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Alexa L. Hayes April 13, 2010

Confronting Elsie Palmer: John Singer Sargent as a Painter of Real Women

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An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

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By Alexa L. Hayes

Studies John Singer Sargent's portrait *Elsie Palmer* (1889-90: Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center) not simply as a likeness, but as a psychologically penetrating painting of a complex individual. Visual analysis of preliminary sketches and the final portrait reveals Sargent's meaningful changes of composition, pose, hair, scale, and painting style. Investigates the biography of Elsie Mellen Palmer and her relationship with her parents, General William Jackson Palmer, an American railroad pioneer, and Queen Palmer, an American expatriate in England, through various sources including previously unexplored archival materials. Details Queen Palmer's immersion in a close-knit art circle that included Sargent, Ellen Terry, Henry James, and Alice Strettell (Mrs. J. Comyns Carr). Investigates Ightham Mote, the idyllic English manor house where the Palmers lived while embracing the ideals of the Aesthetic movement. Illuminates how Sargent represented Elsie as a person caught between America and England, her mother and father, girlhood and womanhood, and as an unwilling sitter for Sargent's painting and an uncomfortable participant in the life chosen for her.

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Alexa L. Hayes

TABLE OF CONTENTS

In a letter of 1884, Henry James wrote that he wished Sargent would "come here to live and work--there being such a field in London for a *real* painter of women."[1] In a variation on James's words, I want to argue that John Singer Sargent was a painter of *real* women. *Elsie Palmer* (1889-1890: Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, Colorado Springs) is a portrait that exemplifies Sargent's ability to capture a real woman on canvas, revealing her to the viewer as a person with inner complexities and inherent oppositions. To understand this portrait, I will examine the visual elements of the painting, Sargent's preliminary sketches, and Elsie's biography in an effort to illustrate Sargent's unique ability to uncover the distinctive personality within his, admittedly, unwilling sitter.

The blankness of the girl's expression invites subjective responses from the viewer. This blankness was intentional, since Sargent was a talented portraitist who painted a broad spectrum of expressions in his oeuvre, and allows one to project one's own emotions onto the sitter. Because of this potential reflection and emotional exchange between the sitter and the viewer, *Elsie Palmer* cannot be understood in one viewing, much like a person cannot be understood in one meeting. In effect, Sargent has painted a portrait of Elsie Palmer as a psychologically penetrating study which may reflect the viewer's own emotions as it represents the complicated personality of the sitter.

*INTRODUCTION*

At the time Sargent painted her, Elsie Mellen Palmer was a seventeen-year-old caught between America and England, her mother and father, and girlhood and

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[1] Letter from Henry James to Elizabeth Boott, June 2, 1884, in Henry James, *Henry James Letters,* ed. by Leon Edel, vol. III (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), 42.

womanhood. Breaking from tradition, Sargent depicts not a sweet child who welcomes the viewer, nor a woman who submits agreeably to the male gaze, but a young woman who confronts the viewer directly with an expression of unhappiness. Although she obediently holds the pose for the portrait, Sargent emphasizes her hostile attitude, which creates an inescapable tension in the painting between viewer and sitter. A reviewer for the *Birmingham Daily Post* noted that "the expression of the face indicates that the stubborn nature has not yet been subdued by torture," a revealing, albeit dramatic, illustration of the discomfort viewers feel upon confronting Elsie's portrait.[2]

Through the evolution of the portrait, illustrated in his numerous studies of the sitter, Sargent reveals the difficulty he experienced with trying to visually capture the complicated person that was Elsie Palmer. In an article for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine,* Henry James wrote that Sargent possessed "the quality in the light of which the artist sees deep into his subject, undergoes it, absorbs it, discovers it in new things that were not on the surface, becomes patient with it, and almost reverent, and, in short, elevates and humanizes the technical problem" of painting an effective portrait true to his impression of the sitter.[3] Sargent does not merely paint as he is instructed according to the commission; instead, he thoughtfully considers his fleeting first impression of the subject, savoring the morsels of mysteries within that personality that were only hinted at upon first meeting but were intriguing nonetheless, and sets out to portray his sitter in the most accurate and expressive way possible.

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[2] "Exhibition of the New Gallery," *Birmingham Daily Post,* April 29,1891, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, http://proquest.umi.com, 4.

[3] Henry James, "John S. Sargent," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine,* 75, no. 449 (October 1887), 691.

The same year James wrote the letter wishing Sargent would come to London, the artist was at a major point in his career. His controversial painting *Madame X* (1884: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) was shown in 1884 at the Salon and created a scandal in the Parisian art world among critics and patrons alike. In reaction to the harsh criticism he received in Paris, Sargent moved to England to restore his self-confidence and help rebuild his reputation. He was widely known there as a talented portraitist, something the *Madame X* scandal could not damage, so he took up work on Tite Street in London in 1886.

Sargent enjoyed great success in London, quickly finding a comfortable niche within the close-knit art circle in England. He was close to successful artists, including Paul Helleu and Francis Davis Millet, the literary authors Robert Louis Stevenson and Henry James, and the well-known actress Ellen Terry, all of whom he painted while living in London during the 1880s and later. Through this art circle, he met the Palmer family at their moated castle in Kent. It was at that medieval manor that he began his portrait of the eldest daughter in 1889, seventeen-year-old Elsie Palmer.

Elsie was born to American parents. Her father, General William Jackson Palmer, was a Civil War veteran and a successful railway man who founded the city of Colorado Springs after building a railroad from Kansas City to Colorado. Her mother, Mary Lincoln "Queen" Mellen Palmer, from a prominent family in New York, was a "lovely, petite girl with the melodic mezzo voice [and] was gentility personified."[4] Queen and

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[4] Celeste Black, *Queen of Glen Eyrie: The Story of Mary Lincoln Mellon Palmer, Wife of General William Palmer* (Colorado Springs: Blackbear Publishing, 1999), 7-8. From what I have read, it is unclear who gave her the nickname of Queen. Some biographers claim General Palmer called her that, because of how much he loved and respected her, but others say that her father called her Queen because she was the only woman in his life, after her mother died when Queen was only four.

General Palmer married on November 8, 1870, spending their honeymoon overseas in England. After settling in Colorado Springs in 1871, the couple designed and built Glen Eyrie, a mansion with an unusual "honeycomb" design that spread out from a central living room. At the time the Palmers built Glen Eyrie, Colorado Springs was a rugged town quite isolated from civilization and untouched by the refined world Queen knew and loved in New York. While General Palmer focused on bringing people into Colorado Springs, Queen busied herself with starting the first school.[5] With her husband busy sorting out the complicated "political threads" that surrounded his proposed railroad from Colorado to Mexico City, Queen often visited her family in the East, where she gave birth to Elsie on October 30, 1872.[6]

Elsie's parents were essentially "tumbleweeds" throughout America, since her father traveled constantly around the West for business and her mother traveled constantly to the East Coast and to England. Only one of their three daughters was actually born in Colorado--Dorothy, born in 1880--just one year before the family relocated to England because of Queen's delicate health, which was aggravated by the Colorado climate. The youngest of the three Palmer girls, Marjory, was born in England a year later in 1881, and the next year General Palmer returned to Colorado Springs, where

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[5] John S. Fisher, *A Builder of the West: The Life of General William Jackson Palmer* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1939), 212. John Fisher, the author of this biography, corresponded directly with Elsie Palmer to get information for his book about General Palmer. A number of the letters from Fisher, as well as from his mother Alice, to Elsie Palmer are in the Special Collections archives of the Tutt Library at Colorado College and date as early as 1948, when Fisher was still a child. Fisher addressed Elsie as "Aunt," supporting the theory that his mother was the sister of Dr. Henry Chorley Watts, who married Elsie's sister Marjory. Marjory met Dr. Watts when he was the resident physician at Glen Eyrie, caring for General Palmer after he had a paralyzing accident. This information comes from a document called "Dr. Henry Chorley Watts" by Lester L. Williams, M. D., also in the Special Collections of the Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs.

[6] Fisher, *Builder of the West*, 222. Elsie Palmer lived from 1872-1955.

he lived until his death. General Palmer visited his family in England periodically, but he never lived there again.

In England, as in America, Queen moved often, never quite settling down in any one place. In contrast to her life in Colorado, however, Queen became immersed in English refinement and art, a world where she could focus on social events instead of the threat of attacks by neighboring Native American tribes. She regularly hosted parties for the artistic elite, such as Ellen Terry and Henry James, either of whom could have introduced her to the well-known expatriate painter John Singer Sargent. In 1889, Sargent painted a number of the Palmers' friends, including Mrs. J. W. Comyns Carr and her sister Alma Strettell, while he stayed with the family at Ightham Mote in Kent.[7] Sargent started Elsie's portrait in October 31, 1889, and did not finish it until late December 1890, after the Palmer Family left Ightham Mote. The painting was passed to Elsie after Queen's death.

Sargent's portrait of Elsie Palmer has been overshadowed, during his lifetime and in modern times, by earlier paintings such as *El Jaleo* (1880: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston), *Fumee d'Ambre Gris* (1880: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown), *Lady with a Rose* (1882: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), *The Daughters of Edward D. Boit* (1882: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), and, of course,

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[7] Alice Vansittart Strettell, *Mrs. J. Comyns Carr's Reminiscences,* edited by Eve Adam (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1926), 120. According to her *Reminiscences,* there were "very special ties" between the Palmers and Alice Strettell, later Mrs. J. Comyns Carr. Alice speaks about Mrs. Palmer: "It was she who had cared for my brother when he had been sent to Colorado by his physicians and my sister Alma had been a guest at her home in 'The Garden of the Gods' during her visit to America. Therefore, when the Palmers settled in England, Ightham Mote became a kind of second home to us and our children." Alice Strettell was also a costume designer, and designed the costume depicted in Sargent's painting of *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth.* Her sister, Alma Strettell, was a close friend of Queen, as well as of Henry James and Sargent.

*Madame X.* His depiction of *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth* (1889: The Tate Gallery, London) received notable attention at the time he exhibited it, and even today it is well-known and revered. These paintings overshadow *Elsie Palmer* because of their heightened drama and theatricality, as in *El Jaleo* and *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth*; their depiction of bold and irresistible characters, as in *Lady with a Rose* and *Madame X;* and their enticing depictions of the exotic, as in *Fumee d'Ambre Gris* and *La Carmencita* (1890: Musee d'Orsay, Paris).

*THE PAINTING*

Sargent painted *Elsie Palmer* with subtlety in mind, since Elsie's pose and expression could have been far more confrontational than they are. For example, he could have painted Elsie standing, perhaps with hands on hips, towering over the viewer as the epitome of a furiously unwilling sitter. But Elsie was not a visibly angry person. She was reserved about the effects her complicated family situation had on her, a personality trait that Sargent worked into the painting by putting her in an obedient pose, but countering that pose with her unhappy expression. My use of the term "unwilling" in this paper expresses Elsie's feeling of unhappiness at being subjected to the male gaze. She agrees to sit for the portrait, but her face expresses her resentment. Further, I expand the term to address Elsie's unhappiness with her life in England and the discomfort she feels while stuck in a liminal state, between her family and between girlhood and womanhood.

The painting's visual elements are subtle, like the layers of meaning within the portrait. Sargent's palette consists mostly of browns and whites, with soft diffused

lighting instead of harsh, direct lighting, which would have created dramatic contrasts and taken away from the subtle streaks of pastels in Elsie's dress and distracted from the power of her expression.

A similar visual subtlety of tone and color is also found in *The Daughters of Edward D. Boit*. The paintings share a quietness, as well, a sort of silence that spans between the viewer and the subjects, but *The Daughters* has received the most attention from scholars, critics, and the public because of its radical composition, the casual poses of the girls, and Sargent's revealing characterization of the stages of childhood.[8] Looking at *Elsie Palmer* is not like looking at *The Daughters*. Elsie is unsettling yet hypnotic, so the viewer becomes trapped in her gaze, sharing her discomfort and suffering in silence with her. Upon seeing the portrait at an exhibition in April of 1890, a reviewer for the *New York Times* noted how haggard Elsie's face looks, and how it "makes one uneasy."[9] The girls in *The Daughters*, in contrast, are sweet and welcoming. They do not intrude upon or challenge the viewer. They simply look out of the painting, as if the viewer walked in on them while they waited to be posed for their real group portrait. The innocence and the sweetness of the girls' expressions are far less threatening than the icy stare of Elsie Palmer.

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[8] Erica E. Hirshler's *Sargent's Daughters: The Biography of a Painting"* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2009) goes into great detail about this painting, from the Velázquez-inspired composition to the meaning behind each of the girls' poses. This paper follows a format similar to Hirschler's book in analyzing a Sargent painting by looking at the elements of the painting itself and by a close investigation of the biographies of the girls in the painting, their parents, and Sargent himself. *The Daughters* is an example of Sargent's interest in familial relationships, complex personalities, and the lives of fellow expatriates, an interest also expressed in *Elsie Palmer*.

[9] "Society of American Artists," *New York Times,* April 28, 1890, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, http://proquest.umi.com, 4.

The dimensions of the paintings make a difference, too, in their reception. *The Daughters* is smaller than life-size, which invites the viewer to come close to the painting, close enough to see the brush strokes. *Elsie Palmer*, on the other hand, is life-sized or even a bit larger, forcing the viewer to stand about twenty feet away to properly view the painting. Sargent physically distances the viewer from the subject simply by making the painting so large, but that distance enhances the discomfort the viewer feels when approaching *Elsie Palmer*. An encounter with this portrait becomes something more like a confrontation, an uncomfortable yet seemingly inescapable experience once the viewer is caught in Elsie's gaze. Because Sargent painted her with such charged tension, it is possible that that is why the portrait has been overlooked, or perhaps intentionally avoided.

The following visual analysis will initially attempt to address the painting as it stands, in an effort to identify what the artist communicates to the viewer in the painting's most pure form, without any biographical information about the sitter or painter. As the painting is visually deconstructed, information about Sargent will be woven in to help inform and explain the visual elements and how the painting elicits certain emotions from the viewer.

A young woman sits with her back against carved wood panels, hands folded in her lap. Her white dress falls in folds around her, held close around her waist by a satin sash. The fabric tapers out from her lap, falling to the floor, where a single delicate foot rests. With her back straight, hands folded, and ankles crossed, the young woman's pose seems poised, patient, and pretty: perfect for a portrait. Her expression, however, is not.

Her mouth is set, unsmiling, and her eyes stare straight ahead. The blankness of her expression is unwelcoming and unsettling. The symmetry of the composition creates a stillness in the image, furthered by the symmetry of her pose and face. She sits with her shoulders squared, directly confronting the viewer with an unbroken stare, like an animal as it guards its territory in the face of a threat. The stillness of the image is at odds with the subject's confrontational body language, creating tension. The viewer squirms, trapped in her gaze, unable to predict her next movement or when the silence will be broken.

The perspective of the portrait is strange. The artist painted the young woman as if he were on the same level as she, looking at her directly, but only from the waist up. The sash around her waist enhances this effect, since it is depicted straight-on, not from an angle. The perspective tilts, however, below her waist. The viewer looks slightly down on her lap. She sits a bit forward on the bench with her back straight, keeping good posture. From the perspective on her face and torso, the bench should be much narrower. Moreover, it is unclear where the bench meets the paneling on the left side of the painting; it is merely blocked in on the right, with little definition. The bench legs are clearly rendered, but because they touch the floor so far behind the girl's feet, the perspective tilts even farther forward. The apparent changes the artist made to the bench and the color differences between the sitter's yellow-white blouse and the cool purple tones of her skirt also suggest a shifting viewpoint.

As a result of these distortions, the lower half of the sitter's body pushes the viewer's vantage point up in the picture plane, as if the viewer were standing over her,

while the direct view of her torso and face keep the viewer's vantage point from rising above her. This combination of perspectives only adds to the discomfort of the viewer when facing the young woman's confrontational stare. The art historian Elizabeth Prettejohn identifies this as a "tilting pose," which Sargent greatly exaggerates in his later portraits through the use of diagonals. His employment of the "tilting pose" here is significant because it is the first time he uses it. In his later portraits, Sargent uses the tilt to create a "precarious" image, as if the sitter were slipping off her seat, but here he creates a captivating tension between the tilting perspective and the stable symmetry.[10]

When viewing the painting from twenty to thirty feet away, the portrait looks finely painted with minimal brush strokes (Fig. 2). A reviewer for *The Pall Mall Gazette* writes that *Elsie Palmer* "is a very fine piece of impressionism, which seen at its proper distance--the middle of the room--comes together with a brilliance and life-like effect," essentially removing the hand of the artist.[11] This "life-like effect" enhances the illusionary aspect of the portrait, as if the viewer were looking at a real girl poised on a bench, but upon closer inspection, the viewer realizes that the painting is actually painted broadly (Fig. 3). The loose handling of the paint *counters* the illusionary aspect of the portrait, calling attention to the fact that a portrait is simply paint on canvas and not a window onto reality. When looking at an "impressionist" painting, a work that embraces

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[10] Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Interpreting Sargent* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998), 44. Although Prettejohn only specifically identifies this "tilting pose" in *Mrs. Hugh Hammersley* (1893) and *Mrs. Charles Thursby* (1897-8), she does mention that these paintings "represent an extreme development of the tilting pose Sargent had used in his earliest portraits." *Elsie Palmer*, then, is a transitional piece in Sargent's development of this precarious posing of his sitters, seen at its extreme in the aforementioned portraits, among others.

[11] "The New Gallery," *The Pall Mall Gazette,* April 29, 1891, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, http://proquest.umi.com, 2.

the liberal handling of paint on the surface, one focuses on the artist's hand, streaking across the canvas in fluid or frantic movements. The painting becomes about the process of painting and the material of paint, more so than an illusion of the sitter.

The style in which Sargent painted *Elsie Palmer* is consistent with the inherent tension in the portrait. He painted her broadly, sketching in details such as fingers and a pendant necklace, drawing attention to his own interaction and dialogue with the *paint*, not the sitter. The scale of the portrait, though, forces the viewer back. When viewing the painting from a distance, the brushstrokes blend together and the artist's hand disappears. The interaction, then, changes from between artist and canvas to between viewer and subject. The illusion of the portrait can shatter, depending on how close one chooses to stand to the painting. Of course, if one is responsive to Elsie's glare, one will stand as far back as possible, out of reach of the mutinous young woman, just in case the portrait is as real as it appears.

This tension between realistic and "impressionist" styles is interesting because Sargent successfully employs both. The painting appears life-like and realistic when viewed from a proper distance, but upon closer inspection, the illusion disappears into an impressionistic broad handling of paint. Sargent is simultaneously painting a revealing portrait of a complicated young woman *and* demonstrating his advanced skill in two seemingly opposite modes of painting, both in the handling of paint and the conception of what a painting is about, illusion or material. Henry James, in his article on Sargent for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine,* writes that "the gift that he possesses, he possesses

completely--the immediate perception of the end and of the means."[12] In a way he is describing the artist's manipulation of the impressionist handling of paint, the "means," and the sheer scale of the portrait, which forces the "end" of a life-like image. Although Sargent addresses each portrait "as if painting were pure tact of vision, a simple manner of feeling," he painted Elsie a number of times, as if exploring his different feelings towards her, reconciling his first impressions of this complex young woman in order to paint her in the most truthful, revealing way possible.[13]

*THE SKETCHES*

Sargent made a number of studies of Elsie Palmer before deciding on the final composition, each study depicting a different impression of the sitter. Few of Sargent's oil sketches for portraits survive. Ormond elaborates that "preliminary oil studies for portraits are rare in Sargent's oeuvre and suggest the care that went into the realization" of the final paintings.[14] He was known for painting directly onto the canvas without much prior preparation, making the number of sketches for Elsie Palmer's portrait unusual. Additionally, Sargent finished portraits fairly quickly, usually within months, but Elsie's portrait took a year to complete. This suggests that Elsie's portrait was particularly difficult for him, but also that the portrait was important enough for Sargent to invest so much time in it. A close visual analysis of the preliminary sketches in comparison with

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[12] James, "John S. Sargent," 691.

[13] James, "John S. Sargent," 684.

[14] Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent: The Early Portraits* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 45.

the final portrait will not only illuminate what Sargent found most captivating about Elsie's personality, but will reveal how the artist made changes in order to create the most accurate portrayal of a real young woman.

The most significant changes among the portraits are in the tilt of the face, the hairstyle, the costume, the pose, the setting, and the overall composition. When examining these elements, I will reveal biographical information about Elsie and the Palmer family, in an attempt to uncover the relevance of those elements and the reasons why Sargent made certain changes to them. The number of sketches show Sargent's commitment to resolving the artistic complications of portraying a *real* person, and his ultimate respect for Elsie since, as the studies will reveal, he wanted to depict the complex person she was instead of merely copying her face. Although Sargent's initial attempts are fairly conventional representations of a young girl, in the final portrait he breaks from tradition through the captivating tension he creates by juxtaposing Elsie's expression with her pose.

In a pen-and-ink drawing of 1889, the girl looks to the right (Fig. 4). Her lips are parted, not pursed, and in combination with the lack of eye contact, the overall mood of the drawing is comfortable. In an oil sketch (1889-90), Sargent painted a coy young woman in a garden, surrounded by roses (Fig. 5). Elsie's chin drops toward her chest, tilting her face forward so she looks up at the viewer with an expression of charming sweetness. In another preliminary oil sketch, the girl stands in a large room with stained-glass windows and a fireplace, wearing what appears to be the same dress as in the final

painting (Fig. 6).[15] Here Elsie stands at a slight angle with, as Prettejohn notes, "toes at right angles in accordance with what eighteenth-century etiquette prescribed as a graceful pose."[16] The sketch is unfinished, but the concept is clear. The young woman appears sweet and ladylike, just as any mother would want her seventeen-year-old daughter to appear.

When considering the final composition and emotional atmosphere that Sargent created, it is important to closely examine the preliminary sketches because they illustrate Sargent's struggle to represent this young woman in a way that would be the most true to Elsie's personality and his impressions. In the garden portrait (Fig. 5), the sitter's hair is pulled back, with her bangs curled around her face. This softens her appearance and draws attention away from her slightly bulging eyes. Her hair appears as soft as the flower petals behind her. In the other sketches, as well as in the final portrait, Elsie's hair is down, with her bangs uncurled. Straightened, they create a sharp line across her forehead that runs perpendicular to the rest of her hair, which falls to her shoulders. In the seated sketch (Fig. 7) and final portrait (Fig. 1), her hair corresponds to the pattern of the wood panels in their sharp angles and straight lines. The blunt bangs above her eyes emphasize their prominence and hold the viewer's focus there. In the final portrait, Sargent has created a dynamic composition: the pale figure makes a pyramid against the dark paneling, with its apex at her face. Elsie's hair blends into the wood, highlighting the contrast between her white skin and the brown paneling.

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[15] This sketch was painted in the Great Hall at Ightham Mote in Kent, famous for its elaborate Gothic-inspired stained-glass windows, high ceiling, and massive fireplace.

[16] Prettejohn, *Interpreting Sargent*, 39.

In addition to the differences in hairstyle, the collars of the dresses in the garden portrait (Fig. 5) and the final portrait (Fig. 1) affect the appearance of the young woman. In all the paintings, Elsie wears a white dress, but in the garden portrait, her large collar falls open around her neck, keeping her cool and comfortable outdoors. The collar of the dress she wears in both the standing (Fig. 6) and sitting portraits (Figs. 1 and 8), however, fits tight around her throat, adding to the austerity of the setting and the young woman's appearance.

In both the standing (Fig. 6) and sitting sketches (Fig. 5 and 8), Sargent paints Elsie's face at an angle, although in the standing portrait she is turned to the right and in the sitting portrait, to the left. The only time the young woman directly confronts the viewer is in the final portrait (Fig. 1), so Sargent must have seen something in her personality that could not be expressed with her face averted. In two sketches (Fig. 6 and 8) and the final portrait, Elsie wears the creamy satin dress with long sleeves, waist sash, and accordion-pleat skirt, suggesting that it holds significance for either Sargent or the Palmer family. With its satin material and pale color, the dress is an indication of wealth, and it would be worn for a special occasion, like a ball. Since Elsie is young, the expensive gown reflects more on her family's social status than her own.

Elsie was painted in her family's moated English manor, Ightham Mote. Considering her family's expatriate status, the style of the dress and the setting of the portrait illuminate the cosmopolitan ideal that Queen Palmer sought to embody. In an article on Queen Palmer published in 1923, F. C. Thornton recalls that "whatever her financial resources were at the time, her love of dress was invariably governed by her

artistic taste."[17] Queen's "artistic taste" favored the fashions of the Aesthetic movement, which flourished in England during the late nineteenth-century and was popular in the art community that Queen tried to associate herself with. The Aesthetic movement revered the romantic mythology of the Medieval Age. Queen's choice to live at Ightham Mote, a romantic and picturesque moated castle, reflects her interest in the Aesthetic movement, since the historic home is from the Medieval period, when knights and ladies would have walked its halls. Aesthetic clothing harkens back to medieval styles that featured free-flowing fabrics wrapped loosely around the body.[18] These styles allowed the wearer to move freely and were considered healthier than other contemporary fashions because they did not require restrictive elements such as corsets, which inhibited breathing and compressed organs. Patricia A. Cunningham explains the relevance of aesthetic dress:

> Even in the late 1870s . . . women had begun to dress like the quaint figures in Pre-Raphaelite paintings. By affecting the aesthetic, or artistic, styles of dress worn by the Londoners who participated in what was described as the "Cult of Beauty," American women were expressing their own feelings of modernity. . . . Artistic dress for Americans was more than an outpouring of sentiment for a new fashion. It represented the substance of a new way of thinking.[19]

Queen was familiar with the Aesthetic fashions before she lived at Ightham Mote. Her first introduction to this trend was probably during her honeymoon trip to England with General Palmer, igniting her interest in the Aesthetic movement. Elsie's dress, then,

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[17] F. C. Thornton, "Mrs. Palmer . . . : Striking Character of a Woman," 3. Fifty-first Annual Edition of the Colorado Springs *Gazette Telegraph* (April 8, 1923), 3. This newspaper clipping is a part of the Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College in Colorado Springs, Colorado. When it was cut out, the person clipped off most of the title, so the only text left reads "Mrs. P . . . Part . . ." with "Striking Character of a Woman" as the subtitle. It is safe to say, upon reading the contents of the article, that the title started with "Mrs. Palmer," although I cannot speculate about the rest of the title since so little of it remains.

[18] Penelope Byrde, *Nineteenth Century Fashion* (London: B. T Batsford Limited, 1992), 71.

[19] Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art,* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2003), 135.

aligns her family's identity with the artistic elite of London society and the "Cult of Beauty."

Beyond social status, the dress also holds meaning for Elsie herself. The dress is creamy ivory, not brilliant white. White traditionally signifies purity, and is customarily worn by young children, as in Sargent's *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* (1885-1886: The Tate Gallery, London), which depicts two young girls in bright-white loose dresses. Elsie's dress appears to be designed for an adult in its complexity, fit, and detail, and the ivory color suggests maturity and sophistication. But Elsie's hair, in every sketch but the garden portrait, is worn loose like a child's, since little girls did not usually wear their hair up in the nineteenth century. Through her hairstyle, then, Sargent connects his image of Elsie with images of little girls, in contrast to her apparent age and the ivory color of her adult dress. Elsie's final portrait depicts a girl caught between two worlds. She has left the world of childhood, but has not yet truly entered womanhood and the world of marriage. The differences between the final portrait (Fig. 1) and the seated oil sketch (Fig. 7) are subtle but significant. The seated sketch is off-balance, with a vertical division between light and dark, which the spray of light fabric helps to correct. In the final portrait, Sargent arranges the pleated skirt more carefully to create compositional balance. The black shoes seem unusually heavy in the sketch, contrasting with her dress, and distract from the focus on Elsie's face. Her shoes are changed to white in the final portrait, presumably to unify the color of her clothing and keep the eye focused on her face.

Surprisingly, in light of his attempts to achieve balance and symmetry, Sargent added space above Elsie's head in the final portrait. The sketch (Fig. 7) has a diamond-

shaped symmetry, with the girl's hands being the perfect center of the painting. The final portrait's center is higher up, at her waist, creating a slightly bottom-heavy composition. This change makes the figure appear smaller in the pictorial space, less imposing, an example of the inherent contradictions within this painting, since Elsie's pose seems confrontational but her size within the picture is relatively small. Finally, Sargent changed the position of Elsie's head. In the sketch, her head tilts to the side and she looks slightly to the left. In the final portrait, she stares squarely at the viewer. Sargent abandons the submissive head tilt in favor of direct confrontation with the viewer, yet he also abandons the imposing monumentality of the figure. Although the figure appears dwarfed by the paneling behind her, her direct gaze negates any appearance of submission. Elsie stares out with a cool confidence, unconcerned that she appears small and delicate in her satin dress, surrounded by dark paneling.

The atmosphere in each of the portraits is dramatically different. In the standing portrait (Fig. 6), Elsie is in the Great Hall, an expansive room with medieval features, like Gothic windows, and a massive marble fireplace. The painting looks almost cave-like, with the slender girl emerging from a dark, spacious background. A collie, a beautiful, elegant dog, lies on his side at her feet, another symbol of her family's wealth. For many children, a dog is a loyal companion and confidant, comforting the child with warmth and softness. Sargent's portrait of Beatrice Townsend (1882: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) exemplifies the sweetness of a child and her dog.[20] Beatrice carries a small terrier with one arm against her hip. She holds one of the dog's front paws, a

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[20] Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits*, 59. Beatrice died at the age of fourteen, just two years after this was painted. She was born in 1870 and died in 1884.

gesture of affection. Both the child and the dog look out at the viewer with seeming interest. Their sweet faces are inviting. In Sargent's standing sketch of Elsie (Fig. 6), the dog should make her look less vulnerable and isolated within the austere setting, but she seems even more isolated because the dog does not acknowledge her. She and the collie do not share the intimate connection and companionship of Beatrice and her terrier. The collie seems lifeless, sprawled on the floor, paying no attention to Elsie or the viewer.

The collie's indifference may point to Elsie's relationship with her family. Her mother was often occupied with social events, her governesses were more interested in her little sisters, and her father was in America for most of every year. Elsie must have felt isolated even in her own house. Dogs by nature long for attention, but the collie at Elsie's feet ignores her. Sargent may have used the collie to depict his impression of her family situation, but in the final portrait he excludes the dog to enhance her isolation in a more clear, effective way. She has no one to comfort her, to confide in, to escape with.

At the time he painted Elsie she was seventeen years old, yet Sargent's depictions show her both younger and older than her actual age. A photograph of Elsie from 1889 (Fig. 8), the year Sargent painted her, captures a baby-faced girl in a dress very similar to the costume she wears in the final portrait, with her hair shoulder-length, straight and loose.[21] In the sitting (Fig. 7) and standing oil sketches (Fig. 6), she looks younger, perhaps around eight or nine years old. The heavy black shoes add to the effect, as if to suggest that she is not old enough to properly dress herself or has just come inside from playing in the garden. In Sargent's *Garden Study of the Vickers Children* (1884: Flint

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[21] Photograph of Elsie Palmer, 1889, by Henry Vander Weyde, courtesy of Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado

Institute of Fine Arts, Flint, Michigan), where a little boy and girl water tall lilies, the girl also wears a white dress and black shoes. She is probably six or seven years old, so Sargent, when working out the composition of Elsie's portrait, may originally have had a child, not a teenager, in mind. In these two oil sketches, Elsie's features are soft and she seems sweetly obedient, like a compliant child.

In the pen-and-ink drawing (Fig. 4), Elsie looks a bit older, maybe twelve or thirteen. The image in the drawing most resembles the Elsie in the photograph, although Sargent has given her darker, more defined eyebrows. The lines that describe her heavy eyelids anticipate the treatment in later works, in the garden painting and final portrait, while giving her the appearance of an older girl than the baby-faced child in the standing and sitting oil sketches. Although her eyes are prominent in the photograph, her lower eyelids are not nearly as pronounced as Sargent depicts them. The painter emphasizes her eyes because they hold the viewer's focus. Their slightly bulging appearance makes her image more disconcerting, her gaze more captivating, and their exaggerated size heightens their hypnotic element. In the 1926 Buffalo Fine Arts Academy *Acquisition Notes*, the portrait is described: "Wistful eyes look out from the picture and betray a nervous, sensitive and reticent nature. . . . The artist has accomplished a dignity and poise which is masterful," illustrating not only the artist's skill, but the complex young woman Sargent sought to portray.[22]

In the garden portrait (Fig. 5), Elsie appears older than in the photograph, perhaps nineteen years old, but in the final portrait she looks like she could be in her early to mid-

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[22] "The Academy Acquires a Fine Sargent," *Academy Notes*, (Buffalo, New York: Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 1926), 7.

twenties. Elsie's cheeks have lost their baby fat and her eyes are much heavier in both the garden portrait and the final painting. Sargent has lengthened her bangs and the rest of her hair to create a more dramatic framing around her eyes, but also to enhance the figure's verticality as a compositional element.

Although Sargent paints Elsie differently than she appears in the photograph, there are two significant similarities between the final portrait and the photograph. The portrait and the photo both capture the seriousness of the girl and suggest a maturity beyond her years, a certain "formal, almost stiff" appearance with the appeal of "maidenly reserve," according to one reviewer.[23] She also directly confronts the viewer in both images. Her chin is not lowered in a shy or coy expression; instead, she faces the viewer straight on. Her face is ever-so-slightly turned in the photograph, but she maintains a confidence similar to that in the painting. Elsie appears unintimidated, a characteristic unusual in a seventeen-year-old and evidently stimulating for Sargent.

The final portrait of Elsie recalls the focused stare and frontal, hieratic pose of ancient Egyptian royal statuary, which entered the European art world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These funerary statues represented men and women caught in a liminal stage between life and the afterlife, between order and chaos.[24] The

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[23] "The Society for Scottish Artists," *Glasgow Herald,* April 21, 1892, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, http://proquest.umi.com, 4.

[24] For the ancient Egyptians, the world was inherently chaotic, so the king had the responsibility of keeping order in that chaos, constantly trying to keep a balance. The king also functioned as a liaison between the gods and humans, building temples to provision the deities and performing rituals in order to become a vessel for the gods to manifest. One of the king's major focuses was preparing his burial site, to ensure safe passage, provisioning, and power in the afterlife. Thus, the king is caught between order and chaos, the realm of the gods and the realm of humans, and lastly, life and the afterlife. Although Elsie is caught between different things than the ancient kings, they all share a similar liminality. For further information on ancient Egyptian funerary statues, see Gay Robins, *The Art of Ancient Egypt*, revised edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

ancient kings and fair Elsie sit with their backs straight, hands in their laps, staring straight ahead with wide eyes. The Egyptian king seems to see into eternity, beyond all the things before him. They directly confront the viewer with square shoulders and penetrating gazes meant to convey "a strong sense of dignity, calm, and above all permanence."[25] Many of these statues were made of diorite, an extremely hard stone meant to further the Egyptian focus on immortality and immovability.[26] Despite her folded hands and crossed ankles, Elsie closely resembles the square, sturdy, immoveable ancient Egyptian sculptures. There is a sense of timelessness inherent in the sculptures and the painting, and the feeling that the viewer is caught in the subject's stare, which extends beyond what the viewer themselves can see, into something only the sitters can see and experience.[27] The kings are intended to be intimidating, even in their seated positions, a sentiment that crosses into Elsie's portrait as well. Even Elsie's hair mimics the Egyptian *nemes* headdress with its straight lines to the shoulder and perpendicular line across the forehead. Sargent may reference these ancient sculptures in *Elsie Palmer* to draw a parallel between them as symbols of dignity, timelessness, and, above all else, intimidation.

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[25] Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History*, revised second edition (Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Pearson Education, 2005), 64.

[26] Diorite and granite are hard stones, often dark in color, commonly used for funerary sculptures in Ancient Egypt.

[27] Stokstad, *Art History*, 71. Stokstad writes that the ancient kings "gaze into eternity, confident and serene."

*COMPLICATIONS*

In addition to these sketches, a number of documents, mainly letters and diary entries, suggest that the artist had an unusually difficult time painting Elsie's portrait.[28] Following the creative evolution he explored in the studies and after he decided on a final composition, Sargent still had problems completing the portrait due to practical obstacles such as lighting. Elsie mentions in her diary that the portrait was difficult to finish owing to bad lighting and the dark London weather.[29] Richard Ormond, Sargent's great-nephew, cites an undated letter from Sargent to Elsie's mother: "Elsie's picture hasn't yet come . . . but I hope for wonders to be accomplished tomorrow morning. So please come with Elsie and Violet and we will see what we can do -- with the hair if not with the picture."[30] This excerpt suggests that either Sargent was working in the Palmer's cottage because of the poor lighting in London, which would require the transport of both Elsie and the painting to Frant, or that he was simply working in his Tite Street studio, not on-site at Ightham Mote.

Sargent was working on a number of paintings during 1889, when he started Elsie's portrait, including *Ightham Mote, Kent* (1889: Whitney Museum of American Art,

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[28]Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits,* 191.

[29] Elsie Palmer, diary, December 11, 1890, in the Colorado College Tutt Library Special Collections, Colorado Springs: "Weather is so dark in London, that a thought came to me of having the portrait finished in the country where it is light. So Mr. Sargent has come down today for that purpose." She is referring to the Palmers' country cottage in Frant. The Palmer family was living in London while Sargent finished the portrait, since they moved from Ightham Mote in April 1890 to Blackdown, where they lived until they left for London in September 1890. In October of 1890, the Palmers moved from London to the cottage in Frant. Elsie's diary entries document each of those moves. Since Sargent was living in London throughout his work on the portrait, it is likely that after the Palmers left Ightham Mote, Sargent worked on the portrait in his studio on Tite Street, before finishing it at the cottage.

[30] John Sargent to Queen Palmer, n. d., quoted in Ormond and Kilmurray's *The Early Portraits,* 191.

New York). *Ightham Mote* depicts a group of people outside the grand manor playing a game of bowls. In her *Reminiscences,* Mrs. Comyns Carr describes the occasion:

> A particular house-party comes back to me. George Meredith and Henry James were both there. Sargent was already staying in the house, for he was busy painting Mrs. Palmer's little daughter. . . . It was during this visit to Ightham Mote that Sargent was struck with the possibilities of painting a picture of us all as we played at bowls on the big green lawn which centuries before had been christened the "Pleasauance." So he sketched us all as we stooped in various attitudes, and afterwards he worked the results into one of his best pictures.[31]

Two of these figures are believed to be Elsie Palmer and Violet Sargent, the artist's younger sister, so Sargent's request for both girls instead of just Elsie may suggest that he was still working on the Ightham Mote painting. Because Sargent was so close to Violet, and because she is depicted playing with the other Palmer family friends, it is also possible that the artist was merely requesting that his beloved sister accompany Elsie to his studio.[32]

The painting *Ightham Mote* illustrates more than friends playing a game on the lawn. The painting illustrates the weather England is famous for, and the weather that hindered the completion of the portrait. Sargent painted a flat gray sky with thick clouds that dissolve the shadows of the figures. They all wear hats and cloaks to protect them from the persistent drizzle of English weather that Elsie refers to in her diary. Although unpleasant, the weather did not deter Sargent from painting out-of-doors, but those flat

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[31] Carr, *Reminiscences,* 123.

[32] Elsie Palmer's diary also says that she recommended him finishing the painting at the Palmer's cottage in the country, since it would be away from the poor English weather. I omitted the section of Sargent's letter that mentions the studio, because I'm not convinced that's where he was working on this portrait. I think the studio may have been in disarray because he was traveling so much during 1890, or Elsie's suggestion to finish the painting in the country cottage helped the lighting issue since it was in Frant, not London.

gray clouds would have blocked most of the light that would enter the antique glass windows of Ightham Mote.

From Sargent's letter to Queen Palmer, it seems that he was having difficulty with Elsie's *hair* as well as the portrait itself, yet in the final portrait the hair does not appear particularly troublesome. Sargent may have had trouble reconciling her blunt, flat hair with the frilliness of her dress, or reconciling her hair and costume with the impression of her personality he was trying to depict. Given the similar color of Elsie's hair and the paneled background, it is also possible that her hair blended into the wood as a result of the poor lighting in the Tudor Chapel in the seated oil sketch and the final portrait. Sargent seems to have liked the effect of the dim light, since he retained the blending of her hair into the paneling in the final painting, the symbolism of which will be explored in the following section.

*THE PALMER FAMILY*

Sargent did not paint Elsie in isolation. He was familiar with her family, and since he lived with the Palmers at Ightham Mote for a time while he worked on the portrait, he had a first-hand look at the effect Elsie's complicated family life had on her. Through the use of archival materials, such as newspaper clippings, letters, and photographs, I will illustrate the Palmer family's biography. These sources, along with the manuscript of the memoirs of the family's governess, Anna Held, and Elsie's "Two Stories," have not been

used in connection with this portrait.[33] Excerpts from Elsie's diaries will also be referenced.[34] This section will explore how the final portrait is inherently disjointed, exemplified by the contrast between blunt, flat, brown hair blending into dark wood panelling, and porcelain skin blending into the white, silky pleats of the gown. The final portrait appears disjointed because Sargent witnessed Elsie's inherently disjointed family. This section explores Elsie's memories of childhood, which reveal her innate sensitivity to her surroundings, affection for nature, and discomfort with her family situation. Elsie's parents' differences are evidenced in their choices, most especially where they chose to live. Glen Eyrie, the Palmers' home in Colorado, embodies Elsie's father, General Palmer, who was a rugged pioneer and adventurer. Ightham Mote, the Palmers' home in England, embodies Elsie's mother, Queen Palmer, who was a refined socialite and patron of the arts. Their irreconcilable differences were embodied by Elsie, who in turn was depicted by Sargent in the inherently contradictory portrait. Elsie, like her portrait, is split between dark hardwood and white silk in that the panelling represents her father, her masculine side, and the white silk represents her mother, her feminine side.

As a small child, Elsie lived with her parents in the pioneer town of Colorado Springs from 1872 to 1881. General Palmer was raised a Quaker and left his home in Delaware when he was nineteen to travel to England and France to learn about coal-mining and the use of coal as fuel. He came home eight months later and became the private secretary to the president of the Pennsylvania railroad. His railroad career was

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[33] These materials are a part of the Palmer Family archives in Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado, and were saved because of General Palmer's importance to Colorado Springs.

[34] Excerpts from these diaries are also mentioned in Ormond and Kimurray's *Early Portraits.*

interrupted by the Civil War, when Palmer abandoned his pacifist values to join the Union's Fifteenth Pennsylvania Calvary. By the end of the war, Palmer had been made a Brigadier General, with twelve hundred men under his command. He returned to his railroad career by working for the Kansas Pacific Railroad, which had its focus on expanding westward.[35] Palmer was assigned the task of surveying the land that stretched from Kansas to California, a job that involved "months of excitement, danger, and hardship," according to his biographer Martin Sprague, and "involved Indian battles, threats of starvation, lost trails, desert heat, and sub-zero snowstorms."[36] When the Kansas Pacific Railroad failed to find funding for tracks to California, Palmer took it upon himself to complete the railway. Palmer bought and sold land, built coal mines for fuel and steel mills for tracks, and made enough money to found the town of Colorado Springs, Colorado. General Palmer, then, was a rugged pioneer who travelled to Europe on his own as a teenager, led his men to victory in the Civil War as a young man, and built a fortune through his business instincts and persistence.

Mary Lincoln "Queen" Palmer was the only daughter of Isabel and William Mellen. She was born on March 26, 1850, in Kentucky, where just four years later her mother died at age twenty-five. William raised Queen largely on his own, until he married Isabel's sister, Ellen Clark, before moving to Flushing, New York, in 1865, when

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[35] Marshall Sprague, *Newport in the Rockies: The Life and Good Times of Colorado Springs* (Denver: Sage Books, 1961), 17-18. Martin Sprague's biography of William Jackson Palmer was written in 1961, whereas John Fisher's biography was written in 1939. Although Sprague's biography is used as often as Fisher's, reviewers have warned that his descriptions of Queen Palmer are extremely biased, but the rest of his book seems fairly objective.

[36] Sprague, *Newport in the Rockies,* 18.

Queen was sixteen years old.[37] William Mellen was a successful lawyer in New York, and for a time was the Supervising Agent of the Treasury Department for the United States government, which generated a large amount of wealth and made the Mellens a prominent family in New England social circles. Ellen and William had six children, but the relationship between William and Queen stayed strong despite the other children's demands for attention. Queen was "well-educated and modern. The beauty of her voice was recognized early and singing and voice lessons became an important part of her life."[38] Her family's support of her singing probably encouraged her interest in theater and the arts, as well.

In 1869, at age nineteen, Queen and her father took a trip to see the great West, where she was introduced to General Palmer. General Palmer proposed a few weeks later, and after a whirlwind courtship, they were married in November of 1870.[39] The day after their wedding, the couple set sail for England to spend their three-month honeymoon visiting friends, who were either acquaintances from Colorado or General Palmer's business associates, and sight-seeing. In her biography of Queen, Celeste Black describes the trip:

> At every gathering, whether planned or impromptu, Queen was called on to sing. Sometimes she entertained by singing American war songs. Lively discussions with their English friends delved into the slavery question, the American war, California, and far western life in general. The young couple delighted in an overnight stay at a three hundred year old mansion, Thadenmont, seventeen miles

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[37] Black, *Queen of Glen Eyrie*, 8.

[38] Black, *Queen of Glen Eyrie,* 8.

[39] Black, *Queen of Glen Eyrie,* 2, 13.

> from London, as guests of the Flemings, in a room where Queen Elizabeth had slept.[40]

This excerpt illustrates Queen's first encounter with England, how she was immersed in a social circle of her liking, and how the couple stayed in a picturesque medieval setting, which probably had long-lasting effect on her tastes, exemplified in her choices of homes when the Palmers moved to England in the early 1880s.

Back in America, after the honeymoon trip ended, Queen and William committed themselves to the building of Colorado Springs and their new home, Glen Eyrie, which Queen named for "a pair of eagles who for an untold number of years had built their home in one of the huge rocks for which the Glen is so famous."[41] During the few years Queen lived in Colorado Springs, she made an impact on the residents. In addition to founding the first school and building the first church, Queen also held a Christmas party for all the children in the town, which became a tradition that continued for many years, an example of her generosity.[42]

John Fisher's 1939 biography of General Palmer describes Glen Eyrie as "the house with its gardens and stables at the mouth of the great canyon, under the hills where the tall pinnacles of rock--spires and bastions and arches--stood sharp against the blue Colorado sky."[43] Although Queen permanently left Colorado in 1881, Glen Eyrie was where Elsie's father lived out his entire life after following the railroad industry there.

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[40] Black, *Queen of Glen Eyrie,* 35.

[41] Thornton, "Mrs. Palmer." The word "glen" refers to a small, secluded valley. The term "eyrie" refers to the nest of a bird of prey, such as an eagle, that is built in a high, inaccessible place.

[42] Black, *Queen of Glen Eyrie,* 57.

[43] Fisher, *Builder of the West,* 282.

Elsie, like her father, loved Glen Eyrie. Glen Eyrie fed the girl's active imagination as a child. When she was eleven years old, her father printed and bound "Two Stories," a collection of Elsie's writing including one short story and one account of a trip home from Europe.[44] The first story, called "Magic Wand," is about a pair of siblings who wish for a magic wand. The story is full of imagination and adventure. The children explore an underwater world where every place they see is more beautiful than the next and animals change form constantly, from birds to fish to ponies to dolphins. The second story, "A Man Overboard," details a July trip from England to Colorado on a "large German steamer called the Rhine," with Elsie's mother, sisters, two governesses (including Anna Held), her grandmother, and their nurse.[45] Elsie describes how the steamer had turned around to pick up a man who had jumped from the boat and what the family did during their stay in New York before returning to Glen Eyrie in August. Although Elsie mentions enjoying herself on the steamer as it sailed across the ocean, and how much fun it was to play in the water at Coney Island, she emphasizes how much she wanted to go home. When they finally started for Colorado, she writes, "I was so glad I did not know what to do. It seemed to me as if we were never going to get home. . . . I thought that I never wanted to go away from Glen Eyrie again."[46]

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[44] E. M. P., "Two Stories," Glen Eyrie, 1883. Inscription on the inside cover: "Dorothy Palmer, Losely, April 1892, from Papa."

[45] E. M. P., "Two Stories," 29. Since both her sisters had been born, but they had not moved to London, this trip was probably taken late 1881.

[46] E. M. P., "Two Stories," 31-32.

In an unsent, undated letter to George Macdonald, the English author of children's fantasy books, Elsie lovingly describes her home in Colorado in relation to the settings of her favorite books:

> Our home is in Colorado in the midst of the mountains, and a long way off from houses, and I love it more than any place in the world. Some of the descriptions in [your books] remind me very much of it; and when I am there I go far away almost inside of the beautiful red rocks, and read them, and they help me understand them.[47]

Her affection for Colorado is unmistakable, as are her active imagination and her appreciation of fantasy. Further, the letter shows Elsie's tendency to go outdoors, not just to play, but to read as well. The "beautiful red rocks" help her understand the fantasy stories she reads, an illustration of how comfortable with and trusting of nature she was. Her favorite retreat was into the uncultivated rocky foothills beside her childhood home.

John Fisher quotes from letters Elsie wrote to him in response to his request for childhood memories. She recalls minute details, such as her father's "little bristly moustache," freckled hands, and old, crinkled boots.[48]

> These boots lived in a cupboard in his bed-room, and into this cupboard I had once been put after I had been naughty. It was not a severe punishment, for I remember the experience as odd and interesting--sitting in the dark which was filled with the rather pleasant leathery smell of the boots.[49]

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[47] Undated, unsent letter from Elsie Palmer to a "Mr. Macdonald." She mentions the books *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871); *Princess and the Goblin* (1872); and the sequel to *Goblin*, *Princess and the Curdie* (1883), which help identify "Mr. Macdonald" as George Macdonald. The approximate date of the letter is ambiguous, since the Palmers moved to England before *Princess and the Curdie* was published, yet Elsie still calls Glen Eyrie "home" in the letter. The purpose of her letter to Macdonald was to ask for his autograph, to add it to her "blank book," she explains in her letter, in which she "puts any thing to do with [her] favorite authors."

[48] Fisher, *Builder of the West*, 283.

[49] Fisher, *Builder of the West,* 283.

Elsie's attitude toward her punishment, which by today's standards sounds extreme, illuminates her personality as much as the punishment illuminates her father's leniency, in that he chose not to spank her. She seems to have been a curious, inquisitive child, who took notice of small things like freckles and smells and made the best of potentially boring or miserable situations. Most children would resign themselves to being bored, or perhaps feel angry or scared in a tight, enclosed space, yet Elsie found something to interest her in the dark. Both of these stories illustrate how Elsie, even as a young girl, had a noticeable sensitivity to her surroundings and environment.

In many ways, Elsie shared a vibrant and exciting life with her father in Colorado. She reminisced about her first ride on their horse, "Grisly," who stepped in a hole and sent her and her father "rolling over into the dry bed of the creek." She recalls:

> Of these very early days perhaps the pleasantest of my recollections is one of him and me going off alone together on a lovely summer day for a walk. We spent hours lying in the soft grasses among the rocks of north Glen Eyrie, where the flowers were growing thick--harebells, red pentstemon, kinnikinnick, and painter's brush. Our mood was a very happy one; we sang, we made up rhymes about the stealing of these hours that should have been spent in town. Neither of us forgot this particular walk.[50]

Elsie and her father seem to have shared a special connection that was intimately tied to the wild outdoors. The tenderness with which she recalls these early memories shows how rare these experiences were, especially after the family left Colorado, and how she treasured those days with her father.

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[50] Fisher, *Builder of the West,* 284.

Her recollection of the specific types of flowers that grew around Glen Eyrie correlates to her interest in botany as a teenager. Writing to her father from England, Elsie gushes about the spring of 1887.

> This afternoon we had a beautiful walk, in successive showers and sunlight. It makes one feel so fresh, that kind, when the odors come up from the earth, with the moisture. I am so interested in the botany now. We have a most beautiful botany-book, with illustrations, and it is interesting to look for the real flowers, and learn the latin, english, and german names of them.[51]

She goes on to describe the complexities of the formation of chalk, about how tiny water creatures called "foraminifera" die and form mud, that over time becomes chalk as a result of chemical processes between carbonic acid gas and limestone. This letter shows not only Elsie's infatuation with nature on a scientific level, but also her natural eye for detail in her surroundings. The letter concludes:

> Tomorrow we are going to go to town for the lecture and I think to some picture-gallery; please hurry up and come back, and we can explore the country, and see lots of interesting castles, and churches.[52]

Her phrase "some picture-gallery" may suggest her disinterest in the arts, which could account for some of her unwillingness as a sitter for Sargent. She would rather be exploring the country with her father, identifying various plants by their Latin, German, and English names, stretching her legs and experiencing the world with all five senses.

Her mother did not share that connection with nature and became ill from the high altitude of Colorado Springs. In 1883, Queen and her three daughters (Dorothy and Marjory, Elsie's sisters, were seven and eight years younger than she) moved East, living

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[51] Letter from Elsie Palmer, Ightham Mote, to her father, May 13 1887, Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

[52] Letter from Elsie Palmer to her father, May 13th 1887.

in Newport, New York, and London, before finally settling at Ightham Mote in Kent.[53] Around the time the Palmers lived at Ightham Mote, the nineteenth-century poet English Lewis Morris wrote about the manor:

> A home in an untroubled land,
> So old, so grey, so ripe with time--
> Unchanged the old grange stands, and will
> When we in turn are past and gone;
> The hurrying years flit by us still,
> Life glides unnoticed on.[54]

Built in 1320, Ightham Mote is one of the oldest surviving manor houses in England. It is "a home, a hundred homes in one," with over seventy rooms arranged around a central courtyard.[55] Henry James elaborates, after having stayed at Ightham Mote for two days in 1887:

> Its swift blue moat flows around it, its central court is an untouched piece of the fourteenth century, and its old garden and "pleasaunce" must be altogether adorable in the summer. I slept in a room with a ghost and an oubliette, but fortunately the former remained in the latter.[56]

Morris and James present Ightham Mote as a romantic, ancient building, unchanged from its medieval birth, indifferent to the many families who had lived within its stone walls. But James also notes that the building was "in a state of almost perilous decrepitude" as a result of its owners, the Selby-Biggs family, being "so impoverished that they haven't a

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[53] Sprague, *Newport in the Rockies*, 44; Fisher, *Builder of the West,* 290.

[54] Lewis Morris, *The Works of Lewis Morris* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1891) 469-70.

[55] Morris, *Works,* 469.

[56] Henry James to Grace Norton, January 1888, in James, *Letters,* vol. III, 216. Letter begun on January 4, 1888, from Henry James to Grace Norton, the sister of the well-known intellectual Charles Eliot Norton, both of whom had elite social standing in Boston.

penny to spend on chair legs or window fastenings."[57] James's observation illustrates the reality that both the expense of maintaining such a house and the dwindling financial holdings of some old English families allowed for rich, new-monied Americans like the Palmer family to take over these ancient homes. As these houses passed from family to family, they underwent periods of renovation and neglect. Ightham Mote evolved and continues to evolve as it ages and changes over time.

In his 1910 *History of Ightham Mote,* Edwin Harris writes that the home experienced "endless rebuildings, and alterations" throughout its history, even into the twentieth century.[58] Despite the changes made, however, the manor's age and ancient roots demanded reverence from those who visited it, and especially from those who lived inside it. For an American woman to bring her three daughters to live in this elegant home, saturated with centuries of English history, must have seemed inappropriate to the local people, since the move was not only a show of wealth, but also exemplified the American tendency to appropriate European history.

Despite the symbolic weight of her decision to live in Ightham Mote, Queen Palmer must have felt safer in the "home in an untroubled land" than in the home in Colorado, a contrast to the harsh weather and the threat of attacks from neighboring Indian tribes.[59] Elsie's life with her mother in England was a dramatic change of pace, from the rough-and-tumble wilderness of Colorado to the "quiet and ordered and serene"

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[57] Henry James to Grace Norton, January 1888, in James, *Letters,* vol. III, 216.

[58] Edwin Harris, *History of Ightham Mote, Kent* (Rochester, Kent: Edwin Harris & Sons, 1910), 2. Ightham Mote was bequeathed to the National Trust in the 1980s, from an American, Charles Henry Robinson.

[59] Morris, *Works,* 469.

life of Ightham Mote.[60] This life was more to her mother's liking, "the world of books and music and flowers" that could be beneficial to a young woman like Elsie, especially as she entered into marriageable age.[61] The separation between family and father was certainly felt:

> To his two youngest daughters--though never to the eldest--Colorado was becoming a child's shadowy memory. Yet their father's visits once or twice a year would call back Glen Eyrie and its stirring life of horses and mountains, journeys and adventures. For his family these visits were a great event, eagerly awaited, though his coming, with all his restless, vivid energy and activity, disorganized out of knowing the quiet routine of [his family's] life.[62]

Elsie was old enough to remember Colorado, and she must have missed her father dearly during the years they were separated by an ocean. She must also have missed the rugged excitement of life in Colorado. The portrait shows this dichotomy between the pioneering life Elsie shared with her father in Colorado and the quiet life she shared with her mother in England: Sargent depicts the young woman with a bold, spirited personality contained within the picturesque decor of the historic manor.

Elsie's mother shared General Palmer's enthusiasm for life, but appreciated finer, more cosmopolitan things and people. We can read Sargent's portrait of Elsie in relation to her parents' differing lifestyles. Elsie's hair is natural, uncurled and flowing down her shoulders, harkening back to her life in Colorado, where she spent days playing outdoors with her father. Her hair is the same color as the dark wood panels, further connecting her with the outdoors and masculinity. Her dress, with its satin pleats and high collar, may

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[60] Fisher, *Builder of the West,* 290.

[61]Fisher, *Builder of the West,* 290.

[62]Fisher, *Builder of the West,* 291.

refer to her mother's refined tastes and her life in the "graceful Elizabethan house,"[63] where Elsie may have felt she was indeed wearing a costume, and not her own clothing. Elsie was subjected numerous times to her mother's enthusiasm for costume, as pictures from her youth attest (Fig. 10).[64] Although Elsie wore the costumes and held the poses her mother demanded, in the pictures as in the painting, she never looks happy or comfortable.

"My delightful compatriot fails to remember that she now lives in a country boasting the perfection of domestic service," Mrs. Comyns Carr recalls Henry James saying about Queen Palmer, "and it is therefore needless to import a picturesque boatman who doesn't even wash his hands."[65] James's statement illustrates Queen's attempts at appropriating the picturesque into her own life and how she was so rarely satisfied. Ightham Mote was not picturesque enough for her on its own, so she brought in workers from Italy, for example. Another illustration of Queen's interest in the picturesque and her flair for the theatrical is a photograph by W. Hoffert of Queen in a "Wagnerian outfit" that consisted of a feathered helmet, large shield, and body armor (Fig. 9).[66] Costume was not the only element, however, as Mrs. Comyns Carr recalls: "Mrs. Palmer certainly loved the picturesque, especially in the matter of clothes, and one of our favourite pastimes was

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[63]Fisher, *Builder of the West,* 292.

[64] An 1878 photograph by Alman & Co. depicts Elsie in a strange costume, much like a cowgirl outfit but with large lace trim, and a big bow at her throat, in Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

[65]Carr, *Reminiscences,* 123.

[66] On the information card for this photo, one of the archivists applied the term "Wagnerian" to this photo, presumably in reference to the German composer and theater director, Wilhelm Richard Wagner (1813-1883). He was best known for his operas, which often featured costumes much like what Queen wears in the photo. Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

to devise costumes which would harmonise [*sic*] with the character of the house."[67] The Aesthetic dress Elsie wears in the portrait fits perfectly with the medieval backdrop of Ightham Mote, although the fine silk seems at odds with the masculine, dark oak paneling.

*THE SETTING*

As the previous section revealed, Elsie was intuitively sensitive to her surroundings, noticing small details that other children might overlook and appreciating her environment both visually and bodily. The setting of the portrait, then, must be analyzed in relation to what Sargent knew of his sitter's biography and what he experienced when confronting her personality.

Perhaps if the setting of the portrait had been up to Elsie, she would have been painted outside. She wrote in her diary on March 31, 1890, "Last place I sat on at the Mote, was the first place I had sat on here [at Ightham Mote]: the bench under the little fir tree, looking across the lake and the house with the poplar tree behind."[68] This was where she was first introduced to the house, so the bench under the fir tree would probably have been the most meaningful spot on the grounds for Elsie. Instead, Sargent painted her in the Tudor chapel inside the manor.

Although she does not mention the Tudor chapel as a place of *personal* significance, I will reveal why Sargent saw the room as a place with *symbolic*

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[67] Carr, *Reminiscences*, 123.

[68] Elsie Palmer, diary, March 31, 1890, excerpt in Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

significance for Elsie, which is why he painted her there in the final portrait. The room, described in Nigel Nicolson and Edward Fawcett's *Ightham Mote, Kent,* was never intended to be used as a chapel because "it is unlikely that a specially built chapel would be designed as a passageway through which people pass, right down its length and past the altar."[69] Indeed, this area does not seem ideal for a sacred space. Architecturally, the room functions as a passageway between the "two halves of the family quarters," when the Palmers lived there and before.[70] Even the furniture, that would be appropriate in a chapel, such as a choir screen, altar, and pews, "being of various dates between medieval times and the eighteenth century, suggests that the room was fitted up subsequently and haphazardly."[71] Ightham Mote has a history of people putting things in it that did not belong, from furniture to families.

Taking into account the function of the room as a passageway and the haphazard "dressing" of the room with chapel garb, it is possible that this is why Sargent chose this room in particular to paint Elsie Palmer. Although the oak, linen-fold paneling is beautiful on its own, Sargent contrasts its dark color with the ivory dress and skin of the young woman so that the girl and the setting play off each other in tone and color. Just as the room is between two halves of the family quarters, Elsie is between the two halves of her family, her father in Colorado and her mother in England. Elsie, like the furniture, is out of place in style and function. Her costume appears medieval, but is a modern trend in the Aesthetic movement, just as she appears British, but is in fact an American living in

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[69] Nigel Nicolson and Edward Fawcett, *Ightham Mote, Kent* (London: The National Trust, 1988), 25.

[70]Nicholson and Fawcett, *Ightham Mote,* 25.

[71]Nicholson and Fawcett, *Ightham Mote,* 25.

England. Even the configuration of the room could not allow Sargent to paint the portrait the way he did: the only space for Elsie to sit had a span of a mere three panels of the linen-fold oak. Elsie probably sat on a bench wedged between a door and the altar, as Sargent exercised artistic license and continued the oak paneling on either side of the sitter, despite the reality of the spatial limitations of the room's layout. Sargent may have felt an incongruity in Elsie as in the room; he paints her as if she wants very little to do with that "costuming." Considering Elsie's sensitivity to her surroundings, she may have felt Ightham Mote's indifference to her life and her family's presence, especially when wedged among haphazard, out-of-place-furniture in a room that has no clear function or purpose, leaving her with a feeling of isolation exacerbated by the absence of her father.

Further, the Palmers simply rented Ightham Mote, they did not own it. In her August 10, 1889, diary entry, Elsie writes that they were "on the lookout for houses with a long lease," since Sir Thomas Colyer-Fergusson had just bought the house. He gave them six months to move out, so by the time Sargent "came down to arrange about [Elsie's] portrait," the young woman already knew that her time at this house was quickly drawing to a close.[72] In addition to being painted in a physically liminal room, one that connects two parts of the house without its own defined function, Elsie was painted in a liminal time, between Ightham Mote and a new home. The fact that the Palmers *rented* and did not buy their homes (excluding Glen Eyrie, of course, which Queen and General Palmer built together) illustrates a kind of "temporary mentality" that discouraged the family members from growing attached to any one place. This mentality may have

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[72] Elsie Palmer, diary, October 31, 1889, excerpt in Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

encouraged Elsie's retreat into nature, since the home was essentially temporary for their family, whereas nature is permanent.

Sargent painted Elsie in an awkward, almost purposeless room, indoors where she was not comfortable, in a costume that was probably not her own, at a time when the family was already looking for a new home. With her biography taken into consideration, the time and place of this portrait in many ways parallel her discomfort with her current stage in life, and perhaps her unwillingness to embrace it or actively participate in it, just as she is unwilling to embrace having her portrait painted.

*FAMILY CONNECTIONS*

Elsie's relationship with her parents was complicated, and her parents' relationships outside the family were also complex. Queen Palmer was a member of a social web that connected artists, literary greats, patrons, actors, and other people interested in the arts. The Palmer family governess, Anna Held, is a part of this tangle of connections, but is the only one who directly impacted Elsie. Anna also connects the Palmers to Ellen Terry, a well-known actress at the time, who connects the Palmers to Sargent, who painted Terry in costume. The costume was designed by Alice Strettell (later Mrs. J. Comyns Carr), who was an old family friend of the Palmers from Colorado. Yet another person involved in this tangle is Henry James, a good friend of Sargent's, a correspondent of Terry's, and an acquaintance of Mrs. Comyns Carr's. Their connections between Queen and Sargent are relevant, but they also contribute personal accounts of

Ightham Mote and the Palmer family, which help to flesh out the biographies already presented.

The Palmer family had a number of governesses, but the first was Anna Held (later Heinrich), who joined the family after Elsie's birth in 1872, and whom Henry James described as Queen's "major-domo, a helpless German-American governess from the Rocky Mountains." Anna's memoirs were compiled into a manuscript, transcribed by her great-great grand niece, and give insight into the governess's perspective of the family affairs. Memoirs of governesses are fairly rare and this is the first time that this manuscript has been used in connection with Sargent's portrait of Elsie Palmer.[73]

Anna travelled with the family to and from Europe as they visited friends abroad.[74] With the births of two more children, Dorothy and Marjory, Anna called on her two sisters to care for the other children so she could look after the new baby, leaving no child without her own governess. Elsie, the oldest, became the least interesting to Anna, "general supervisor and directress of the household but ever with interest and time for the two littler girls. Anything that concerned them instantly had her undivided attention."[75]

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[73] Henry James to Grace Norton, January 1888, in James, *Letters,* vol. III, 217.

[74] H. H., *The Joyous Child: A Personality Sketch of Anna Held Heinrich,* transcribed and published by her great-great-niece, Mary C. Hampel DeHay (Sunnyvale, California, 1992), 24. The introduction of the manuscript explains that Anna's biography was written "in two parts; the second part is noted as 'The last thirty years.' It appears the same person who wrote the whole work, but the person's identity is not clear. It was completed in Lugano, Switzerland, in 1939. He never identifies himself with more than 'H. H.', 'the writer,' and 'he.' He is very possibly a British friend, as many of the words like centre, favourite, etc., have the British spelling. The 'Last thirty years' section, however, seems to have used predominantly American spellings, and the writer seems to be headed back home to America (he had traveled with Tante Anna on one of her last trips to Europe). The book appears to have been written as a tribute to her ninetieth birthday." This document belongs to the Colorado College Tutt Library Special Collections, Colorado Springs. Mrs. Palmer's relationship with Anna Held "became not that of mistress and maid, but of friend and companion." According to Anna's memoirs, they attended parties, plays, and other social events together.

[75] H. H., *The Joyous Child,* 28.

This suggests that she paid little attention to Elsie for the greater part of her teenage years. Given that Elsie's caretakers were changed each time Mrs. Palmer had a new baby, and that the lead governess's greater interest was in Dorothy and Marjory, Elsie may have developed her independent streak as a result of being left to her own devices. According to her memoirs, Anna became the "directress of the household" around the time that Elsie turned sixteen, so the unhappiness apparent in her portrait may result from being denied attention from her governess, as well as from the pain of seeing her sisters constantly doted upon.[76]

The social web that connected the Palmers and Sargent is complex, and involves both Ellen Terry and Henry James. Before the family's move to England, Mrs. Palmer and Anna attended a play in Washington, D. C., where they met the actress Ellen Terry through a mutual friend.[77] An affection grew among the women, such that Ellen Terry (known to her friends as "Lady Nell") would visit the Palmers whenever she was in America, and the Palmers would visit her whenever they were in England.[78] Thanks to that friendship, when the Palmers moved to England in 1881, Queen was welcomed into the artistic circle, whose members she entertained at Ightham Mote.

In 1889, Sargent painted Terry in one of the costumes that Mrs. Comyns Carr designed. Shortly before Sargent painted Terry, Anna Held quit her job to become an assistant to the actress, acting as her secretary and living with her for a short time.

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[76] H. H., *The Joyous Child,* 28. "Dorothy ever had been closest in her love for Anna" (p. 32).

[77] H. H., *The Joyous Child,* 24.

[78] H. H., *The Joyous Child,* 28.

According to her memoirs, Anna stood in for the actress while Sargent was working on the painting of Terry as Lady Macbeth:

> It was Anna who went for weeks to the Sargeant [*sic*] studio, and donned the heavy costume, posed while the picture was being created. Miss Terry sat only for the face, the rest was Anna. . . . But Sargeant had first in mind a canvas showing Lady Macbeth coming down a flight of stairs in the studio, and her lady-in-waiting bowing to her. This was sketched and partly finished, both Miss Terry and Anna posing for the two figures.[79]

This is yet another connection the Palmer family had to Sargent, so they could have met him while visiting Anna or Ellen Terry. Also, Anna or the actress may have recommended Sargent to the Palmers to paint Elsie's portrait, since the artist completed the portrait of Terry before he started painting Elsie in October of 1889.

That same year, Sargent painted a candlelight portrait of Mrs. Comyns Carr (1889: Speed Art Museum, Louisville), a portrait of her sister Alma Strettell (1889: Private Collection), and *Ightham Mote, Kent*.[80] Sargent was friends with Mrs. Comyns Carr by 1885, so it is possible that he joined his friends at one of the many parties at the Palmer residence. The commission for Elsie's portrait could have come through any one of Sargent's many connections with the Palmer family, either through Ellen Terry, Anna Held, Mrs. Comyns Carr, or even simply because of his reputation.[81] Yet another connection between Sargent and the Palmer Family is Henry James. Henry James was a friend of Ellen Terry and of Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), Sargent's best friend since

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[79] H. H., *The Joyous Child,* 31.

[80] Sprague, *Newport in the Rockies,* 128.

[81] Evan Charteris, *John Sargent* (London: William Heinemann, 1927), 70.

childhood.[82] Although the date of James's initial acquaintance with Sargent is unknown, they knew each other by the time Sargent moved to London from Paris in 1886, and their friendship continued for many years.[83]

James may have first met the Palmer family during his visit to Ightham Mote around Christmas in 1887. In a letter to Grace Norton of January 1888, James describes the Christmas party as "a queerly, uncomfortable yet entertaining visit" with "General Palmer, a Mexican-railway-man, and his wife and children. I didn't know them much . . . and the episode was the drollest amalgam of American and Western characteristics . . . in the rarest old English setting."[84] The family was indeed an "amalgam of American and Western characteristics"; James's discomfort may have been a reaction to the visual incongruity of General Palmer's almost stereotypically pioneering ruggedness combined with his "spontaneous, loquacious, and really charming wife," with her genteel New England polish, within the ancient halls of Ightham Mote.[85] Although Queen may have blended in more with the setting, her flair for theatricality encouraged her to dress and act in a way that would be fitting to the "rarest old English setting." General Palmer would have seemed incredibly out of place, as if he were knocking the mud off his boots in the middle of Queen's medieval-themed tea party.

James's relationship to the Palmers is described quite differently in *Mrs. J. Comyns Carr's Reminiscences*. She writes that Henry James was "a great friend of the

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[82] Various letters in James, *Letters.*

[83] Charteris, *John Sargent,* 70.

[84] Henry James to Grace Norton, January 1888, in James, *Letters,* vol. III, 216.

[85] Henry James to Grace Norton, January 1888, in James, *Letters,* vol. III, 216.

Palmer family. [He] had an absolute passion for old houses, and he found at Ightham Mote the inspiration for at least one of his stories . . . the scene of which was laid in an old haunted room at Ightham."[86] The writer was specific about the details and atmosphere of his stories, so when James was imagining new stories set in the medieval setting of Ightham Mote, he was willing "to put up with certain material inconveniences," such as using candlelight to navigate the corridors instead of electric light. Electric lights "would be sacrilege at Ightham," so James put up with them in order to have the most authentic experience of the manor house, and thus recreate the most authentic atmosphere in his story.[87] Of course if those inconveniences affected James, they certainly affected Elsie as well. Seeing Ightham Mote only by candlelight or the weak daylight that managed to sneak in through the leaded glass windows may have made the manor seem ominous, shadowy, and cave-like, an unwelcoming environment for a young girl, at least in comparison to sunny Glen Eyrie, with large windows that invited sunlight and plenty of electric lights to light its long halls.

In Mrs. Comyns Carr's recollections, James seems fond of the Palmers, their home, and their children. He may have simply been downplaying his relationship to them because he was writing to Grace Norton, one of his life-long correspondents and the sister of Charles Eliot Norton, a professor of art history at Harvard and a well-known, respected intellectual from Boston. James's tone when he describes the Palmer family in

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[86] Carr, *Reminiscences,* 122. In a letter to her father from 1887, Elsie mentions the ghost that haunted Ightham Mote. The ghost was called "Dame Dorothy, who was sewing some tapestry on a Sunday, and for that reason she pricked her finger and bled to death, and the mark of blood is still to be seen."

[87] Carr, *Reminiscences,* 122.

his letter to Miss Norton may belie his discomfort with how "western" they were, but also may play to a certain curiosity about these nouveau-riche Americans.

Both James and Alice Comyns Carr describe sitting around the fireplace, watching the Yule logs burn, although James's description lists foods eaten, a band that played for the Christmas party, and a dance by the children. Mrs. Comyns Carr recounts James creating a "wordpicture" about the room they ate in, "with a door at each corner through which something gruesome was always about to come."[88] The charming occasion they recount was a feast put on by the Palmers for the "lean tenants" of Ightham Mote.[89] Keeping with Queen's interest in the medieval, this gathering imitated the feasts conducted by the aristocracy for their peasants and serfs in actual medieval times. Despite their inconsistent stories, Mrs. Comyns Carr and James were at Ightham Mote a number of times, occasionally at the same time, both with interesting tales to tell about their experiences at the moated manor and the American family living there.

*WHO WAS ELSIE PALMER*

With the Palmer family's biography detailed, and Elsie's complicated relationship with her parents and their homes examined, it is time to look more closely at Elsie as a person, beyond the time of the portrait. Elsie's most prominent characteristics were probably the same when she was a child, a teenager, and an adult. These are the characteristics that Sargent captures in the portrait, so they are the most crucial things to

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[88] Carr, *Reminiscences,* 122.

[89] Henry James to Grace Norton, January 1888, in James, *Letters,* vol. III, 216.

examine now that we have all the supplemental information to inform the origin and impact on those qualities.

As a final investigation of this portrait, we must ask, "Who was Elsie Palmer?" We know that as a child she was adventurous, curious, and imaginative. As a teenager, Elsie was serious, mature, and independent. As an adult, Elsie maintained her sense of adventure and her streak of independence. In 1894, at age twenty-two, Elsie returned to America to see her father. Father and daughter met in New York, where they piled into "Nomad," the General's private railroad car, and travelled throughout the United States:

> The mountains and rivers and plantations unrolled before them . . . There were romantic evenings by the sea in Florida, with moonlight and the scent of orange trees. Then they turned westward, to Denver, and Colorado Springs again, and the familiar house, the great rocks of Glen Eyrie and the Garden of the Gods, the old friends, the horses and the dogs, the color and the clear, sharp mountain skies.[90]

The "ramble" around the country started in the summer and ended in September, giving Elsie time to catch up with her father, as well as with America, where she had not been for ten years.[91] Cross-country travel on the new railroads must have been rough and dirty, a dramatic change from the smooth, efficient English trains she was used to. Despite the years apart, Elsie seemed to have felt right at home in America, sharing her father's pioneering impulse, independence and spirit, and love of adventure.

Elsie experienced a different kind of independence in life with her mother. Queen Palmer, like her husband, was a bold pioneer, but instead of staking a claim in the wild West, she struck out on her own to make a life for herself and her daughters in cultivated

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[90] Fisher, *Builder of the West,* 294.

[91] Sprague, *Newport in the Rockies*, 145; Fisher, *Builder of the West,* 294.

places brimming with culture. Queen gathered her daughters and their governesses and left the country to stake her own claim in New England, and eventually in Great Britain. Apart from the occasional visit from General Palmer, Queen was the sole authority in her household, an unconventional position quite new for a woman in the nineteenth century. Elsie was raised by this bold woman during a time when women were gaining independence and opportunity. Women were given more opportunities to work outside the home, to wear new fashions, and to participate in traditionally male leisure activities. Further, because women were now in greater control of their lives, they could choose when to get married. Although it was still common for a woman to marry when she came of age, at eighteen, it was no longer her only option.

Elsie chose not to get married at age eighteen; she probably was too busy enjoying the world to consider settling down with a man. Her trip to America with her father in 1894 would not have been possible if she had a husband and children to take care of. An event that same year, however, pushed Elsie into the role of family caretaker, despite her avoidance of marriage. Elsie and General Palmer returned to England that August of 1894. A few months later, Queen died at age forty-four of heart failure, leaving Elsie to care for her younger sisters who were fourteen and fifteen at the time.[92] The girls moved back to Colorado where, Sprague writes, General Palmer "stumbled along blindly while Elsie, a wise, forthright young lady managed his big household."[93]

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[92] I've found a few obituaries for Queen Palmer, which differ on the *day*, but confirm that she died in December 1894. A list of "departures for Europe" in the *New York Times* published on August 16, 1894, includes the names of both Elsie and her father, so she was in fact with her mother when she died that December.

[93] Sprague, *Newport in the Rockies*, 146.

It was not until age thirty-four that Elsie finally consented to marriage. Elsie met the novelist and poet Leopold Hamilton Myers at Glen Eyrie after the Palmers moved back to Colorado in 1895 following Queen's death.[94] G. H. Bantock's critical study of Myers's works tells us that "Miss Palmer would not hear of marriage, though she liked the boy; and Myers had to wait seven years before they were finally married," a further illustration of Elsie's disinterest in becoming a wife.[95] Consistent with Bantock's description of Elsie's resistance to romance, Sargent's portrait of Elsie shows no softness, no invitation to touch her, despite her status as a *potential* bride. One can almost imagine her eyes looking through the viewer and any suitor, beyond the Elizabethan grandeur and social expectations, beyond her life in England to a world where she is free to roll through grassy meadows or ride along rocky canyons, where she is simply free to be herself. Even with blindness in old age, Sir Charles Tennyson writes in Elsie's obituary, she lived alone in a "remote Suffolk rectory," insisting on being independent when others might have succumbed to their own perceived weakness or handicap.[96] Sargent also may have foreseen the maturity in Elsie that allowed her to rise to the occasion and care for

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[94] Myers lived from 1881-1944, when he committed suicide after many years of depression. Elsie died ten years after he did, in 1914. They had two daughters, Eve and Elsie Queen. Elsie Queen had a daughter, Louisa, and in her book *Memories of EQ and Eve* (York: Quacks the Booklet Printer, 1994), Louisa Creed transcribes a collection of memoirs from her mother and Eve. The sisters agree that Elsie and Leo were a poor match and lived an unhappy marriage. Elsie loved both her children, but the children "had a rivalrous relationship all their lives which never really mellowed" (6). Leo seems to have favored EQ over Eve, so the family as a whole seems to have been very unhappy and inharmonious.

[95] G. H. Bantock, *L. H. Myers: a Critical Study* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1956) 139. Elsie's engagement to Myers was announced in the *The Times* on January 7, 1908. General Palmer died a year later, in March 1909, so Elsie may have postponed her marriage until after her father and family no longer needed her care..

[96] C. T., "Elsie Myers," *The Times,* Sept. 22, 1955. Sir Charles Tennyson was the grandson of Alfred Lord Tennyson, the well-known Victorian poet, and lived in London at the same time as Elsie after she returned to England with her husband, L. H. Myers.

her family upon the death of her mother and the decline of her father, a maturity and confidence seen in his portrait of her.

Sargent's sensitivity to Elsie's independence and self-assurance may stem from his own experience with independent women. His mother was not unlike Queen Palmer, who has been described as "a wilful [*sic*] beauty, with such a given name as 'Queen,' and brought up to despise self-control. . . . All felt that her natural setting was the whirl and possibilities of a brilliant social life in one of the older cities," like London, where she took up residence after leaving her rustic Colorado life.[97] Mary Newbold Sargent moved the family from Philadelphia to Europe, despite her husband's promising medical career.[98] According to Ormond, Mary Sargent, like Queen Palmer, had a "passion for art and culture" and "was a person of bubbling enthusiasms and high sprits who relished company and late nights."[99] Mary Sargent and Queen Palmer both set their sights *outside* the family, on social interactions such as parties, teas, and art performances.

Sargent's early life was spent in intimate connection with his father, Fitzwilliam Sargent, who encouraged his son's desire to become an artist, and who taught Sargent and his sisters himself.[100] Sargent and his mother maintained an emotional distance, while he and his father remained close until Fitzwilliam's death. Although Elsie lived with her mother, she too shared an intimate connection with her father. Since Elsie was frequently

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[97] Thornton, "Mrs. Palmer," 3.

[98] Richard Ormond, "Women of the Family Circle," in *Sargent's Women,* Warren Adelson, ed. (New York: Adelson Gallery, 2003), 40.

[99] Ormond, "Family Circle," 40.

[100] Ormond, "Family Circle," 41.

passed from governess to governess, and traveled mainly with her father, it is unlikely that she shared a deep emotional connection with her mother, although her letters suggest that she did have affection, addressing Queen as her "own darling Motherling."[101] Elsie's maturity and seriousness, though, could also be a reaction to her mother's sometimes volatile personality. In his article on Queen, F. C. Thornton recounts a story of Queen throwing a tantrum as a full-grown woman, about which he writes that he "would not have told this intimate incident if it did not show her indomitable will which could overcome even her temperamental drawbacks."[102] Elsie seems especially calm and self-possessed in comparison to this illustration of her mother.

Like Elsie, Sargent grew up fast and was "both well behaved and self-controlled beyond his years."[103] Despite the fact that Sargent had both parents in his household and Elsie's household was full of governesses, the expatriate lifestyle isolated them from their peers as well as from the idea of "home." Sargent and Elsie had no solid roots since their families moved frequently on one continent or the other. They lacked a real connection to a *place,* which increased their feelings of isolation. With no place to belong, Elsie and Sargent had to grow up quickly in order to survive that kind of liminal lifestyle.

Sargent's early independence and experience with a dominant mother seems to have increased his sensitivity and attraction to other independent women. Even as a child, Sargent was attracted to Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), a fellow expatriate. Sargent and Lee

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[101] Elsie Palmer to Queen Palmer, October 2, 1889, written on Lake Mohonk Mountain House, Mohonk Lake, Ulster Co., New York, stationery. Written before Sargent started the painting in late October. Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

[102] Thornton, "Mrs. Palmer," 7.

[103] Ormond, "Family Circle," 41.

remained close friends throughout their lives. Lee was an outspoken feminist and a talented writer: she certainly represented the "independent woman" of the time. Sargent painted other independent women, such as Ellen Terry, the actress, and Virginie Amelie Avegno Gautreau, known as *Madame X*, portraits that won Sargent recognition.

Sargent also witnessed the repression of independent women under other independent women. His older sister Emily, with whom he remained close throughout his life, suffered under Mary Sargent. Emily was physically handicapped from an accident at a young age, but she bravely carried on with her life, becoming Sargent's constant supporter and confidante.[104] As a result of her physical deformity, her prospects were limited and she, "like her father, was in thrall to the demands and obsessions of Mrs. Sargent," and her few attempts at independence were squashed.[105] Emily remained the "compliant daughter forever trapped at home."[106] It is possible that Sargent saw a bit of Emily in Elsie; both young women suffered under the "reigns" of their mothers. Elsie was also trapped at home--not physically, but psychologically--since she was forced into a lifestyle that she did not choose.

*OTHER UNWILLING SITTERS*

*Elsie Palmer* is not the only painting in which Sargent paints a *real* individual, not a convention. *Elsie Palmer* is not even the only unwilling sitter he paints. *Capri Girl* and

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[104] Ormond, "Family Circle," 41. It is unclear whether she was injured from an accident or an illness, but it left her back permanently deformed.

[105] Ormond, "Family Circle," 41.

[106] Ormond, "Family Circle," 41.

*Carmela Bertagna* maintain a similar glare. Sargent did not act entirely on his own, though: other artists were experimenting with new ways to paint women. Most notably James McNeill Whistler, Sargent's fellow expatriate, has gained much attention for his exhausted *White Girl* and "mutinous" *Cicely Alexander*. This is not to say that Sargent copied Whistler, but more to suggest that he may have been participating in a trend that focused on portraying women as real people with emotions and opinions about being painted, not pretty dolls with mask-like faces. In painting "real" sitters, Sargent and Whistler call attention to the *illusion* of portraits and remind the viewer that a living, breathing person sat in front of these artists to be painted.

In Sargent's own oeuvre are paintings that recall the *stare* in Elsie Palmer's portrait. In Capri, Sargent painted the *Head of a Capri Girl* in 1878 (Private Collection) and *Carmela Bertagna* in 1879 (Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio). The young woman in *Head of a Capri Girl* confronts the viewer with direct eye contact, but her body is turned away slightly. Sargent painted her eyes dark and heavily lidded, much like Elsie's, with lips unsmiling in much the same way. Carmela sits at the same angle as the Capri girl, but she snarls more than she is simply unsmiling.[107] Her eyes are not heavily lidded, but they hold the viewer in the same stare as Elsie and the Capri girl. Carmela's hairstyle is similar to Elsie's in the shoulder-length locks falling loose and the bangs that stop just above her eyes, but Carmela's hair springs out in curly waves. Her hair is free to go wild. These young women, Elaine Kilmurray writes, "are independent creatures--sultry, sensual, and

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[107] Some scholars speculate (in *Sargent's Women*) that Carmela was a model whom Sargent painted in Capri. She and the young woman in *Head of a Capri Girl* both seem to be around Elsie's age.

self-possessed--who are perhaps bored with the whole business of sitting and who gaze out at us with disquieting, appraising looks."[108]

A similarly unhappy expression can be found in a painting roughly contemporary with *Elsie Palmer*, *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl* (1862: National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.), by James McNeill Whistler, a fellow expatriate. Whistler's *The White Girl* stands in a long-sleeved white dress on a rug made from the skin of an animal, either a bear or a wolf. Creamy curtains create the backdrop for the red hair that falls loose around the model's shoulders. Her hand holds only one flower; she has dropped the rest of the spray on the animal-skin rug from the sheer exhaustion of modeling, of donning a dress that is not hers and holding a pose she did not choose. Like Elsie, she appears to be an unwilling subject.

According to Sprague, Sargent originally titled Elsie's portrait *Young Lady in White*, which has an undeniable similarity to Whistler's *White Girl*.[109] Sargent may have seen *The White Girl* when his family visited Paris in the summer of 1867, when the painting was shown in the Universal Exhibition. Sargent may have had a second chance to see the painting while it was periodically in New York in the 1880s and 1890s, since Sargent travelled to New York in January 1888.[110] Also, considering that the painting was

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[108] Elaine Kilmurray, "Sargent's Women: Models, Dancers, and Exotics," in *Sargent's Women*, Warren Adelson, ed. (New York: Adelson Galleries, Inc, 2003), 27.

[109] Sprague, *Newport in the Rockies*, 138.

[110] Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits,* xvi-xvii. Sargent also went to New York in December 1889, but he started the portrait of Elsie Palmer in August, so it is most likely that any influence from Whistler's painting would have been impressed on Sargent during his visit in 1888. The exhibition history for *The White Girl* on the National Gallery of Art's website documents that the painting was shown in the Union League Club, New York, in 1881 and then later, in 1894 and 1895, the painting entered the Loan Collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Although the painting only hung briefly in The Union League Club, I would imagine the painting was somewhere in New York during 1888, since its documented exhibition history suggests it was in New York from 1881-1898.

first exhibited in 1863, it is likely that the image was reproduced, so Sargent could have seen a print sometime before starting *Elsie Palmer* in 1889. Sargent painted his younger sister Violet in watercolor (1883: Private Collection) in the same pose as Whistler's *White Girl.* They stand at the same angle, their left hands are identical except for the position of the thumb, and the young women's expressions are similarly blank. Sargent was unquestionably aware of and influenced by Whistler's famous *White Girl.*

The similarities between the paintings include the white dresses; the simple, patterned background; the natural hairstyle; and the general expression and mood of unwillingness. Elsie sits quietly as the White Girl stands sedately. Elsie glares at the viewer, while the White Girl looks exhausted, as if pleading with the viewer for relief. Both young women appear almost lifeless within the stillness of the paintings, but Elsie's eye contact charges the image with a tension that the White Girl is too tired to create. The moment the artists have captured are still quite similar: the girls do not want to be in the painting, they just show it in different ways (or the artist interprets that unwillingness in different ways--dropping the flowers or staring down the artist). The paintings also function similarly, in that they destroy the illusion that the viewer is looking in on another world or reality. Instead, their expressions force the viewer to confront the works as *paintings,* made possible by the hand of the artist and the compliance of the sitter. In other words, the relationships between the sitter, artist, and viewer become the subtext of the painting, not just the images of pretty young women.

Whistler's *Harmony in Grey and Green: Miss Cicely Alexander* (1872-1874: The Tate Gallery, London) is also strikingly similar to *Elsie Palmer*. Cicely stands with the

toe of one shoe out, arms at her sides, a pose that resembles Elsie's in Sargent's painting. Both girls wear white dresses, although Cicely's dress is bright white and Elsie's is soft ivory. What is most similar, though, is the expression in Elsie's portrait and in the portrait of the "mutinous" Cicely Alexander.[111] The girls directly confront the viewer with a steely gaze. No smile grazes their lips as they stare down the viewer and the artist. Cicely, only a young girl when the portrait was painted, later wrote about how Whistler made her hold the pose for hours on end: "I sometimes used to stand for hours at a time. I know I used to get very tired and cross, and often finished the day in tears," no doubt resulting in a certain resentment towards the painter.[112] Her resentment, too, may extend beyond the artist to her parents, who commissioned the painting, forcing their daughter to endure hours upon hours of standing for the portrait. The little girl may not have had a smile left in her by the completion of the painting.

Sargent's portrait of the Pailleron children (1880: Des Moines Art Center, Iowa) depicts Edouard and Marie-Louise sitting on a bench together. Edouard sits on the far side of the bench, glancing over his shoulder at the viewer, almost disapprovingly. Marie-Louise assumes a pose similar to Elsie Palmer's, but more aggressive. She refuses to cross her ankles and fold her hands in her lap, like a good girl should, and instead leans forward toward the viewer with an icy glare. Her lips are pursed tightly and one can imagine her grinding her teeth within those baby cheeks. She is the opposite of the Victorian, doll-like, sweet child, even more so than Elsie Palmer. Marie-Louise claimed

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[111] Aileen Ribeiro, "Fashion and Whistler," in *Whistler, Women and Fashion,* (New York: The Frick Collection, and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 45.

[112]Quoted in E. R. and J. Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler,* vol. I, (Philadelphia, 1908), 173-174.

that Sargent made her sit for an outrageous number of sittings, which she abhorred, since she was neither a quiet nor an idle child.[113] Her fury here, much like Cicely Alexander's, is at her mother, for making her sit for the painting, and at the painter, who enforced her mother's orders.

Although I do not know exactly how many sittings were required for Sargent's portrait of Elsie Palmer, I do know that Sargent made an effort to entertain his subjects during the tedious and lengthy process of painting their portraits. He gave them breaks between sessions, during which he offered them refreshments and played the piano for them, presumably in an effort to make them feel less like a bug under a microscope or a still life on a table, and more like a human being.[114] In contrast to Cicely's fury with the artist and her mother, Elsie's resentment may be a result of her situation rather than against any person or persons. Sargent painted Elsie in a liminal stage, caught between America and Europe, between her pioneer father and her socialite mother, between her ever-changing governesses, between girlhood and womanhood. In a way, she is even caught between time periods; she is a modern young woman forced into a nostalgic attempt to recapture the romantic past of the Gothic and medieval world. Elsie seems to stare beyond the viewer, as if she is looking past her Aesthetic costume and the Great Hall of Ightham Mote. Her glare is not directed at Sargent, her fellow expatriate, but instead focuses on the isolation and frustration she must have felt within her liminality.

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[113] Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits,* 52.

[114] H. H., *The Joyous Child,* 31. "During pauses for the sittings for the final great portrait, Anna and Sargeant would play piano duets to 'get rested' for the next turn at posing and painting."

A similar intense, furious stare can be found in another of Sargent's paintings of unwilling sitters. His portrait of Mademoiselle Boussenet-Duclos (1882) is a quarter-length portrait of a young woman whose face emerges out of the black background. Her expression is similar to Elsie's in intensity. Dark, wide eyes hypnotize the viewer, forcing one to stare back at her, held in her gaze. The viewer is unable to look away from her, despite her unsmiling lips and unwelcoming expression. She is captivating in her power and dignity, but is also intimidating, like Elsie, in her confident gaze. Little is known about the sitter, aside from her name. This portrait suddenly appeared on the art market in 1988, its earlier years unaccounted for and its disappearance unexplained.[115] The woman's face emerges pale from the background, almost ghostly, and when combined with her unwelcoming expression and hypnotic gaze, the portrait is an unnerving sight.

*CONCLUDING THOUGHTS*

What Sargent and Whistler exemplify in these works is the emergence of a "New Woman" during the late nineteenth century in art, an image of women as "assertive, confident, and dynamic at a time when the majority of female sitters were presented as maternal, passive, and pure."[116] This New Woman began to develop during the Civil War in the 1860s, when women were given new freedoms and responsibilities, formerly reserved for men, to support the country at its time of need. As a result of these freedoms, women began to challenge traditional ideas about their place in society. Women were

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[115] Ormond and Kilmurray, *Early Portraits,* 62.

[116]Holly Pyne Connor, ed., *Off the Pedestal: New Women in the Art of Homer, Chase, and Sargent* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, in conjunction with the Newark Museum, 2006), xi.

actively seeking work outside the home, postponing marriage, and restricting their number of children, which resulted in a "virulent backlash."[117] This backlash came not only from men, but from traditionalist women as well, all of whom accused these women of "selfishly denying their biological destiny and marital duties," which, as the art historian Holly Pyne Connor concludes, was seen as "jeopardizing the well-being of the family" and, in effect, dooming the purity and success of the white race.[118] Both positive and negative images of this "New Woman" were prevalent during the 1890s, illustrating the prominence of this issue in the mind of society.

Sargent was especially sensitive to this emerging type, since many of his friends were strong, independent women who embody the "New Woman." Connor cites a number of his paintings in which "women were portrayed as bright, thoughtful, and mentally engaged," a trend that was starting to take hold, depicting women as intellectuals with more on their minds than childrearing, more in their hands than knitting patterns.[119] As mentioned earlier in this paper, Sargent gained recognition for a number of his bold depictions of women, "portraits of women whose intelligence, vitality, and forceful personalities were highlighted," either in dramatic portrayals, such as *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth* and *Madame X*, or in the direct interaction with the viewer, such as *Lady with a Rose*.[120] These women were all decidedly "New Women"; they were adults

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[117] Holly Pyne Connor, "Not at Home: The Nineteenth-Century New Woman," in Connor's *Off the Pedestal*, 2.

[118] Connor, "Not at Home," 3.

[119] Connor, "Not at Home," 19.

[120] Conner, "Not at Home," 39.

during the time period when this type was most controversial in society. Elsie Palmer, however, was not yet an adult, and, in effect, stood on the cusp of this movement.

Elsie certainly fits with Sargent's portrayals of these intelligent, forceful women, but she is not purely an image of the "New Woman." What makes this portrait so captivating is that she is mentally engaged, while still physically passive. She seems to bridge the gap between traditional views of women, the sweet, pretty, compliant woman who stays in the home to care for the family, and the bold, independent, active woman who engages in outdoor activities and insists on educating herself about the world. Elsie's prominent eyes and intriguing, albeit unsettling, expression inform the viewer that she is not the "maternal, passive, and pure" traditional woman, but her feminine dress and ladylike pose keep her from fully embodying new womanhood.

The inherent tension and contradictions within the painting, as detailed in this paper, may be Sargent's way of expressing the inherent tensions and contradictions of society at the time Elsie was growing up. She was painted at that pivotal age when she must choose whether to embody the New Woman or to maintain conventional ideals by getting married and having children. The stillness of the image freezes Elsie and the viewer in a stage of the unknown: the viewer is unsure what she will do next, just as society's eyes turned to focus on these young women, watching intensely to see if they would "selfishly deny" their duties. Elsie sits quietly, sizing up the viewer as she weighs her options as an intelligent, self-possessed woman at the dramatic cusp, standing at a social split, caught in the moment when she makes her decision.

Connor claims that Sargent "created monumental, life-sized portraits of exceptional women whose biographies support the artist's interpretation of them as fascinating and psychologically complex," a claim that I have sought to support in this paper. In examining Elsie Palmer's complicated life and portraying her as a captivating personality, I have attempted to unpack Sargent's intriguing, but unsettling, portrait. Through close visual analysis of the final portrait and the preliminary sketches, I have revealed Sargent's commitment to portraying the real Elsie Palmer, not simply a visual representation of her. Finally, in putting the portrait in its broader artistic and social context, I have illustrated how the tension inherent in the portrait relates to Elsie's standing between the life of a "New Woman" and the traditional life of a mother and wife. Despite the progress made by women after the Civil War, Elsie sits unwillingly, a woman in possession of herself but still at the mercy of a man with a paintbrush.

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*List of Figures*

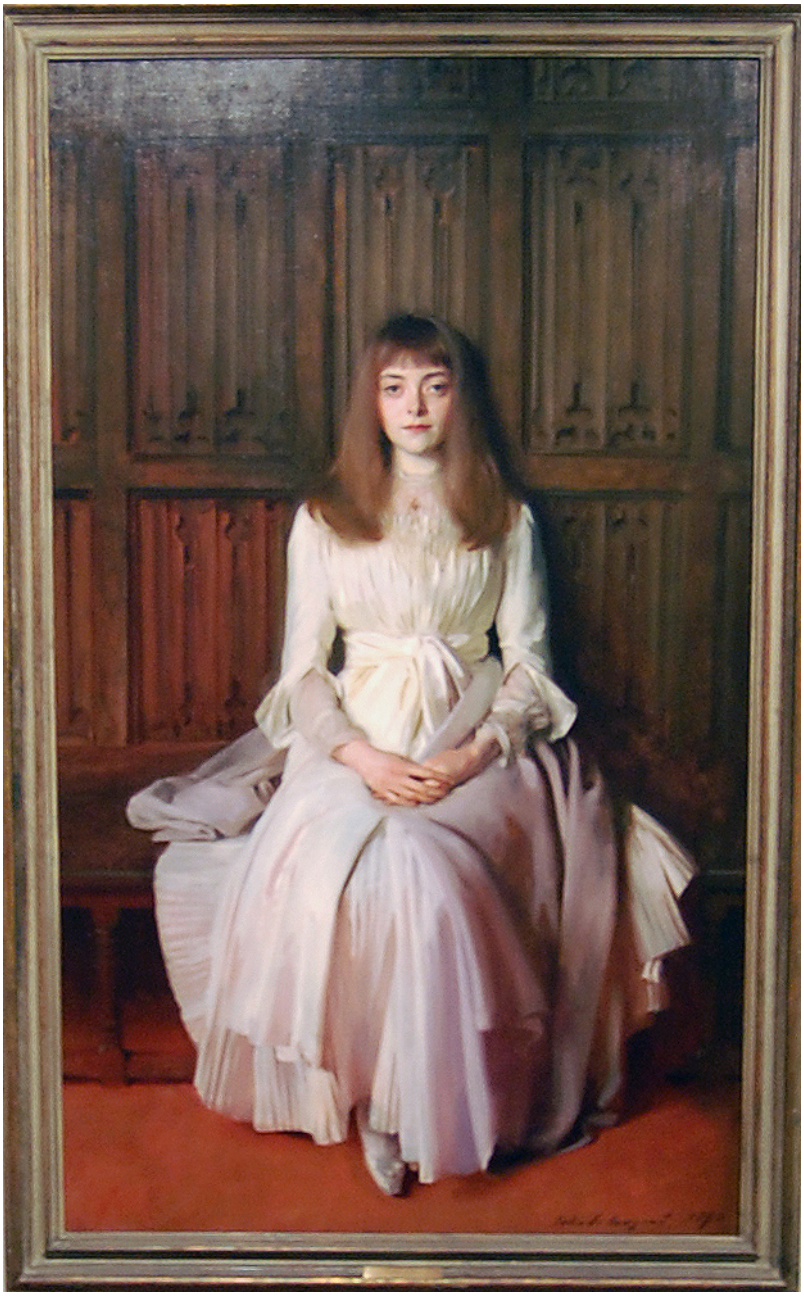

Fig. 1
John Singer Sargent (American, 1856-1925), *Elsie Palmer,* 1889-90. Oil on canvas, 75 x 45 in. (190.5 x 114.3 cm). Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, Colorado Springs (69-4). Photo by Alexa L. Hayes, 2010.

Fig. 2
View of John Singer Sargent's *Elsie Palmer* in the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, Colorado Springs. Photo by Alexa L. Hayes, 2010.

Fig. 3
Details of *Elsie Palmer.*
Photos by Alexa L. Hayes, 2010.

Fig. 4
John Singer Sargent, *Elsie Palmer,* c. 1890. Brown ink on off-white wove paper, 10 3/8 x 14 in. (26.4 x 35.5 cm). Harvard Art Museum, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond (1937.7.27.2.B).
Photo by Katya Kallsen © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Fig. 5
http://jssgallery.org/Paintings/Elsie_Palmer.html#Pic
John Singer Sargent, *Elsie Palmer*, 1889-90. Oil on canvas, 29 1/2 x 24 1/2 in. (74.9 x 62.3 cm). Private Collection.
Drawing by Alexa L. Hayes, 2010.

Fig. 6
John Singer Sargent, *Elsie Palmer*, 1889-90. Oil on board, 23 3/4 x 12 3/4 in. (60.5 x 32.5 cm). Private Collection.
Drawing by Alexa L. Hayes, 2010.

Fig. 7
John Singer Sargent, Study for *Elsie Palmer*, c. 1889-1890. Oil on canvas, 30 x 19 3/8 in. (76.2 x 49.21 cm). Harvard Art Museum, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Gift of Grenville L. Winthrop, Class of 1886 (1942.58).
Photo by Katya Kallsen © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Fig. 8
Photo of Elsie Palmer by Henry Vander Weyde, c. 1889. Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado.


Fig. 9
Photo of Mary Lincoln Mellen by W. Hoffert, c. 1881. Tim Nicholson Collection, Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado.


Fig. 10
Photo of Elsie Palmer by Alman & Co., c. 1878. Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado.