

STUDIES OF SENTIMENT:

JOHN WHITE ALEXANDER'S DEPICTIONS OF GILDED AGE MEN AND WOMEN

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ASHTON NICOLE SMITH

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Thesis Approved:

Major Professor, Dr. Mark Thistlethwaite, Kay and Velma Kimbell Chair of Art History

Dr. Jessica Fripp, Assistant Professor of Art History

Sue Canterbury, The Pauline Gill Sullivan Associate Curator of American Art,
Dallas Museum of Art

Dr. Joseph Butler, Associate Dean for the College of Fine Arts

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INTRODUCTION

The American painter John White Alexander (1856-1915) is today best known, as he was in his own time, for his paintings of women caught in a state of emotion or thought and wearing large, swirling gowns of deep gemstone colors dramatized by sweeping, expressionistic lines. He is also remembered for his portraiture, as he relied upon portrait commissions both financially and as a vehicle to carry forth his reputation through the ever-increasing sphere of bourgeois, upper-class American society. His portraiture is best understood as a combination between an objective likeness of his sitter and a study of, what he termed, sentiment, culminating in what has been labeled a “subject picture.” Alexander, when he began serially exploring this nuanced portrait-type in the mid-1880s, stated that he wished to paint “a subject and not a simple portrait. . . . It is very simple—only one figure but in it I want to express a sentiment.”¹

No study, aside from one overarching and biographical book on the artist published by Mary Anne Goley in 2018, attempts to place Alexander’s portraits in the context of his chronic exploration of sentiment, especially his images of men despite their similarity in formulaic composition and artistic intention to those of women. Almost all previous art historical studies of Alexander focus on his images of women, partially because of his overwhelming number of canvases that feature lone or sometimes two females. Art historians have even claimed that his career was dedicated to femininity in general.² While women often receive sentimental treatment, Alexander’s portraits of men, a class societally polarized against effeminate, demasculinizing “sentiment” or “sentimentality,” retain a sentiment/al, subjective nature imbued

¹ Mary Anne Goley, *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age* (London and New York: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2018), 31.

² Julie Anne Springer, “Art and the Feminine Muse: Women in Interiors by John White Alexander,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 6, no. 2 (Autumn, 1985-Winter, 1986): 6.

into their objective likeness. By situating Alexander's oeuvre, with particular emphasis on his decorative pictures and his commissioned high-society portraiture, within the discourse of Gilded Age notions of sentiment, Alexander's work stands out as a surprisingly democratic exploration of the term, or more specifically *his* use of the word "sentiment." If scholars use "sentiment" or "sentimental" in reference to Alexander's work, most give no basis for what they mean by this catch-all, connotatively-laden term or how it relates to the political, artistic, and literary circles he associated with or helped form. This thesis aims to bridge the disparity from the general use of "sentiment" to the more specific intention Alexander had in mind.

The few examples of Alexander's studies of sentiment featuring men I will explore include portraits of the burgeoning business class and well-known artists, such as James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) and Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), and an ambiguous and understudied self-portrait of the artist titled *The Tenth Muse* (1909). I want to stress that I am attempting to define sentiment as Alexander would have by looking at the political, literary, and social contexts of his era, and then relate his formulaic study of sentiment initially to images of women and more radically to his male portraits.

I look first at the societal conflation between and construction of femininity and sentimentality with direct reference to Alexander's oeuvre and his late nineteenth-century context. Then I explore Alexander's portraits of well-known artists, writers, and prosperous businessmen in order to relate Alexander's definition of sentiment in terms of its masculine counterpart in a political and social climate rife with nationalistic, anti-effeminate rhetoric. My goal is to demonstrate how "sentiment" needs to play into a discussion on Alexander and, perhaps most of all, highlight the gendered implications, which previous scholars have nearly all

but neglected to mention, when using such a complex word in reference to a time undergoing changes in gender performance and construction.

There is often a lack of clarity in the term “sentiment,” especially in its common application to Alexander and his peers. Sarah Burns highlights the importance of critical language and its relation to gendered vices and virtues imbued in institutionalized gender politics.³ Though her aim is centered on illustrating the difference in word choice used by critics to describe the painting styles of Cecilia Beaux and John Singer Sargent, she reminds us to be careful of the language used in the past and the present to talk about art. She defends her methodology of examining Beaux’s and Sargent’s contemporaneous criticism

in order to expose the workings of language in manufacturing gender difference and hierarchy, and to explore the ways in which this language, which imposed gendered readings on paintings closely comparable in subject and style, played a powerful role in support of a specific agenda.⁴

By looking at the literature concerning Alexander and his relation to sentiment during his career and right after his death, it is obvious that writers, as Burns warns, approach Alexander’s work with a “specific agenda” aimed at solidifying American stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.

During his time, Alexander was among the top of his trade and mentioned alongside names such as Sargent (1856-1925), Beaux (1855-1942), William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), Winslow Homer (1836-1910), and Whistler. Perhaps even more than the others, he stood apart as a painter of women, commissioned and not.⁵ Yet to current art historical scholarship, Alexander is a minor figure eclipsed by his peers, even those whose fame increased after their death, such

³ Sarah Burns, “The ‘Earnest, Untiring Worker’ and the Magician of the Brush: Gender Politics in the Criticism of Cecilia Beaux and John Singer Sargent,” *Oxford Art Journal* 15, no. 1 (1992): 36-53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵ Springer, “Art and the Feminine Muse,” 1.

as Thomas Eakins (1844-1916). Most books, catalogs, and articles on portraiture or feminine imagery in the Gilded Age gloss over his name, diving into an analysis on Sargent or Chase, pausing for a few seconds to throw in a list of names of artists the author finds comparable—usually Alexander, Dewing, and Beaux.

In the past few decades, several art historians have combatted Alexander's apparent erasure from history.⁶ Scholars have revealed how important Alexander was to the American and international art world until his early and mourned death in 1915, bringing back to life an artist that once presided over the American National Academy of Design for six years, who socialized in the same circles as Henry James, Mark Twain, Auguste Rodin, and others, and who exhibited within both traditional and revolutionary artistic spheres. It remains key that Alexander's recovery, as well as that of other artists, does not verge on exaggeration, over-simplification, or, in a truly modern manner of art history, myth making. Alexander's critical reception has not avoided these pitfalls, yet by citing early criticism of his work, we can understand why writers might purposefully essentialize his career and try to place him neatly within acceptable bounds of American masculinity.

In her introduction to her most recent publication, Goley notes almost each and every minor and major exhibition Alexander's work could be found in from the mid-1970s through within eighteen months of this paper's completion.⁷ She states her lofty and well deserved claim, that her biographical book's "investigation aims to become the standard by which all further Alexander research will be based, correcting misstatements and misperceptions."⁸ I commend

⁶ Mary Anne Goley, the leading writer on Alexander since the mid-1970s, and Sarah J. Moore, who wrote her dissertation on Alexander in 1992 and published a book on him in 2003, have been at the forefront of this art historical trend.

⁷ Goley, xiii.

⁸ Ibid.

her for her bold pronouncement and, as my footnotes will reveal, trust her judgment on his biographical and critical history.⁹ This paper does not act as a rebuttal against Goley, Moore, and other's work that has come before, but rather as an analysis into the application (or marked refusal) of the word sentiment by Alexander and by critics and art historians. Following Burns' caution about the power of words and their inherent historical and gendered biases, this study looks at Alexander's work and exposes the complexities and intricacies of a word in flux during the long nineteenth century.

⁹ For this paper, dates for Alexander's biographical data and the dating on paintings come from Goley's *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age*.

WOMEN, FEMININITY, AND SENTIMENT

Before I can argue the democratic application of sentiment by Alexander, it is important to first situate him within the late nineteenth-century discourse of sentiment and the word's overwhelming application to the virtue, character, and visual illustration of women. The relationship between femininity, sentimentality, and Alexander's own career is understudied but somewhat established in the work Moore and Goley. This section provides a summary of sentimental femininity before attempting to argue for a masculine domain of sentiment in turn-of-the-century America. Alexander was no different from his peers, particularly Thomas Wilmer Dewing (1851-1938), in using female sitters to explore the concept of sentimentality or emotion. For the continuity of this discussion, I have chosen to look primarily at his female portraiture, though the term "portraiture" is used loosely. Traditionally, portraiture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries denoted a recognizable likeness, though acceptable deviations from objective likeness could be made in the process of idealization and for visual effect.

Alexander, a successful and renowned figure and society portrait painter, purposefully conflated the conventions of portraiture and artistic study in his depictions of women in his formal female portraits and the studies of women expressing what he termed "sentiment." Alexander held an early and enduring debt to the Aesthetic Movement, notably due to his early relationship with the American expatriate and artist James McNeill Whistler. Whistler's emphasis on detached, aesthetic study informs Alexander's mature style, though, Alexander, unlike Whistler, retains a concern for his sitters' identities and invoking a mood or the senses. I also seek to situate Alexander's portraits of women in the discourse of sentiment and the practice of blending portraiture into studies of figure, form, and feeling. The focus on women's portraits in this discussion reveals a mid-to-late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century tendency to

conflate sentiment or sentimentality with women and femininity, a socially constructed notion carrying social, political, physical, and psychological implications.¹⁰

The Gilded Age saw a marked and extraordinary increase in the depiction of the female figure in American art. Prior to the popularity and accessibility of European schools for American students, the nation's painting tradition had rested on the back of the landscape and genre conventions that espoused ideals of Manifest Destiny and Transcendental communion.¹¹ The human figure, especially the female, remained secondary to American artistic interest. Starting in the 1870s and continuing into the twentieth century, American artists sought foundational training in European ateliers and schools, including Paris' indispensable Académie Julian and the school led by American expatriate Frank Duveneck (1848-1919) in Munich.¹² Within these and other Continental schools, artists were immersed in increasingly modern and markedly French painting traditions, French discourses on social politics, and, most important for this study, embraced the female figure, a subject of traditionally French emphasis.¹³ Lloyd Goodrich wrote in 1966:

Never in our previous history had painters and sculptors concentrated so much on the feminine. With the idealism that was so ingrained in the nineteenth-century American mind, they pictured women as being finer and purer than the male, not only more beautiful physically but representing ideals of spiritual beauty.¹⁴

¹⁰ Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 50-90.

¹¹ Bailey Van Hook, *Angels of Art: Women and Art in American Society, 1876-1914* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 5.

¹² John C. Van Dyke, *American Painting and Its Tradition: As Represented by Inness, Wyant, Martin, Homer, La Farge, Whistler, Chase, Alexander, Sargent* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1919), 223.

¹³ Van Hook, *Angels of Art*, 4.

¹⁴ Lloyd Goodrich, *Three Centuries of American Art* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 46; Springer, "Art and the Feminine Muse," 1.

Alexander refined his style and subject abroad and transplanted his European teachings to the United States, leading to a complex and successful amalgamation of his earlier stylistic associations and his personal concern with the female figure.

Though he preferred painting images of relaxed women in domestic settings and wished to be known for doing so, Alexander, like many of his contemporary, European-trained artists, relied on the income and popularity gained from portrait commissions. Formal portraiture, a genre primarily of and for the upper and celebrated classes, flourished during the Gilded Age, as artists like Alexander, Beaux, and Sargent painted “the exemplars of civic, social, [cultural],” and aristocratic life.¹⁵ Art historian Bernard F. Reilly, Jr., argues that Gilded Age values set parameters for portrait sitters, “presenting the subject in the accepted social roles of his or her class and status: prosperous industrialist, affluent wife and mother,” or socialite debutants.¹⁶ Yet despite portrait commissions outnumbering his other artwork, Alexander remains best known for his intimately cropped images of billowingly-dressed women lounging in an amorphous domestic sphere, caught in a state of emotion or thought.¹⁷ Alexander started serially exploring this subject of the domestic, absorbed female subject around 1885, when he was twenty-nine years old, during which he concocted a formula that would carry through the majority of his career. This theme largely dominates his oeuvre until his death in 1915, at the age of fifty-eight.

In the mid-1880s, while abroad in North Africa and Germany, Alexander stated that he wished to steer his painting career in a new, more pointed direction, which had previously

¹⁵ Bernard F. Reilly Jr., “Varieties of Evasion in a Century of Publicity,” in *Eye Contact: Modern American Portrait Drawings from the National Portrait Gallery*, ed. Wendy Wick Reaves (Washington, D.C., Seattle and London: Smithsonian Institution and University of Washington Press, 2002), 33, 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁷ Kathleen Adler, Erica E. Hirshler, and H. Barbara Weinberg, *Americans in Paris 1860-1900* (London: National Gallery Company Limited, 2006), 106; Goley, *John White Alexander*, 71.

consisted mostly of portraits of his friends, American patrons, and those he illustrated as a freelance artist for the American magazine *Harper's Weekly*, a topic I will return to later in this paper.¹⁸ He wrote to his adoptive father in 1885 about an upcoming exhibition in New York for which he strove to paint for submission:

a subject and not a simple portrait. It will be my first serious attempt and I have been working hard at it for some months all through this trip. It is very simple—only one figure but in it I want to express a sentiment—and I think it will either be a hit or a grand slip up.¹⁹

The painting Alexander writes about is agreed upon by critics and art historians to be the large, horizontally-composed *Azalea* (fig. 1). Completed in 1885, the painting, subtitled *Portrait of Helen Abbe Howson*, demonstrates Alexander's early and prophetic mixture of subject and portrait, what Alexander scholar Goley deems his first "subject picture."²⁰

The primary title *Azalea* refers to both the azalea flowers that Alexander includes on the right side of the painting to balance the figure-laden left portion of the composition and to the popular practice of titling depictions of women with flower species.²¹ In the Victorian "language of flowers," a symbology wherein flowers were likened or associated with objects, feelings, or attitudes, the azalea stands for "temperance."²² Art historian Bailey Van Hook argues that artists titled their works with flower names in order to stress the woman's ideal status in contrast to her fashionable, contemporary outlook. It additionally signals to the viewer that Alexander's painting moves beyond the traditional conventions of portraiture and, like his friend and mentor Whistler, he wishes to encourage further contemplation or meditation on the composition.

¹⁸ Goley, *John White Alexander*, 1-30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

²¹ Van Hook, *Angels of Art*, 109.

²² "Azalea (Portrait of Helen Abbe Howson)," Collection Highlights, Hudson River Museum, <https://www.hrm.org/collection/74-19-6/>; Springer, "Art and the Feminine Muse," 1.

Whistler, however, strove for his work to evoke the feeling of music and tone, not of human emotion. The subtitle of the sitter's name, sometimes included when shown during the artist's lifetime, acts as the only signifier to the viewer that this is indeed, as it was originally intended to solely be, a formal portrait. George Waldo Abbe, a wealthy dry goods merchant, commissioned Alexander to paint this portrait of his daughter, Helen, in honor of her engagement, especially after the success of a (now lost) image of another Abbe daughter, Charlotte Colgate Abbe.²³

Van Hook notes a marked trend by the turn of the century across American art, in which artists more comfortably “[blurred the] genres among portraits, genre, and formal studies.”²⁴ Additionally, art historian Barbara Dayer Gallati argues that Gilded Age, upper-class demand for “beautiful” portraiture, suggesting a degree of idealized portraiture, is unique and the market for portraiture has since been unsurpassed in quantity.²⁵ As Alexander's earliest foray into his lifelong and characteristic pursuit of the “subject picture,” *Azalea* also foreshadows the artist's personal, simplified formula in which he wished to realize a portrait-study of sentiment.

Sentiment, critically and actively used in the nineteenth century in its noun form or its adjectival conjugation “sentimental,” can be defined today as “an attitude, thought, or judgment prompted by feeling” or a “refined feeling: delicate sensibility especially as expressed in a work of art.”²⁶ In 1828, roughly thirty years before Alexander's birth, Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* defined sentiment as “a thought prompted by passion or

²³ Hudson River Museum; Goley, *John White Alexander*, 33-34. Sometimes this image is subtitled with the other daughter's name. Goley has determined this is certainly a portrait of Helen Abbe (Goley, *John White Alexander*, 31-34).

²⁴ Van Hook, *Angels of Art*, 108.

²⁵ Barbara Dayer Gallati, “Gilded Age Portraiture: Cultural Capital Personified,” in *Beauty's Legacy: Gilded Age Portraits in America*, ed. Barbara Dayer Gallati (New York: New-York Historical Society, 2013), 48.

²⁶ “Sentiment,” *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>.

feeling,” a synonym to “sensibility,” or “thought; opinion; notion.”²⁷ By 1913, Webster’s dictionary defined “sentiment” as “a thought prompted by passion or feeling; a state of mind in view of some subject; feeling toward or respecting some person or thing; disposition prompting action or expression.”²⁸

The varying definitions never include a gendered signifier, though late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attitudes tended, as Alexander sometimes did, to conflate sentimentality with femininity.²⁹ This conflation increased at the end of the nineteenth century as changing attitudes toward women, the family, and class boundaries challenged conventional, conservative ways of thinking.³⁰ It is no coincidence that Alexander’s primary exploration of the intersection between portraiture and sentiment, “subject and not a simple portrait,” occurs in commissioned and non-commissioned images and portraits of women—primarily artists’ models and high society wives, daughters, actresses, and socialites. Women exhibited a “feminine frailty” and a disposition toward emotion explored and exploited by artists through their depictions of women.³¹ Alexander defined “sentiment” in the former sense, as “an attitude, thought, or judgment” invoked through his sitter’s preoccupation in thought or sense.³² Art historian Julie Anne Springer sees Alexander as simply wishing to convey a mood, for she states:

²⁷ “Sentiment,” Webster’s Dictionary 1828 Online Edition, American Dictionary of the English Language, <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/sentiment>.

²⁸ “Sentiment,” *Revised Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Noah Porter, (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1913), <https://www.webster-dictionary.org/definition/>.

²⁹ Isabelle Lehuu, “Sentimental Figures: Reading ‘Goley’s Lady’s Book’ in Antebellum America,” in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 73, 88.

³⁰ Gallati, “Gilded Age Portraiture,” 30, 48.

³¹ Karen Halttunen, “‘Domestic Differences’: Competing Narratives of Womanhood in the Murder Trial of Lucretia Chapman,” in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 51.

³² Goley, *John White Alexander*, 31.

The feminine subject served the artist [Alexander] as a symbol for the moods and conditions of art. Specifically, woman functioned for him as a metaphor for a world of inner realities—dream, imagination, intuition, and soul—as well as a symbol of exquisite external refinement.³³

These definitions are not mutually exclusive, and I argue that Alexander expresses sentiment by conveying a mood in both his figure's action (or thoughtful inaction) as well as in formal terms through color and line. Sentiment, for Alexander, was different from feeling, as it acted subtly and softly. My understanding of his use of sentiment centers on his consistent, subtle evocation of a refined feeling—more so an expression of sensation, a category in which I include the act of being “lost” in mental thought, perhaps in a state of reverie, defined in 1913 as “a loose or irregular train of thought occurring in musing or meditation; deep musing; daydream.”³⁴ In this way, his definition more closely aligns with tastes like those of Samuel Clemens (1835-1910), known under the pen name Mark Twain, who encouraged reigned-in sentiment characterized by economy, facility, and simplicity rather than elaboration, excess, and complexity.³⁵

Alexander's thematic exploration of the woman in the interior is not unique. Victorian and turn-of-the-century American middle- and upper-class society championed the “cult of true womanhood,” in which women, as caretakers of the home, were to “display in face and attire as well as attitude their adherence to the qualities of purity, piety, domesticity, and submission.”³⁶ This theme as a pictorial motif additionally occurs in the work of other American artists such as

³³ Springer, “Art and the Feminine Muse,” 1.

³⁴ “Reverie,” *Revised Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Noah Porter, (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1913), <https://www.webster-dictionary.org/definition/>.

³⁵ Michael Davitt Bell, “Humor, Sentiment, Realism: Mark Twain,” in *The Problem of American Realism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 34, 44.

³⁶ Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1983), 53.

Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), Dewing, and Sargent.³⁷ Griselda Pollock examines the social and professional position of female Impressionist artists and finds that Parisian society split the domains of gender into public for men and private for women, harkening back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's division of the sexes. Henry James (1843-1916), one of Alexander's friends, wrote in 1887, "It sounds like a paradox, but it is a very simple truth that when to-day we look for 'American art' we find it mainly in Paris. When we find it out of Paris, we at least find a great deal of Paris in it."³⁸ Pollock sees this split as a naturalized construction. Late nineteenth-century femininity called for docile, domestic women who were expected to confine themselves to their respectable spheres.³⁹ Pollock additionally characterizes the modern, bourgeois, cosmopolitan woman (the type of woman Alexander painted portraits of on both sides of the Atlantic) as "defined by this other, non-social space of *sentiment* and duty from which money and power were banished."⁴⁰ Feminine interiority, according to Pollock's analysis, directly ties to sentimentality.

The "Woman at Rest" or "Woman at Home" subject additionally carries associations with the modern psychological disorder, termed neurasthenia, an affliction diagnosed equally to both sexes but with extremely gendered "cures."⁴¹ Neurasthenia was defined as nervousness or psychological distress in response to modern industrial society's rapidly changing and

³⁷ Ibid., *American Beauty*, 53.

³⁸ Henry James, "John S. Sargent," *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* 75, no. 449 (October 1887): 683.

³⁹ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 71.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 68, italics mine.

⁴¹ Katherine Williams, Zachary Ross, Kathleen Spies, Amanda Glesmann, Claire Perry, and Wanda A. Corn, *Women on the Verge: The Culture of Neurasthenia in Nineteenth-Century America* (Stanford, CA: The Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, 2004), 21-30.

demanding lifestyle. Doctors prescribed female patients suffering from neurasthenia the “rest cure,” in which women were made to sit inside by themselves and think as little as possible with no distractions, in order to protect “the weaker, more emotional, and more sensitive sex.”⁴² On the other hand, doctors encouraged men to go outdoors, go to the country, and work out.⁴³ Biological science institutionalized the gendering of bodies while artists like Alexander expressed these values visually in art. Further, the 1890s saw an increase of the sacredness of the home and the woman in charge of the domestic space; it and she embodied rest and peace in contrast to the male dominated public sphere of bustling modernity.⁴⁴

Returning to the portrait-study of *Azalea*, a single figure sits in a compressed, ambiguous space and avoids eye contact with both the artist and the viewer. The profile gaze increases the indistinctness of the figure’s emotion and expression, so as to intrigue the viewer as to what she looks at and what she is thinking, be it directed at the flowers in front of her or beyond them. The flowers increase the sentimental nature of this canvas, as floral imagery has been noted to suggest “poetic flights of fancy, delicate shades of feeling, ‘everything that can flower in the human soul.’”⁴⁵ She is, as Alexander scholar Sarah J. Moore states, “remote and pensive,” acting as both model for a portrait and a model for a mood or sentiment study.⁴⁶

The brushstroke and the configuration of a profile figure in a simple dress with an ambiguous expression denotes the influence of Whistler. While studying under the artist Frank

⁴² Williams et al., *Women on the Verge*, 4.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Springer, “Art and the Feminine Muse,” 6.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2; Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, Daniel Russell, trans. (New York: Orion, 1969), 157.

⁴⁶ Sarah J. Moore, *John White Alexander and the Construction of National Identity: Cosmopolitan American Art, 1880-1915* (Newark and London: University of Delaware Press and Associated University Presses, 2003), 27.

Duveneck in Germany and Italy between 1878 and 1880, Alexander came to know Whistler well, for the artist, destitute and looking for American company, sought comfort and happiness with the rowdy American “Duveneck boys.” Over several months, Whistler stayed with Duveneck’s school in Italy and, of all of the students, Alexander especially took to the aging, infamous expatriate.⁴⁷ Through the years, Alexander and Whistler’s relationship grew from a mentor-pupil standing into a powerful friendship lasting until Whistler’s death in 1903. Because he met Whistler early on in his artistic training, Alexander would almost always be indebted to the American master.⁴⁸ *Azalea*’s lone figure sitting with an almost ninety-degree turn away from the viewer echoes Whistler’s *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1* (1871, fig. 2) known also as *Portrait of the Artist’s Mother*, a painting emulated by many artists indebted to Whistler’s aesthetic teachings and philosophy.⁴⁹

Beyond a simplified composition and a thin application of brushwork, Whistler’s artistic philosophy also proved integral to Alexander’s oeuvre and artistic outlook. Whistler’s mature work embodies the Aesthetic Movement, which flourished primarily in Britain in the 1870s and 1880s and opposed Victorian middle-class tastes for moralistic, didactic, and narrative works.⁵⁰ The movement argued that art should attain beauty, by which the “visual and sensual qualities of art” mattered more than the close observation of reality.⁵¹ Whistler stated, “But the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science [that is, observable reality], these elements, that the

⁴⁷ Goley, *John White Alexander*, 13-20; Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 224.

⁴⁸ Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 219.

⁴⁹ “Azalea,” Hudson River Museum.

⁵⁰ Christopher Wood, *Victorian Painting* (Boston, New York, and London: Bulfinch Press and Little, Brown and Company, 1999), 141-43.

⁵¹ “Art Term: The Aesthetic Movement,” Tate Britain, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/aesthetic-movement>; Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 219; Wood, *Victorian Painting*, 142-43.

result may be beautiful,” which suggests that the artist make creative choices on what aspects of reality to keep and what to beautify.⁵² Rather than state the sitter or figure by name, Whistler titled his works in accordance with musical scores, likening the main colors in a particular work to a key of a piece of music. His famous *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1862, fig. 3) embodies this rejection of naming his models and serves as art historian Malcom Warner observes to “warn his viewers from too great an interest in subject, to expect abstraction rather than observation.”⁵³ His overwhelming, limited palette of white, off-whites, creams, and the pops of color relegated to the face of the model and below her feet no doubt influenced Alexander’s *Azalea* in its heavy use of limited greens, browns, and white. One critic, upon first viewing *Azalea* in New York noted that the painting might be “what Mr. Whistler would probably call a nocturne. It looks as if it was painted in green moonlight.”⁵⁴

In combination with descriptive titles and his assumption of muted tonal harmonies, Alexander adopted the simplified composition and subtle evocation of feeling that Whistler championed. As the British author Benjamin Disraeli’s main character in his novel *Lothair* states, the “virtue needed in the pursuit of beauty lies in the control of the passions, in the sentiment of repose, and the avoidance of all things of excess.”⁵⁵ The lessons learned from Whistler included streamlined simplicity, subtle and ambiguous emotion, and an obsession with graceful line and form. While Whistler would have rejected a sentimental reading of his own work, Alexander, perhaps due to his latent Symbolist leanings, embraced a stronger though still

⁵² Malcolm Warner, “Signs of the Times,” in *The Victorians: British Painting 1837-1901*, ed. Malcolm Warner (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. and National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1996), 27.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Goley, *John White Alexander*, 34.

⁵⁵ Warner, “Signs of the Times,” 28.

subtle sentiment in his *Azalea* and later canvases.⁵⁶ Turn-of-the-century art critic and art historian John C. Van Dyke (1856-1932) likened Alexander's work to Whistler's and saw in both "tales of the lady's charm, or womanly instincts, or perhaps gave a suggestion that she was a lady and not merely a studio model dressed for the part."⁵⁷ Sentiment derives not from the facial expression, which Alexander generally placed in a quasi- or fully-unreadable profile, but from the figure's pose, hand gesture, and graceful silhouette.⁵⁸ Whistler's blankly staring model in *Symphony in White, No. 1*, whose "beautiful female face," as the "chief icon of aestheticism," serves a formal over emotive function.⁵⁹ In contrast, Alexander's portrait of Howson illustrates the thinking, contemplating modern woman, however relegated to the interior almost as a decorative object.⁶⁰

In the next period of Alexander's career—his stay in France during the mid-1890s—his work increasingly explored the conjoined portrait-genre-figure study begun in America. By the end of 1890, seven years after deciding on and pursuing his intention of "subject pictures," Alexander and his wife Elizabeth Alexander travelled to Paris for what they believed to be a short vacation during which Alexander might recuperate from an illness (termed a grippe by some scholars and journalists, but more likely an unfortunate autoimmune or digestive disease he suffered from intermittently).⁶¹ Instead of a short summer stay, as had been anticipated, the Alexanders remained primarily in Europe until 1900 with occasional trips home to New York to show his Parisian-inspired work. Over his illness in just three months, Alexander found Paris a vibrant and fruitful city for his artistic sensibility where he participated in major art organizations

⁵⁶ Springer, "Art and the Feminine Muse," 1-8.

⁵⁷ Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 219.

⁵⁸ Goley, *John White Alexander*, 43.

⁵⁹ Warner, "Signs of the Times," 29.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 28-29; Goley, *John White Alexander*, 43.

⁶¹ Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 227.

and salons available to transatlantic travelers. The mixture of styles based on Whistler, Art Nouveau, Symbolism, and traditional Grand Manner portraiture paired with the French emphasis on the female model coalesced into the style for which Alexander is still praised.⁶²

His 1892 series of portrait studies, including the life-size and Whistlerian *Portrait Noir* and *Portrait Gris* (figs. 4 and 5), feature his wife as model. Her likeness is hinted at, but, as the titles suggest, Mrs. Alexander largely acts as a mannequin, a passive prop, upon which Alexander's attention could focus on the long, flowing gowns and color harmonies within the composition.⁶³ These are portraits of color, not of Mrs. Alexander. As Sadakichi Hartmann writes about this series:

[his] subjects are not women, they are merely the means of expression . . . These titles attest that he does not care so much for the woman he portrays as for the gray or black color. He wishes to reveal the charm of a particular color to us, and for that he invents a woman.⁶⁴

These canvases can be likened to similar work done by Whistler during this period, especially his *Mother of Pearl and Silver: The Andalusian* (fig. 6), begun sometime around 1888. In it, Whistler paints his sister-in-law, though critics were right to point out that, like the "portraits" of Mrs. Alexander, "it is not a portrait of a person, but of a dress," and by extension the color and form of the material.⁶⁵ This brief interlude into full aesthetic study would not last long, as Alexander soon turned his attention back to focus on the female figure's body and her thinking presence as equally a part of the canvas. Alexander found his main success with the help of his muse, the young French model Juliette Very.

⁶² Adler et al., *Americans in Paris*, 223; Van Hook, *Angels of Art*, 21.

⁶³ Van Hook, *Angels of Art*, 12; Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 227.

⁶⁴ Moore, *John White Alexander*, 35.

⁶⁵ "Mother of Pearl and Silver: The Andalusian," Collection, National Gallery of Art, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.12197.html>.

From 1895 to 1900, Alexander worked almost exclusively with Very as his model for privately executed works. Alexander took his formula of a female figure, initiated by Whistler and morphed through experimental *Azalea*, and started painting Very. She is shown in large dresses designed by his wife and in close quarters lost in thought or sensation.⁶⁶ The first painting of Very in 1895, *Juliette* (fig. 7), suggests through its title that it is a portrait of his model and muse. Yet, like in *Azalea*, Alexander blurs the line between figure study and a traditional portrait, although some art historians refuse to categorize his paintings of Very portraits.⁶⁷ As seen in his other depictions of Very, including *Althea* (fig. 8) of the same year and *Les Pivoines (Peonies)* (fig. 9) from 1896, Alexander paints her true to her physical likeness, thereby completing one of the most traditionally held objectives of a portrait. His faithfulness to her strong profile allows her to be recognized without hesitation throughout the next five years, yet his formal treatment of her constantly shifts, as she warps into different poses, wears different dresses, and is accompanied by an endless stream of props.⁶⁸ Are these paintings a composite portrait of Very or is she simply the vehicle by which Alexander explores line, color, and feminine grace? His “portraits” of Very differ from his commissioned portraits. They are the artist’s own experiments in sensuality and sentiment. Additionally, though he titles one or two with Juliette’s name, he generally titles them after compositional devices, usually the primary color or prop (or both).⁶⁹

In each painting of Very, Alexander studies her profile, like he did in *Azalea*, yet there is a new fascination with the flow of the gown and the starkness of the silhouette as seen in *Althea*

⁶⁶ Goley, *John White Alexander*, 71-98.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Prelinger, *American Impressionism: Treasures from the Smithsonian American Art Museum* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2000), 8.

⁶⁸ Goley, *John White Alexander*, 90-98.

⁶⁹ Prelinger, *American Impressionism*, 8.

and *Peonies*. For this informal series of paintings, Alexander earned the salutatory name “painter of the flowing line,” alluding to his exploration of Very’s intense, graceful profile and the folds of fabric that envelop her body.⁷⁰ Alexander’s work is often spoken about in relation to Art Nouveau. His focus on drapery “for line effect” is similar to the sinuous linearity seen in Parisian advertisements for theaters, merchandise, and concerts. Alexander’s evocation of an Art Nouveau style reminded American and French art critics alike that his work carried a cosmopolitan taste.⁷¹ Very contorts her long, flowing body over a couch, on the floor, or around an object, either inanimate like a vase of flowers or animate like a curious kitten. She is caught in a sensory act—she thinks, smells, reads, plays. In each composition, Very, either named or personifying the ideal, graceful woman, looks down or off of the canvas, not necessarily avoiding or even aware of the viewer’s gaze but locked in a moment of thought or sensual feeling. Again, Alexander evokes the idea of sentiment absent in Whistler’s tonal harmonies. Alexander’s repeated use of greens and blues, so prominent against Very’s dark hair and pale skin, additionally invoke the ideas of interiority and rest, as the cool colors sooth the eyes. In 1895 when the first “subject pictures” of Very were shown, a critic pronounced that on the spectrum “between portraiture as a picture and portraiture as a near-photographic likeness,” Alexander succeeded in painting the former.⁷² His pictures were “to be enjoyed in no ordinary degree,” perhaps alluding to his rejection of Whistlerian non-emotion and embrace of both likeness and sentiment.⁷³ It is during this period that Alexander, according to critics, came into his own as an emotive and decorative painter and no longer under the shadow of Whistler.

⁷⁰ Goley, *John White Alexander*, 71.

⁷¹ Adler et al., *Americans in Paris*, 185.

⁷² Goley, *John White Alexander*, 81.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 81.

Alexander's exploration of sentiment is best seen in *Green Girl* (fig. 10), also known as *Juliette* (fig. 11).⁷⁴ Completed in 1897, Very poses in an elaborate green dress of Mrs. Alexander's design and rests in an Empire style chair that envelopes part of her torso. Appearing downcast, she gazes straight ahead at an angle about ninety-degrees away from the viewer. The background of a semi-flat and isolating, atmospheric black and grey space draws attention immediately to the pale face and hand of Very.⁷⁵ The pose is again reminiscent of Whistler's *Arrangement on Grey and Black, No. 1*, but Alexander's compressed, more intimately cropped space intensifies the focus upon Very's face, encouraging the viewer to imagine what she might be thinking about.

When shown to international audiences across Europe in 1897, the press admired Alexander's composition for its "simplicity and ease of pose."⁷⁶ This is still the case despite how awkward—and very unladylike—Very's pose is; she sits sidesaddle in the chair with her back resting more so on the wall behind her than the back of the chair. In contrast to the other images of Very, this work embodies the highest degree of Alexander's definition of sentiment. The especially sullen profile glance, aided by the inclusion a limp hand upon Very's lap, invoke a mood of contemplation, tiredness, or perhaps sadness.⁷⁷ Of the Very study-portraits, *Green Girl* best illustrates Alexander's goal of "a subject and not a simple portrait," as Very's likeness and talent for posing combines with Alexander's evocation of a feeling, a sentiment, into a portrait of both Very and of introspection.

⁷⁴ *Green Girl* also circulated sometimes with the British and American spelling, *Juliet*.

⁷⁵ Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 232.

⁷⁶ Goley, *John White Alexander*, 95, translated into English from French by author.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

After his move back to New York in 1901, Alexander's work shifted toward portrait commissions and away from his popular Parisian decorative images featuring Very.⁷⁸ The third portion of Alexander's career is marked by the synthesis of Alexander's two earlier focuses and a continued fleshing out of the "subject picture" formula. Despite his return to the more formal practice of commissioned portraiture, in which a patron seeks an agreement with an artist to paint a likeness for financial exchange, Alexander remained committed to his 1885 declaration to "paint a subject and not a simple portrait."⁷⁹

In 1901, Mr. and Mrs. Hilborne L. Roosevelt, first cousins of then President Theodore Roosevelt, commissioned Alexander to paint their daughter Dorothy Quincy. The subsequent painting, *Miss Dorothy Quincy Roosevelt (Later Mrs. Langdon Geer)* (fig. 12), completed by the early part of 1902, features the young socialite and cosmopolitan Dorothy sitting solemnly, alone, in profile, and executed with a limited palette.⁸⁰ Her setter dog lies at her feet, echoing the quiet, contemplative mood of the portrait. As the contemporary critic John C. Van Dyke wrote in 1916, after Alexander's death, the portrait bears a "refined simplicity," echoing the muted colors of a Whistler painting and the same stark, seated profile seen in *Green Girl* and Whistler's *Arrangement on Grey and Black, No. 1*.⁸¹

The composition also recalls Thomas Eakins's earlier *The Artist's Wife and His Setter Dog* (fig. 13) begun in 1884 and reworked until 1889.⁸² It is possible that Alexander or his patrons saw this work either in Mariana van Rensselaer's 1886 publication *The Book of*

⁷⁸ Ibid., 78. Interestingly, Very chose to stay in Paris and model for the sculptor Auguste Rodin.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 31.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 119.

⁸¹ Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 235.

⁸² "The Artist's Wife and His Setter Dog," Browse the Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10811>.

American Figure Painters or in person as the painting traveled to Paris in 1891 and was exhibited in New York in 1887 and 1892.⁸³ Dorothy's hands rest in her lap similarly to those of Mrs. Eakins's around her book. Additionally, the family dog occupies the space between the sitter and viewer. Despite their commonalities, Eakins's wife confronts the viewer with an awkward if slight smile. In contrast, Dorothy's face appears in complete profile and her body only slightly turns toward the viewer. Alexander's decision to crop the edge of the dress of the over-life-size Dorothy mimics his similar compression of space and mood in *Green Girl*. In fact, it is likely that *Green Girl*, a lauded portrait of Very, directly inspired this depiction of Dorothy, who sits in same chair pictured in *Green Girl*, though her pose is more regal than Very's and indicative of refined, elegant, mental rest. Alexander's designation as the of "Painter of the Flowing Line" is as evident in his commissioned portrait as in his study-portraits of Very. However, instead of the folds of the dress illustrating this tendency toward an Art Nouveau curvature like in his Very paintings, Alexander achieves the style through Dorothy's unnaturally elongated body with the "S"-like form of her white dress complementing her delicate chin and neck.

The title *Miss Dorothy Quincy Roosevelt* signifies that this is a portrait. Unlike Whistler's purposefully unnamed model in *Symphony in White, No. 1*, subtitled *The White Woman*, Miss Roosevelt's portrait is not in line with the Gilded Art trend to title studies of color and figure as "Portrait of a Woman in X-color" because Alexander needed to convey the sitter's likeness and personality within the image per his commission contract.⁸⁴ The inclusion of her family dog, an iconographic symbol of wealth, protection, and loyalty, is one manner by which Alexander

⁸³ Akela Reason, *Thomas Eakins and the Uses of History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 86.

⁸⁴ Van Hook, *Angels of Art*, 2.

identifies his sitter personally. *Miss Dorothy Quincy Roosevelt*, though, is not only about studying a figure and working out beautiful color harmonies. As former Dallas Museum of Art curator William Rudolph remarked, Dorothy's "oblique gaze and profile view remove this painting from the straightforward depiction of a particular sitter and position it as a study in reverie," of being lost in thought.⁸⁵ Her profile is distinct and specifically hers, though by placing her in profile, Alexander separates the viewer from his sitter's most recognized view, her frontal face, and transforms her into a distanced, archetypal woman. Her nondescript white gown and "young, slim, and girlishly formed" body, the type favored in America over the more "voluptuous" French preference, further stress her archetypically American, upper-class woman status.⁸⁶ To Van Hook, Dorothy's image is little more than a "[socially] complacent, nonchallenging embrace of upper middle-class standards of taste."⁸⁷ And Van Hook has a point; despite his best efforts to transform Dorothy's portrait into the blended "subject portrait," in certain contexts the widely known New York socialite's identity and recognizability minimized the sentimental and aesthetic intentions.

Alexander's earlier portrait *Azalea*, his mid-career *Green Girl*, and finally his later *Miss Dorothy Quincy Roosevelt* poignantly resemble the work of his older contemporary peer, the American artist Thomas Wilmer Dewing. Best known for his "reductive, elemental image of the female," Dewing, like Alexander, blended the practice of portrait and study in his 1893 painting *The Carnation* (fig. 14). In contrast to Alexander's titled or subtitled sitters, Dewing intended his

⁸⁵ "Collection: Miss Dorothy Quincy Roosevelt (later Mrs. Langdon Geer)," Dallas Museum of Art, <https://collections.dma.org/artwork/5329094>.

⁸⁶ Van Hook, *Angels of Art*, 109.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

sitter to remain anonymous.⁸⁸ The painting's title referencing a flower, like Alexander's *Azalea*, focuses intrigue and ambiguity on the sitter's identity. The profile glance recalls the sentiment of contemplation or subdued sadness present in Alexander's work. Correspondence with Dewing's close friends reveals that Dewing thought of this painting as both a study and a portrait of the popular artists' model, Julia Baird, most known for modeling for Augustus Saint-Gaudens's *Diana of the Tower*.⁸⁹ Baird's recognizable features and recurrent appearance in Dewing's works blurred the typical reading of Dewing's interior, sentimental women. By calling this a portrait of Baird in letters to his friends, Dewing, "conferred semiprivate but specific meaning to the image (now transformed into a portrait) that calls into play the narrow society of artists, models, patrons, and critics who would have recognized her."⁹⁰ This observation about Dewing's art equally applies to Alexander's work in its importance of naming or the audience's familiarity with the sitter's identity, be it Howson in *Azalea*, Very in *Green Girl*, or Miss Roosevelt.

Alexander's depictions of women from the mid-1880s and into the early twentieth century illustrate his propensity to blur the line between genres of portraiture and figure and color study. His "subject pictures" formulaically feature a lone female figure, oftentimes seated, and caught in a moment of contemplation, meditation or sensation, through which he seeks to invoke a mood or feeling—in his words, sentiment. The overwhelming exploration of the sentimental "subject picture" by Alexander, inspired by the composition and painting style of his friend and mentor Whistler, spans nearly his whole mature career. Alexander's focus on the female figure to express these scenes of sentiment illustrates turn-of-the-century tendencies to

⁸⁸ Susan A. Hobbs, *The Art of Thomas Wilmer Dewing: Beauty Reconfigured* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 62-64.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 64-66.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 62, 64.

conflate femininity with sentimentality. Similarly, Alexander tends to conflate the representation of a particular sitter and the Gilded Age's ideals of womanhood.

MEN, MASCULINITY, AND SENTIMENT

Now that Alexander's primary focus of sentiment and his rather formulaic approach to evoking this refined feeling or emotion has been established by looking at his portraits of sentimental women, I wish to turn to a topic rather untouched in the discourse on Alexander—his portraits of men and their sentimental potential. I say potential, as one could argue the subjective nature of assigning sentiment to an image, especially one featuring a man, one of a class demarcated by their traditional aversion to such a concept. In fact, several of Alexander's contemporaries argued for the incompatibility of sentiment and his work on the basis of sex, refusing to read any sentimental intention on the part of Alexander or, to use the rhetoric of exclusion, spoke only about his work in terms of its formal, tonalist qualities.

One pitfall concerning scholarship on Alexander resides in the overwhelming comparison and assimilation of his methods, subjects, and styles to Whistler and his followers. Goley warns against such as simplified categorization, as she states, "to box Alexander in as a Whistlerian is to deny his other artistic interests."⁹¹ This is no more exaggerated than what John C. Van Dyke writes in his 1919 book *American Painting and Its Tradition: As Represented by Inness, Wyant, Martin, Homer, La Farge, Whistler, Chase, Alexander, Sargent*. Van Dyke highlights the artists he feels best represent the American state of painting in his recent past (1878 through 1915) and those which he feels will continue to influence the next generation. He states in his preface, "Indeed those I have chosen to write about herein, with the exception of Sargent, have passed on and passed out. Not only their period by their work has ended. We are now beginning to see them in something of a historical perspective."⁹² Van Dyke's book acts as both critical response

⁹¹ Goley, "Kindred Spirits, John White Alexander and Auguste Rodin," *Magazine Antiques* 178, no. 6 (November-December 2011): 151.

⁹² Van Dyke, *American Painting*, v.

to his contemporaries and historical reflection and therefore his choice in language is important as it lends credibility as both a primary and secondary source. He continues:

The value of the [modern] movement to American art can be rightly enough judged from [the titled artists]. . . . They wrought during a period of great material development—wrought in a common spirit, making an epoch in art history and leaving a tradition. The pathfinders in any period deserve well of their countrymen. And their trail is worth following, for eventually it may become a broad national highway.⁹³

In addition to a review of recent famous artists, Van Dyke's book is also rife with value judgments and political intentions in establishing a genealogy of great American painters; his use of the words "value," "common spirit," and "worth," signal his inevitable biases.

The first chapter, "The Art Tradition in America," highlights how American culture has a ways to go before it is on par with European excellence in the vast array of liberal arts.⁹⁴ Van Dyke wrote this book in a new century captivated and steered by increasing nationalism, one in which Henry James' earlier 1887 statement that "when today we look for 'American art' we find it mainly in Paris" would have angered a public looking for an independent, American tradition.⁹⁵ As president of the National Academy of Design for six years, Alexander understood the necessary break from European dependency and wrote an editorial titled "The Need of a National Academy, and Its Value to the Growth of Art in America."⁹⁶

Within the first paragraph in the chapter dedicated to Alexander, Van Dyke establishes the language and interpretation of Alexander's work that he continues through the entire chapter. Van Dyck immediately associates Alexander with Whistler by writing, "[the] portrait of a lady

⁹³ Ibid., vi.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 3-17.

⁹⁵ James, "John S. Sargent," 683; Moore, "A 'Salon of America'? Defining Nationalism at the National Academy of Design, 1909-1915," in *Rave Reviews: American Art and Its Critics, 1826-1925*, ed. David B. Dearing (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2000), 123.

⁹⁶ Moore, "A 'Salon of America'?", 124.

was . . . a presentation of a decorative pattern in which the sitter and her garment held large place because conforming happily to an ‘arrangement’.”⁹⁷ Van Dyke systematically opposes Alexander to “the Delacroixs and Millets of to-day who are no longer romantic and dramatic, but lay stress on sentiment, feeling, significance, character, strength rather than mere pattern,” setting up a dichotomous art world torn between aesthetics and emotional expression.⁹⁸ Sentiment, for Van Dyke, is antagonistic to Alexander’s, and, by extension, Whistler’s tonalist creed. Further, Van Dyke praises Alexander for bringing back a focus on method and draftsmanship to American artistic education.⁹⁹ In response to Alexander’s paintings of Very enumerated above, the critic writes, “The handsome, well-gowned, and well-bred young woman who holds the rose or ring or bowl is only part of a color pattern on the canvas. She does not symbolize or signify much of anything beyond that.”¹⁰⁰

Van Dyke’s reading of Alexander’s work and artistic purpose is superficial and reductionistic. Yet simply calling the modernist critic out for his simplistic and pointed look at Alexander’s aim does not change the fact that in 1919, and even during his lifetime, Alexander’s contemporaries read his work with a political bent. Exploring exactly why Van Dyke and others championed the aesthetics-only understanding of Alexander’s work and attacked any notion of sentiment or anything other than decorative finesse in his canvases reveals the times’ gendered negotiation of what constituted modern American art and its nationalistic aims.

First and foremost, sentiment, as illustrated in the first part of this paper, connoted a feminine quality constructed by earlier French and European models that translated to America.

⁹⁷ Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 219.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.

Sarah Burns looks at the negotiation of effeminacy and masculinity in terms of modern American male painters, noting that the accepted masculinity of male artists aligned with the “cult of male vigor and savagery at the fin de siècle.”¹⁰¹ Additionally she writes, “By the early twentieth century the discourse on effeminacy had become—as had that of degeneration—a tool in the hands of anyone endeavoring to demonstrate [American] superiority over the foreign, the anachronistic, and the threatening.”¹⁰² American art was increasingly believed to exude strength embodied in male virility and metaphorically stand for the “youth, enthusiasm, and vitality of American art.”¹⁰³

To characterize Alexander’s work as expressing a sentiment would have been in early twentieth-century artistic politicking equated to calling his work “foreign,” Parisian, non-American, and effeminate. Van Dyke’s refusal to associate Alexander with Paris acts as a marked argument for Alexander’s Americanness and masculine character:

Alexander has been called “the most Parisian of the Americans,” and yet just why one hardly knows. His refined taste, his sensitiveness, his animation are less French than American, but it must be his method that suggests Paris. But whom in Paris? . . . Perhaps the obvious explanation is that Alexander merely followed his own inclination and developed a method and a style quite his own.¹⁰⁴

Alexander is not just American, he is original, a quality associated with the modern “genius,” which carried inherently masculine connotations.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 113-116.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁰⁴ Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 228.

¹⁰⁵ Linda Nochlin, “From 1971: Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists?” *Art News*, May 30, 2015, <https://www.artnews.com/2015/05/30/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists/>.

Yet Burns highlights the paradoxical and myth-making nature of signaling Alexander as a “manly” American artist against “effeminate” qualities. While he might publicly embody masculine virtue, Alexander’s images of American society’s women and men remained influenced by European models. Some critics continued to describe his “[style] of considerable delicacy, complexity, and refinement,” all characteristics that could be relegated in late nineteenth-century outlook to the effeminate in terms of emotional constitution.¹⁰⁶ Burns highlights the importance of this outright construction in the face of an American art world that increasingly sought the praise and accolades reserved historically for European schools. Van Dyke’s *American Painting and Its Tradition* follows this trend by setting Alexander in the masculine, American camp now worthy of emulation.

However, a closer look at Alexander’s own words and his “constitution,” the turn-of-the-century word for a public personality and comportment, reveals his rather effeminate nature.

Alexander’s wife explained after his death that:

He always preferred to work quietly and slowly indoors on a full-size canvas. He always *felt* a picture before he expressed it. . . . Each day must express the very best in him, or his palette was laid aside. This was from the fact that he took his work seriously at all times, and also because he was not physically a strong man.¹⁰⁷

Alexander was not an embodiment of virility and psychological mastery like his peer Sargent.¹⁰⁸ Refined emotion for Alexander, “sentiment” in his own words, stemmed first and foremost from his own initial feeling expressed in an image. Springer notes the paradoxical practice of equating male artists’ lives and interaction with the larger public world with that of society women, arguing that “the male artist was seen as having a feminine orientation since those qualities

¹⁰⁶ Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist*, 118.

¹⁰⁷ Springer, “Art and the Feminine Muse,” 3; J. Walker McSpadden, *Famous Painters of America* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1916): 369-70.

¹⁰⁸ Burns, “The ‘Earnest and Untiring Worker’,” 43.

viewed as inherent in the creative personality—inwardness, subjectivity, and intuition, were essentially regarded as those of the delicate sex.”¹⁰⁹ Springer makes the curious and controversial claim that Alexander’s “iconography seems to give expression to these correspondences, with the female functioning as the muse for art and, perhaps, *as a metaphor for the artist himself*.”¹¹⁰ It is not so much that Alexander preferred to paint the female because of the ease of illustrating her visual charms, as Van Dyke would have his readers understand, but that he associated with the feminine.¹¹¹ This conclusion flies directly in the face of the artistic world Burns lays out and against the image Van Dyke wished to convey on Alexander’s (and arguably the entire American art world’s) behalf. Is there any merit to Springer’s statement?

Springer makes this claim directly after discussing Alexander’s unusual self-portrait *The Tenth Muse* (fig. 15) completed in 1909. Yet before speaking about this work, which intermingles the notions of femininity and masculinity, I want to bring in a few examples of Alexander’s portraits of men. I want to structure this discussion, as I had with his female portraits, chronologically, beginning with work stemming from the mid-1880s and concluding with *The Tenth Muse*, completed six years before his death. Focusing on Alexander’s male portraits, I wish to discern their relation to his artist’s statement to “express a sentiment.” Through this study, I argue that Alexander’s portraits of men illustrate a democratic application of his term sentiment, as they too invoke a refined feeling or mood, following the formulaic precedent I set up in the first half of this paper. I use the term democratic to emphasize Alexander’s inclusionary evocation of sentiment in portraits of both women and men.

¹⁰⁹ Springer, “Art and the Feminine Muse,” 8.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, italics mine.

¹¹¹ Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 235-36.

A year after completing *Azalea*, Alexander began an international assignment for the magazine *The Century*, for which he was tasked with submitting portrait drawings of great and distinguished male authors. This assignment took him around the United States and to Great Britain where Alexander sketched a portrait of Whistler. The resultant image, *Whistler in London* (1886, fig. 16), a charcoal on paper sketch measures only 32.5 by 17 inches, is an intimate, less than life-size portrayal of the larger-than-life Whistler. The sitter meets the gaze of the viewer, as his body is turned in profile, hands on hip, but his face turns toward Alexander/the viewer, to cast a quizzical, pompous glance. Whistler's pose is reminiscent of an earlier portrait of a male figure by Alexander, *Portrait of Larkin Goldsmith Mead* from 1880 (fig. 17), completed when Alexander was abroad with his teacher Duvneck. In the Munich style and based on of European traditional portraiture, Mead's portrait was Alexander's "first real attempt" at portraiture and a painting he hoped would set him on course to picking up commissions from traveling American families.¹¹² Alexander depicts Mead as a strong artist at work, his lower body filling the bottom half of the canvas alongside the incomplete head of the former president Abraham Lincoln on the right. In contrast to Alexander's later work, Mead's portrait is dominated by darker tones of rich espresso and varying shades of cream.

Even though Whistler's portrait is executed in charcoal, emerging stylistic and artistic differences seen in later paintings are discernable. In contrast to Mead's static face and body, Whistler's pose is more dynamic, the folds of fabric billowing off of his shoulders, foreshadowing the emphasis on the swirling gowns Alexander would represent ten years later. In contrast to Mead who looks as though he had posed himself for his portrait, taking on a tall, static air with his hands perfectly placed on waist and table, Whistler appears as though

¹¹² Goley, *John White Alexander*, 18.

Alexander had caught him off guard, possibly lost in thought then abruptly disrupted. This feeling is intensified by the internal scale of the figure, as Whistler's head reaches the top of the paper, giving the illusion of looking down upon a seated Alexander, intensifying the feeling of power and tension. Already, a shift toward drama and an evocation of mood can be discerned in Alexander's mid-1880s work, aligning with his 1885 wish to create "a subject and not a simple portrait . . . only one figure but in it I want to express a sentiment." That overstated, masculine mood, too strong to be his later evolved sentiment, is absent in Mead's cold portrait but increasingly on view in that of Whistler.

Subsequent portraits from the next two years highlight Alexander's increasing interest in sentiment, including portraits of political cartoonist Thomas Nast and Courtlandt Palmer, the founder of the Nineteenth Century Club (1887 and 1888, figs. 18 and 19). Each shows their respective well-off male patron in a reduced, dark atmosphere, Nast sitting and Palmer somewhat striding forward. In each, a simple composition is marked with a single figure, each of which is radically chopped—Nast at the upper thigh on the left and Palmer at what appear to be his knees. The sitters initially seem to look straight out, but their heads both catch shadows in their right sides. Nast, similarly to Whistler, appears massive and brooding and is executed with an apparent quickness of line and in deep, dark tones. Van Dyke describes this phase of Alexander's career in this way: "There is no attempt at fine color or decorative pattern, but rather a desire for the realistic largeness of the model with a resultant brusque modelling and some dragging of a heavily loaded brush," much in the Munich style of painting Alexander was outgrowing at that time.¹¹³ Though the color palette in the portraits of Nast and Mead is similar, Nast's portrait certainly speaks more to the sitter's personality. Nast's body seems to grow out of the darkly

¹¹³ Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 226.

shaded and quickly-rendered background and his unreadable, though not blank, expression connotes a mood of proud introspection and reflection, perhaps on his recent retirement and popular cartoons. The painting is both portrait of Nast and a study of a subject—a color or mood.¹¹⁴ Van Dyke describes similar work from this period as having “spirit and life about it and yet gave small indication of what Alexander’s style would ultimately become.”¹¹⁵ For Van Dyke, a critic concerned only with Alexander’s formal and decorative trajectory, there is little continuity between what Alexander made before and after 1890. Alexander’s artistic focus had not revealed itself according to Van Dyke, though I argue Van Dyke missed the mark. Alexander’s career is more fluid than Van Dyke would have his readers believe, as the mid-1880’s wish to “express a sentiment” is increasingly witnessed in his portraits of Whistler, Nast, and, next, Frits Thaulow (1847-1906).

In 1894, a year before Alexander began his serial exploration of line, color, and sentiment in his paintings of Very, Alexander painted the male counterpart to his earlier 1892 *Portrait Noir* and *Portrait Gris* in *Frits Thaulow* (fig. 20). Even though it is a named portrait, Goley reads the image of the Norwegian artist as “the male version of a decorative picture,” as Alexander subverts the fin de siècle tendency to only regard women as equivalent to decoration.¹¹⁶ Like Alexander’s portraits of his wife dressed in contemporary gowns, Thaulow’s clothes and body dominate the canvas and call for attention, expressing the “forceful” nature Van Dyke reads into this image.¹¹⁷ His face receives only limited canvas space in relation to his large, bulging body. Even more than Very’s profile in *Green Girl*, Thaulow’s facial profile serves to mimic the shape

¹¹⁴ Goley, *John White Alexander*, 37.

¹¹⁵ Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 227.

¹¹⁶ Goley, *John White Alexander*, 68.

¹¹⁷ Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 236.

of his angled coat. Like in Alexander's images of Very and the portrait of Miss Roosevelt, Thaulow is shown to look directly away from the viewer/Alexander. While there is no bowl of flowers, a book, or a hand to glance at in this image, the profile gaze still serves to prompt the viewer to read the featured artist's expression. William Randolph's previously stated quote concerning the Miss Roosevelt painting appropriately describes Thaulow's detached, "oblique gaze and profile view [removing] this painting from the straightforward depiction of a particular sitter and position it as a study in reverie."¹¹⁸ However, "reverie" seems not the most appropriate word, for Thaulow appears more as though he is intently studying something in his physical vicinity, perhaps a painting by himself or another artist.

Like his portraits of women, Thaulow, Nast, and Courtlandt "do not assume a formal pose, but rather are seen in profile or from an oblique angle, caught in [or just disturbed from] a private moment."¹¹⁹ Earlier, I related Springer's tangential definition of what she termed Alexander's "mood of repose and ideal beauty" to my own conception of what Alexander could have meant by "sentiment." While Springer argues that Alexander, in his Symbolist leanings, expresses mood most often and easiest through the use of the lone, contemplative female figure, she states additionally that the process of meditation and the wish for the subjective over the objective was a non-gendered trend at the end of the nineteenth century. Alexander himself is quoted in 1910 as having said, "One needs a peaceful state of mind, and many years of tuition to learn to appreciate real beauty in art."¹²⁰ Alexander's male sitters are inside, a spatial realm socially and politically regulated to women post-Enlightenment, much to the credit of Jean-

¹¹⁸ Dallas Museum of Art.

¹¹⁹ Goley, "Kindred Spirits," 151.

¹²⁰ Springer, "Art and the Feminine Muse," 2; "Need Good Digestion to Appreciate Beauty," *New York Evening Mail*, December 10, 1910.

Jacques Rousseau and his *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (1762). Yet a portrait of a man inside is not in complete aversion to the genre of portraiture, for as far back as the Renaissance artists situated figures indoors with a simplified background to highlight the human figure above all. In the late nineteenth century, the practice of situating men inside with plainer backgrounds “enjoyed great popularity,” as “the interior became a vehicle for expressing spiritual and aesthetic withdrawal” from the busy, modernizing city.¹²¹ Whereas women were encouraged to remain inside, withdrawn from bustling society for propriety’s and sanity’s sake, men were encouraged to seek solitude for a semi-religious, artistically-inspiring peace.

This intentional, aesthetic, and relaxing withdrawal is possibly at play in the understudied portrait of *William Croghan Denny* (1902, fig. 21). Painted the same year as *Miss Dorothy Quincy Roosevelt*, the portrait acts as a complementary visual pendant to the portrait of the young woman. Alexander completed this commission while in Onteora, New York, for the summer with his wife’s family. Alexander returned to Onteora in 1903, 1904, and 1910, painting portraits of the vacationing rich and famous to pass the time in the summer. Like the portrait of *Miss Dorothy Quincy Roosevelt*, Denny is seated in a similar green chair, though the back on his seat makes him look average size or smaller in comparison to Miss Roosevelt’s elegant figure. He sits like Nast and Thaulow at an angle, so much so that his body creates a triangular shape. His head, like Miss Roosevelt’s, and Very’s before her, is in profile. His hands grasp his lower knee and shin of the leg he has casually thrown over the other knee, one of the more twisting poses Alexander adopted for much of his commissioned portraits, especially of men. Van Dyke describes this fixity on “the accidental and the momentary” as a reaction against previous artistic convention. Denny’s pinkish face and hands draw attention to his act of physical inactivity and

¹²¹ Springer, “Art and the Feminine Muse,” 1.

mental concentrated fixation. His eyes, or the singular one the viewer can see of his right side, looks steadily in front of him. His outfit, too, connotes summer vacationing and rest as he wears a cream summer suit.

Goley finds that portraits like these became Alexander's staple in the last fifteen years of his life and that after leaving Paris Alexander no longer absorbed himself in the decorative, sentimental female figure.¹²² Though not melancholic like Miss Dorothy, Alexander's depiction of Denny fits in with the negotiation of femininity and masculinity at the time. Denny is depicted inside with no attributes to his status save his summer vacationing suit. He is certainly more alert than Miss Roosevelt, connoting the turn-of-the-century belief that men were better given to rational and intellectual pursuits.¹²³ Yet his mental interiority, emphasized by the sweeping and exaggerated lines in the upper right-hand side of the canvas, and possibly indicative of some sort of mental wrestling, lends itself to an expression of sentiment or the invocation of "an atmospheric nimbus."¹²⁴ Denny's portrait is not a study of line or color—both trademarks of Alexander's former career are absent. Yet there appears to be something going on in Denny's mind, allowing for "the habit of passive receptivity" many upper-class individuals sought to foster to better contemplate art and receive mental rest from the hustle of city life, much in the way a summer vacation was thought to do.¹²⁵ Denny's portrait well serves, as Van Dyke stated Alexander's portraits do, to be refined in emotion "enough in manner to be seen and not heard," to go on thinking, sensing, and concentrating without interruption.¹²⁶

¹²² Goley, *John White Alexander*, 120.

¹²³ Springer, "Art and the Feminine Muse," 4.

¹²⁴ Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 233.

¹²⁵ Springer, "Art and the Feminine Muse," 3; Theodore Child, *The Desire for Beauty* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1892), 51.

¹²⁶ Van Dyke, *American Painting*, 237.

The two paintings I wish to close this discussion on sentiment and Alexander's male portraits are the self-portrait titled *The Tenth Muse* (1909) and Alexander's *Portrait of Rodin* (*Portrait de Rodin*) (fig. 22) completed in 1899, which he submitted for several exhibitions for the Society of American Artists and the National Academy of Design. Though not completed around the same time, each canvas features a similar subject—an artist engaged in the act of making art in his preferred medium. While rather understudied, both portraits allow for a more sentimental reading than the majority of Alexander's oeuvre due mainly to the direct or indirect allusions to mythic qualities of the artist as conceived of in the modern period.

I want to bring back Springer's analysis on *The Tenth Muse*, in which she argues the self-portrait acts as a signifier of Alexander's relation to feminine imagery, feeling, and fashion. She writes:

He portrays himself standing before the easel about to lay in the sketch of a dressmaker's mannequin, which he has adorned with the wings of a deity and given to hold a ribboned sprig of greenery (perhaps laurel, a hero's tribute to the painter for dedicating his art to femininity).¹²⁷

Goley, on the other hand, reads the image as a celebration of personal artistic fame without any gendered meaning, for “in a rare public display, Alexander presents himself with authority, at the top of his game, dressed in a suit while surrounded by the tools of his profession,” the mannequin being an average tool of the modern studio.¹²⁸ Springer concludes her article by radically stating that Alexander and the male artist in general, a man relocated to serving well-made men and living off of their fortunes, whose pursuits lie in “the pursuit of leisure,” “was seen as having a feminine orientation . . . Like woman, the artist was believed to possess an

¹²⁷ Springer, “Art and the Feminine Muse,” 6.

¹²⁸ Goley, *John White Alexander*, 164.

‘intimate’ personality.”¹²⁹ The female subject and Alexander’s focus on refined feeling, what Springer calls his evocation of a “mood of repose and ideal beauty,” function to metaphorically speak to the artist’s life, pursuits, and interests.¹³⁰ Regardless of whether Alexander would have agreed with Springer’s conclusion, her analysis reveals the paradoxical relationship between masculinity and femininity in modern American art, as well as highlights the higher receptivity to sentiment a portrait of an artist is capable of expressing.

Alexander’s portrait of Auguste Rodin was not a commissioned work. In 1899, Alexander approached Rodin to pose for a portrait Alexander wished to submit to the American pavilion at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. Both Goley and Springer note the emotional meaning of this piece, for “Alexander’s hulking image of the sculptor reveals the essence of a man carrying the burden of a lifetime’s struggle for recognition.”¹³¹ Rodin’s large body looms in the right half of the composition, as an exaggerated play of light and shadow dance around him, inevitably casting the aging artist in the light. His head bends forward, his eyes almost indiscernible in the shadow, as his attention is on the small chunk of clay that the artist was known to ceaselessly work with in his studio.¹³² Certainly, Alexander achieved his goal for a “subject but not a simple portrait,” as the likeness of Rodin—his large “Herculean” sculptor’s hands, his large, unruly beard, and the French Légion d’honneur badge mark him as so—achieves the portraitist’s aim of a likeness, both physically and in terms of recognizable attributes, and secondarily conjures up an emotional, feeling figure, expressing the tension and yearn for public acceptance. Perhaps more so than in his *The Tenth Muse*, Alexander achieves

¹²⁹ Springer, “Art and the Feminine Muse,” 8.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1, 8.

¹³¹ Goley, *John White Alexander*, 105.

¹³² *Ibid.*; Goley, “Kindred Spirits,” 153.

this meld of masculinity and sentiment, no small feat in an age where the two qualities almost always signified the absence of and incongruence with the other.

CONCLUSION

John White Alexander's body of work certainly steers toward the feminine; in pure quantitative output, his oeuvre is marked primarily by a female subject and an interest in modern conceptions of beauty, the decorative, and interiority (both mentally and physically). Samples taken from critical points during his productive career, such as the portraits of Helen Abbe Howson, his wife Elizabeth, Juliette Very, and Miss Dorothy Quincy Roosevelt, speak to sentiment's relation to women and late nineteenth-century femininity. Alexander stated privately in 1885 that he wished to "express a sentiment" and in making this claim gave no gendered qualifier as to what he had in mind. Alexander's portraits of both fin de siècle men and women, though to different apparent and applied levels, manifest sentiment and sentimentality, making Alexander rare in his non-gendered application of what he would have described as a refined, controlled feeling or sensation, similar to being caught in reverie or concentrated on some sort of stimulus or emotion. Alexander's portraits of male artists, including James McNeill Whistler, himself, Frits Thaulow, and Auguste Rodin, and upper-class friends and clients illustrate the increasing tendency throughout his career to challenge conservative, nationalistic rhetoric that denied the congruence of sentiment and masculinity.

In addition to being one of the first writings to place Alexander within turn-of-the-century discourses on sentimentality, this paper adds to the discourse on art critical language, citing the gendered constructions and political implications imbedded in the use of certain connotatively-rich words. As avant-garde movements increased in popularity and acceptability and more traditional painting methods signaled a modern disposition, scholarly discussion and public knowledge of Alexander's life and work declined throughout the middle to late twentieth century, casting him under the shadow of John Singer Sargent, Thomas Eakins, and other more-

studied American portraitists. This study challenges Alexander's secondary and neglected status by illuminating the artist's complex and refreshing depictions of upper-class and artistic gender performance in a modernizing America.

Figures



Figure 1. John White Alexander, *Azalea (Portrait of Helen Abbe Howson)*, 1885, oil on canvas, 19.25 x 44.25 in., The Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York.



Figure 2. James McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1 (Portrait of the Artist's Mother)*, 1871, oil on canvas, 56.81 x 63.98 in., Musée d'Orsay. Copyright RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay)/Jean-Gilles Berizzi.



Figure 3. James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, 1862, oil on canvas, 83 x 42.5 in., National Gallery of Art.



Figure 4. John White Alexander, *Portrait Noir*, 1892, oil on canvas, 72.5 x 35.5 in., John White Alexander Great-Granddaughters.

Source: Goley, Mary Anne. *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age*. London and New York: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2018.



Figure 5. John White Alexander, *Portrait Gris*, 1892, oil on canvas, 72.5 x 35.5 in., Musée d'Orsay. Copyright RMN (Musée d'Orsay).



Figure 6. James McNeill Whistler, *Mother of Pearl and Silver: The Andalusian*, 1888 (?) -1900, oil on canvas, 73.39 x 32.27 in., National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Figure 7. John White Alexander, *Juliette*, c. 1895, oil on canvas, 48 x 35.5 in., Joan and Bernard Carl Collection.

Source: Goley, Mary Anne. *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age*. London and New York: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2018.



Figure 8. John White Alexander, *Althea*, 1895, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 52.5 in., Private Collection, New York.
Source: Goley, Mary Anne. *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age*. London and New York: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2018.

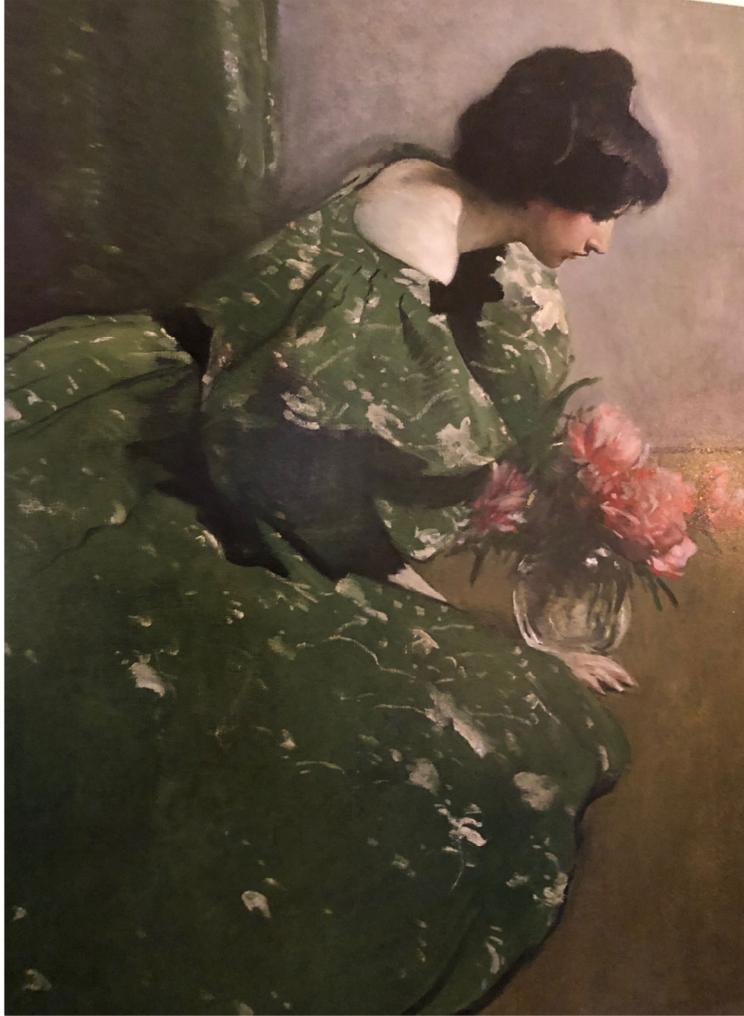


Figure 9. John White Alexander, *Les Pivoines (Peonies)*, 1896, oil on canvas, 48 x 36.5 in., Private Collection, Pennsylvania.

Source: Goley, Mary Anne. *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age*. London and New York: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2018.



Figure 10. John White Alexander, *Green Girl (Juliette)*, 1897, oil on canvas, 47.25 x 35 in., unknown private collection.

Source: Goley, Mary Anne. *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age*. London and New York: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2018.



Figure 11. Newspaper image from November 26, 1916, featuring *Green Girl (Juliette)*. John White Alexander papers. 1775-1968, bulk 1870-1915, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Source: Author photograph, October 2018.



Figure 12. John White Alexander, *Miss Dorothy Quincy Roosevelt (Later Mrs. Langdon Geer)*, 1901 or 1902, oil on canvas, 60 x 40 in., Dallas Museum of Art.



Figure 13. Thomas Eakins, *The Artist's Wife and His Setter Dog*, ca. 1884-89, oil on canvas, 30 x 23 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 14. Thomas Wilmer Dewing, *The Carnation*, 1893, oil on wood panel, 19.93 x 15.63 in., Freer | Sackler Collection.

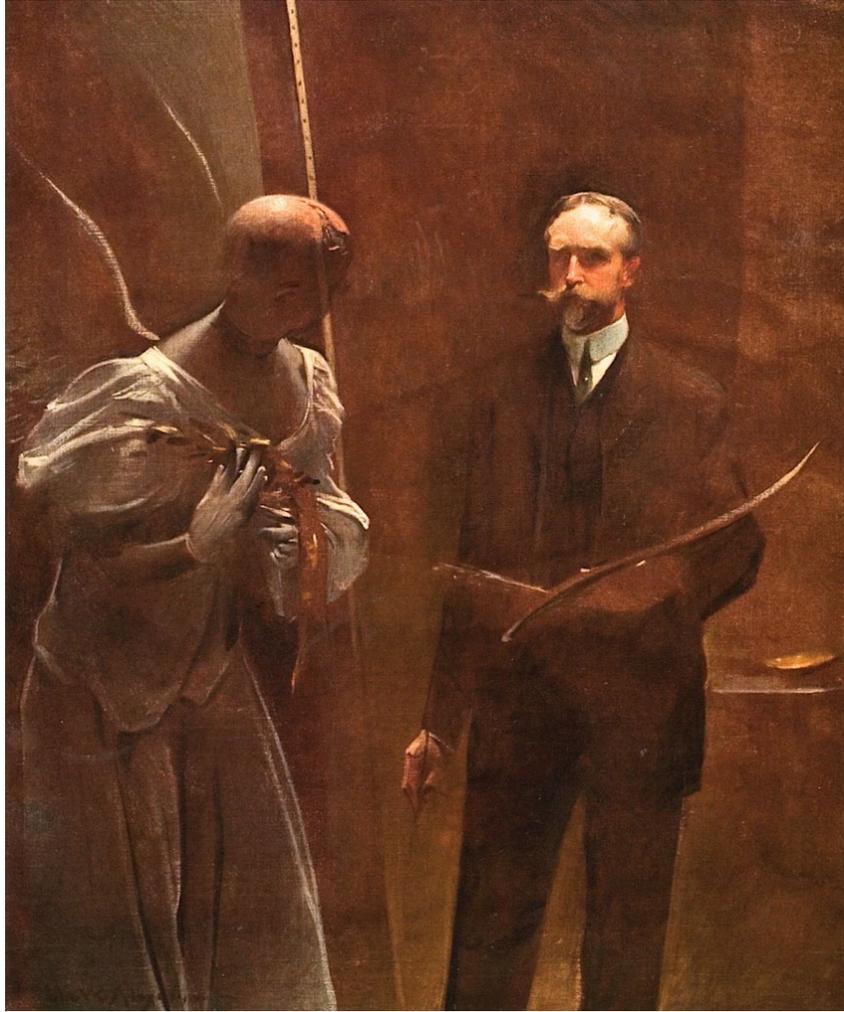


Figure 15. John White Alexander, *The Tenth Muse*, 1909, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 52.5 in., The Hevrdejs Collection, Houston.

Source: Goley, Mary Anne. *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age*. London and New York: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2018.



Figure 16. John White Alexander, *Whistler in London*, 1886, charcoal on paper, 32.5 x 17 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of A.E. Gallatin.



Figure 17. John White Alexander, *Portrait of Larkin Goldsmith Mead*, 1880, oil on canvas, 51 x 36.5 in., Private Collection.
Source: Goley, Mary Anne. *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age*. London and New York: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2018.



Figure 18. John White Alexander, *Thomas Nast*, 1887, oil on canvas, 40 x 30.25 in., National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 19. John White Alexander, *Courtlandt Palmer*, 1888, oil on canvas, 56 x 36 in., Stonington Historical Society, Stonington, Connecticut.
Source: Goley, Mary Anne. *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age*. London and New York: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2018.

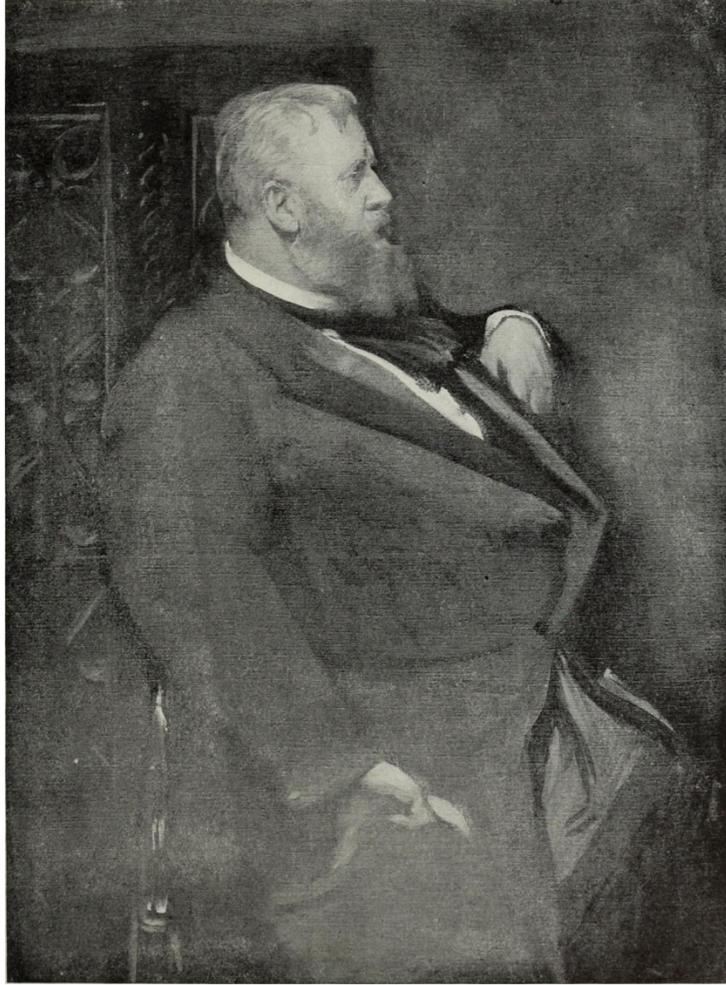


Figure 20. John White Alexander, *Frits Thaulow*, 1894, oil on canvas, 47.5 x 35 in., unlocated. Reproduction from catalogue of the W. P. Wilstach Collection, 1910.

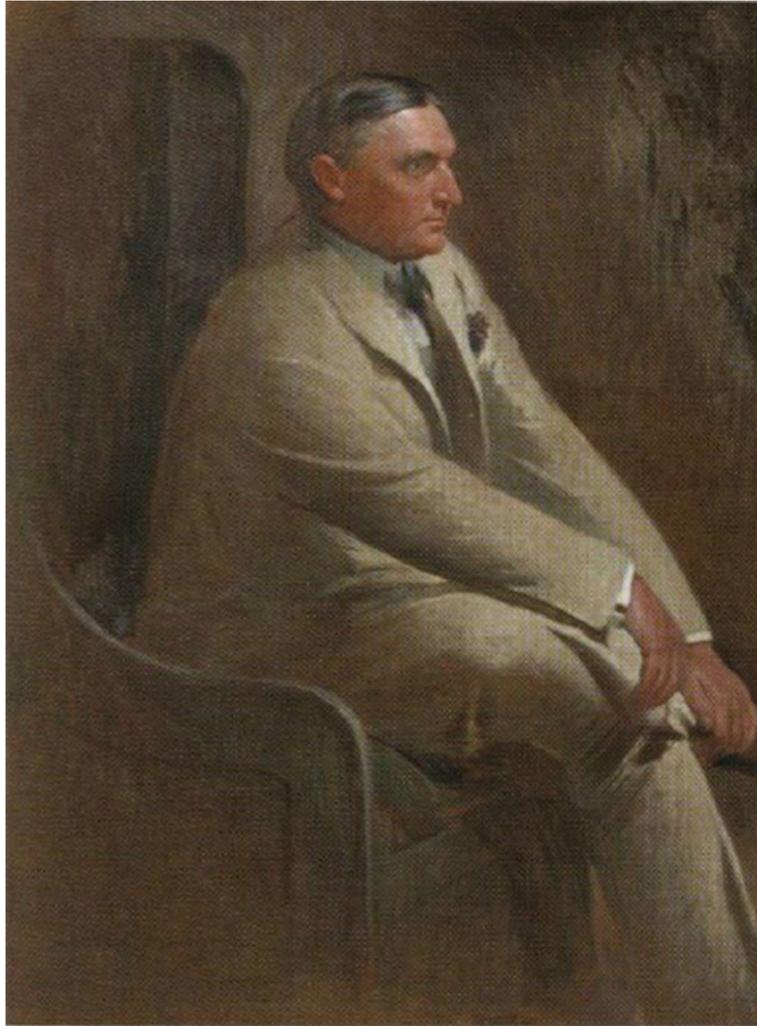


Figure 21, John White Alexander, *William Croghan Denny*, 1902, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in., John and Lorraine Anderson, New Jersey.

Source: Goley, Mary Anne. *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age*. London and New York: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2018.

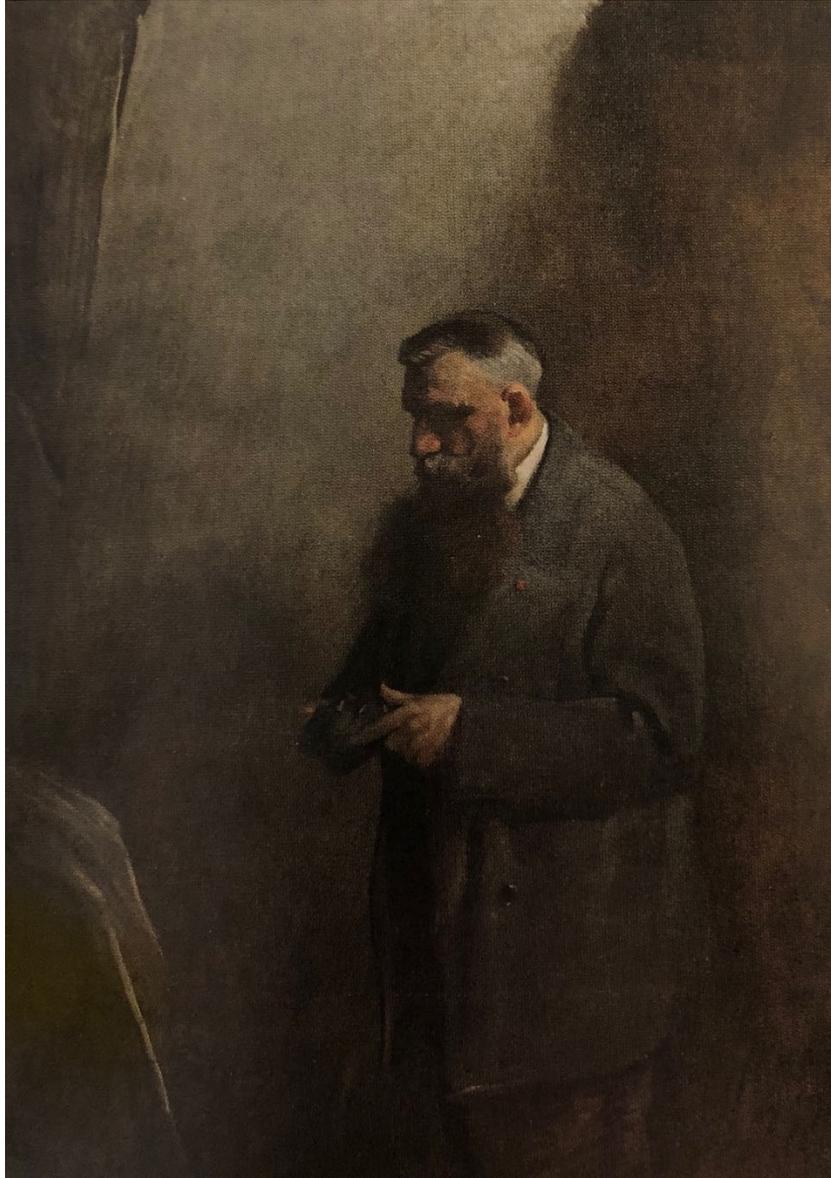


Figure 22, John White Alexander, *Portrait of Rodin (Portrait de Rodin)*, 1899, oil on canvas, 66 x 48 in., JP Morgan Chase Art Collection.

Source: Goley, Mary Anne. *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age*. London and New York: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2018.

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Vita

Personal Background	Ashton Nicole Smith Born in Exeter, New Hampshire
Education	Bachelor of Arts, <i>summa cum laude</i> Art History and International Studies Baylor University, 2017 Master of Arts Art History Texas Christian University, 2019
Fellowships And Awards	Tuition Stipend Award Texas Christian University, 2017-2019 Mary Jane and Robert Sunkel Art History Research Awards Texas Christian University, 2017-2019 Allbritton Art Institute Scholar of the Year Baylor University, 2015-2017 Eileen Blain Rudolph Scholarship Award Delta Delta Delta, Baylor University, 2017 Kate Alison Bronstein Memorial Scholarship Baylor University, 2016
Professional Experience	Graduate Teaching Assistant Texas Christian University, 2017-2019 Graduate Student Lectureship Course Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fall 2018 American Art Curatorial Intern Dallas Museum of Art, Summer 2018 Development Intern Dallas Contemporary, Summer 2018 Visual Resource Library Assistant and Social Media Assistant Texas Christian University, Spring 2018

Co-Curator, *McKie Trotter III: SCAPES*
Texas Christian University, Spring 2018

Student Assistant to the Membership Coordinator
Mayborn Museum Complex, Baylor University, 2016-2017

Visitor and Volunteer Services Intern
Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin, Summer 2016

Undergraduate Teaching Assistant
Allbritton Art Institute, Baylor University, 2015

Abstract

The American painter John White Alexander is best known for his intimately cropped images of billowing-dressed women lounging around an amorphous domestic sphere, caught in a state of emotion or thought. Alexander, when he began serially exploring this subject, stated that he wished to paint “a subject and not a simple portrait. . . . It is very simple—only one figure but in it I want to express a sentiment.” The painting *Azalea* completed in 1885 illustrates the mixture of subject and portrait and may be said to express a mood or feeling.

Sentiment, critically and actively used in the nineteenth century in its noun form or its adjectival “sentimental,” can be defined as “an attitude, thought, or judgement prompted by feeling” or further a “refined feeling: delicate sensibility especially as expressed in a work of art.” The varying definitions never state a gendered bias, though late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attitudes tended, as Alexander did, to conflate sentimentality with femininity.

Alexander’s extensive exploration of “sentiment” through solitary representations of women suggests the underlying belief that there existed something inherently feminine about sentimentality or sentimental about femininity. This paper begins with a general overview on the use of “sentiment” or “sentimental” in relation to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art, especially in criticism to illustrate the word’s gendered meanings and implications. By situating Alexander’s oeuvre, though with particular emphasis on his decorative pictures and his commissioned high-society portraiture, within the discourse of Gilded Age notions of sentiment, Alexander’s work stands as a surprisingly democratic, inclusive exploration of the term. While women overtly and often receive sentimental treatment, Alexander’s portraiture of men, a class societally polarized against “sentiment” or “sentimentality,” retain a sentiment/al, subjective nature imbued into their objective likeness.