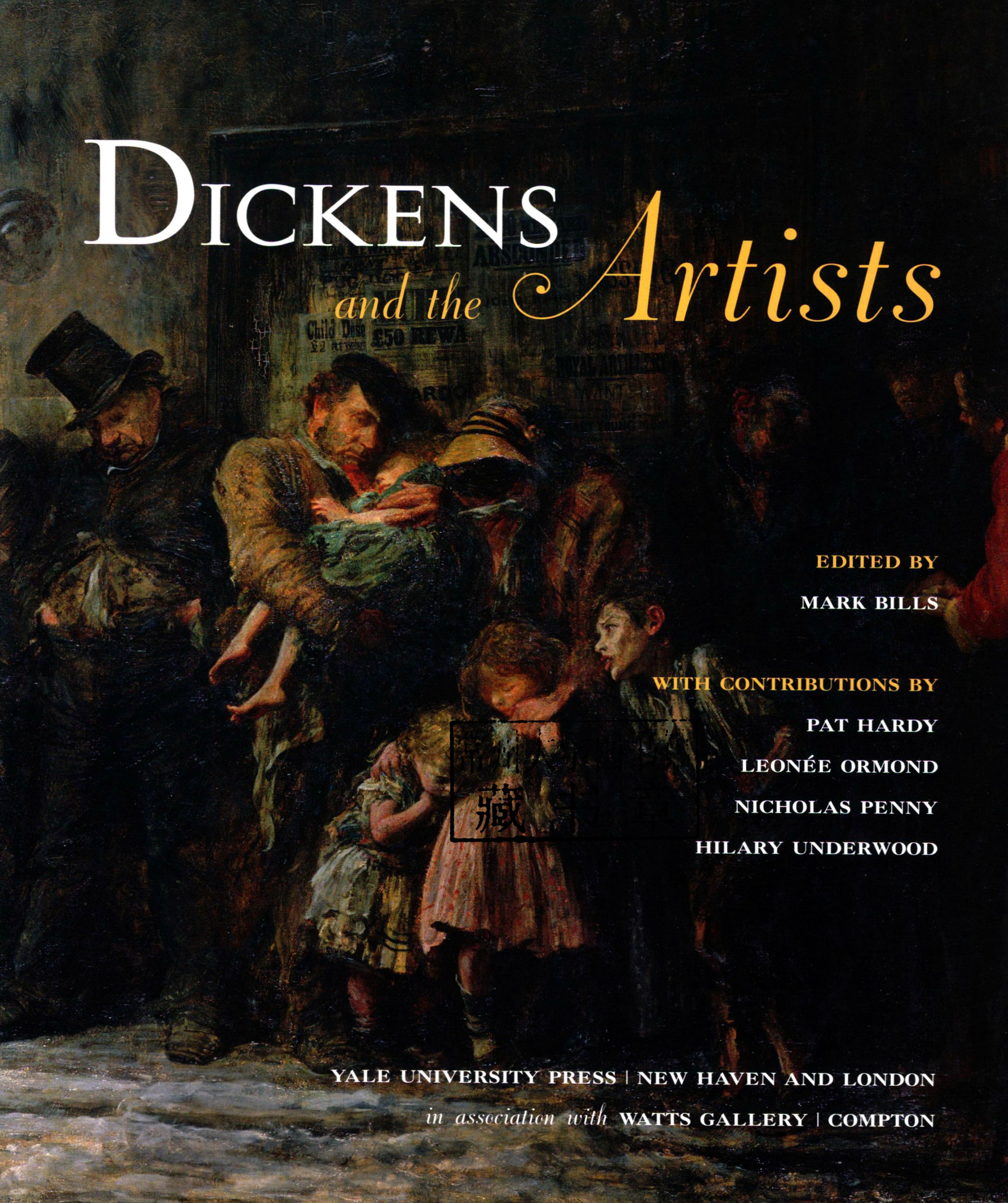


DICKENS *and the Artists*





DICKENS *and the Artists*

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Frontispiece: Sir Samuel Luke Fildes, *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* (detail of fig. 103)

Pages vi and viii: Photographs of Charles Dickens taken by John and Charles Watkins, probably late 1850s

DICKENS AND THE ARTISTS





FOREWORD

In reviewing the role of Watts Gallery for another century following its major restoration, it was appropriate to revert to the vision of its founders, who saw Watts Gallery as an opportunity to promote the understanding and appreciation of G.F. Watts and Mary Seton Watts in the context of the nineteenth century.

The exhibition of *Dickens and the Artists* is an excellent example of this founding vision and takes further the aspiration of the current Trustees to establish Compton as a centre for exploring Victorian art, social history, craft and design. Watts and Mary Watts, through their legacy in Compton, demonstrated the ideas, beliefs, society and art of the nineteenth century. The Chapel, the Pottery, Limnerslease (Watts's house and studio), the hostel for apprentice potters and the Gallery represent a campus where the public and students can research and enjoy the values, context and contemporary resonance of the past.

We are extremely grateful to Nicholas Penny, Director of the National Gallery, who built on the momentum of his excellent Watts Lecture given in 2010, which now appears as an essay in this book. We are also very grateful to the institutional and private lenders who have made this exhibition possible.

As we ponder the impact of social realism depicted by great artists of the nineteenth century it is interesting and sometimes chilling to note the resonance with the twenty-first century. We hope that through our work at Watts Gallery, and our plans for bringing Watts's house and studio in to the public domain, the public will be able to draw from the past – the literature, ideas, art and society – to inform our thinking, learning and experience for the future.

Perdita Hunt
Director of Watts Gallery



DICKENS 2012

CELEBRATING DICKENS'S BICENTENARY

A critic of the young Dickens once said the writer 'would go up like a rocket and come down like a stick'. In 2012, as we are celebrating the bicentenary of the author's birth, one thing seems to be sure: that rocket will not come down again. One hundred and seventy-five years after he first shot to fame at the age of twenty-five, Charles Dickens continues to be regarded as one of the world's finest authors and storytellers and one of the most influential figures this country has ever produced. I am delighted that Dickens 2012, our campaign to bring together partners from the creative industries from around the world to celebrate the Victorian author, is widely recognized as one of the great cultural initiatives in this important year for London and the UK. Internationally Dickens continues to be one of the most influential ambassadors for British culture, and in 2012 readers, authors, actors and artists around the world are honouring Dickens with a vast programme of bicentennial projects that I am sure will be as memorable as Dickens's own creations.

Against the background of budget cuts within the arts and culture sector, it is an extraordinary achievement that all Dickens 2012 initiatives and projects are scheduled to be delivered in the bicentenary year. It clearly shows the dedication and commitment to Dickens among those who work in the heritage and creative industries. Dickens 2012 demonstrates how much can be achieved through partnerships and collaborative projects: many of the Dickens activities that people take part in during 2012 are the result of organizations working together to deliver outstanding, innovative and inspiring programmes and exhibitions.

Dickens and the Artists explores the significant connection between Charles Dickens and visual art. Not only is Dickens an immensely visual writer, he admired artists, many of whom he counted as close friends. He also had an enormous influence on artists and for the first time this connection will be explored through an exhibition held at the recently restored Watts Gallery in Compton, Surrey. It is fitting that Dickens 2012 brings fresh perspectives on Dickens, who continues to fascinate a new and growing audience.

Dr Florian Schweizer
Director, The Charles Dickens Museum
Project Director, Dickens 2012

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I would like to thank all staff at Watts Gallery who contributed to the exhibition and its associated events. In effect that means everyone. In particular thanks go to Mary McMahon, Glynis Paxton, Janet Wilkinson and Dr Desna Greenhow who worked on the exhibition. Thanks too to the trustees of Watts Gallery who guide and support our work here. Lenders have been essential and most generous in their loans. The support of Florian Schweizer of the Dickens Museum has meant that we could have important works relating to Dickens. Thanks are due to the Victoria and Albert Museum for their loans from the important John Forster collection, and to Alison Smith and Tate Britain, as well as to Bradford Museums and Galleries, London Metropolitan Archives, Museum of London, National Portrait Gallery, Royal Holloway College, Royal Pavilion Brighton and Sheffield Museums and Galleries. Thanks to many individuals who have helped, including private collectors. I am grateful for the help of Ron Lander and Henry Sotheran Limited, London, Simon Edsors of the Fine Art Society, Coutts and Pieter Van der Merwe. The University of Surrey is an important partner and I am particularly grateful to Greg Tate for his development of the conference *Dickens and the Visual Imagination*. Finally, thank you to all those who thought that Dickens and the visual arts was a good idea for a book and an exhibition.

Mark Bills
Curator of Watts Gallery



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INTRODUCTION

MARK BILLS

There is no writer, in my opinion, who is *so* much a painter and a black-and-white artist as Dickens.¹ (Vincent Van Gogh, March 1883)

He had no doubt a strong natural instinct for art, and there are in many of his books descriptions of sunsets, storms, river scenes, old cathedral towns, and landscapes, scenes of sweet and peaceful content, or of dark clouds and sinister suggestion, which only a writer with an innate feeling for artistic effect could possibly have described, and he had also a very just and accurate eye, and a judgement that was entirely his own, and owed nothing to any outside opinion.²

Kate Perugini, the daughter of Charles Dickens, wrote the latter words about her father in 1903. Herself an artist and twice married, each time to an artist, she knew the strength and limitations of Dickens's writing on art. Anyone who has read a novel by Dickens knows what a remarkably visual writer he is, but Kate Perugini was in a unique position to understand what the author felt about art and artists. For although Dickens was a very visual writer and had a large number of artist friends, he didn't write very much about art, even though he must have thought quite a lot about it.

His novels, unlike those of William Makepeace Thackeray and Wilkie Collins, do not have main characters as artists or plots set amid the art world. We meet the charmingly amateur miniature painter Miss La Creevy in *Nicholas Nickleby*, who declares 'Ah! The difficulties of Art, my dear, are great' and puts portraits into two categories, 'the serious and the smirk'.³ The less pleasant Henry Gowan is encountered in *Little Dorrit*, but dabblers aside, artists are rare in Dickens's works. A short story entitled 'The Ghost of Art', which appeared in his weekly journal *Household Words*, comically gives a first-person account of a lawyer living in Temple Bar with an interest in painting. He meets an artist's model who grows an expressive beard, an image that haunts and taints his viewing of pictures. At the beginning of the story Dickens perhaps gives us a little of himself:

FIG. 1
(George) Herbert Watkins,
Charles Dickens, 1858,
photograph. Rob Dickins
Collection, Watts Gallery
Archive



FIG. 2
 Hablot Knight Browne,
 'Great excitement of Miss
 Kenwigs at the hair dresser's
 shop', 1838, etching. Original
 illustration from *Nicholas
 Nickleby*

It is necessary that I should observe that I have a great delight in pictures. I am no painter myself, but I have studied pictures and written about them. I have seen all the most famous pictures in the world; my education and reading have been sufficiently general to possess me beforehand with a knowledge of most of the subjects to which a Painter is likely to have recourse; and, although I might be in some doubt as to the rightful fashion of the scabbard of King Lear's sword, for instance, I think I should know King Lear tolerably well, if I happened to meet with him.⁴

Unlike Dickens, though, the character expresses the view of those who slavishly followed the accepted taste of the day:

I go to all the Modern Exhibitions every season, and of course I revere the Royal Academy. I stand by its forty Academical articles almost as firmly as I stand by

the thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. I am convinced that in neither case could there be, by any rightful possibility, one article more or less.⁵

Dickens also used *Household Words* for a more direct criticism of the art that appeared on the Academy walls in 'Old Lamps for New Ones', the now notorious piece about John Everett Millais' painting, *Christ in the House of His Parents* (see pp. 53–4).⁶ It cannot be ignored, but it has often been wrongly taken as the defining text of Dickens as an art critic. His daughter Kate Perugini, in her articles on her father's artistic taste, sought to explain the severity of his judgement of visual art by the fact that he was such a visual writer. She calls it 'the excessive realism of his mental vision', the great and vivid imagination of the author:

That he always *saw* what he had read of, or heard about, even when he was quite a child, is pretty certain. Thus the picture in his own mind of any subject which attracted him was often so vivid as to preclude the possibility of its being conceived in any other way than the one his own fancy had created, and it was perhaps this curious mental faculty that caused him to write so severe a critique of Millais' 'Carpenter's Shop'.⁷

Dickens developed a very personal taste in art that reflected his own writing and is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the control that he exerted over the illustrators who created the plates for his novels. The illustration, 'Great excitement of Miss Kenwigs at the hair dresser's shop' by Hablot Browne (fig. 2), depicts a lively scene from *Nicholas Nickleby* and Dickens was keen that it was realized in the way that he had imagined it. The level of detail is revealed in the author's instruction to the illustrator that he depict the 'underbred attendant with his hair parted down the middle, and frizzed up into curls at the sides'.⁸

Such 'mental faculty' perhaps both marred and enhanced the way he saw art. There was clearly an intense interest, which is only to be expected in a writer who was so profoundly affected by the visual world. In his writings and particularly his letters we can discover something of his personal opinions. More publicly in his travelogue *Pictures from Italy* we find his views on the Old Masters, a subject discussed in this book by Nicholas Penny in his essay 'Dickens and Philistinism'.

On contemporary art Dickens held his own opinions but must have been swayed by his strong friendships with artists such as Daniel Maclise, William Powell Frith, Augustus Egg, Frank and Marcus Stone, and Clarkson Stanfield, to name but a few. The Dickens scholar, Leonée Ormond, explores his view of the art being created in his lifetime and his associations with artists in her essay 'Dickens and Contemporary Art'.

Dickens was also very interested in the great illustrators of the day, revealing much about the author's opinions on art. In two essays, one on George Cruikshank, the other



FIG. 3
Dickens's Dining Room at
Gad's Hill showing his art
collection. Watts Gallery
Archive

on John Leech, Dickens expresses his attitude that great illustration is on a par with great art and writes of the absurdity of their exclusion from the Royal Academy.⁹ Although it is not the focus of this book to discuss the illustrations in Dickens's novels, it does examine paintings inspired by his novels. Throughout his lifetime, in particular, the scenes and characterizations in his novels moved a number of artists to paint them, and Hilary Underwood's essay 'Dickens Subjects in Victorian Art' discusses this phenomenon.

The influence of Dickens was not limited to such 'literal translations' and was felt in the paintings of modern life that flourished in the mid-nineteenth century and the social-realist movement that followed shortly after his death. In his essay on Cruikshank Dickens's comparison of him to William Hogarth is an important one, confirming Dickens's admiration of the eighteenth-century master as well as giving a sophisticated reading of the artist's popular visual storytelling. It underlines his influence on artists who were part of this strong narrative tradition and who looked to contemporary literature for their sources. My essay 'Dickens and the Painting of Modern Life' considers these painters, particularly William Powell Frith, and the influence Dickens had upon them. As the critic John Ruskin wrote of Frith's great *Derby Day*, 'it is a kind of a cross between John Leech and Wilkie, with a dash of daguerreotype here and there, and some pretty seasoning with Dickens' sentiment'.¹⁰