THE SPECTRAL IMAGINATION: AMERICAN ART BETWEEN SCIENCE AND SUPERSTITION IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores how tensions between science and superstition were embedded in and constitutive of the visual arts in late nineteenth-century America. By focusing on the work of artists Henry Alexander (1860–94), William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), Edwin Romanzo Elmer (1850–1923), and Irving Ramsay Wiles (1861–1948), this project examines the interplay of these ostensibly opposing worldviews in painting. It traces how the interdependence of these terms—which were very much in flux during the era—provided a creative paradigm for negotiating the professionalization of science, the emergent discipline of psychology, new theories of perception and memory, as well as scientific and spiritual efforts to unlock material, psychic, and supernatural worlds broadly. This dissertation reassesses distinctions between so-called realistic and visionary idioms in American art and offers a revised conception of the intersections between art and science in this period.
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INTRODUCTION

In 1898, the British writer James Fullarton Muirhead mused, with Tocquevillian perspicacity, on the “extraordinary clashes” he had witnessed during his travels in the United States. The country, he declared, “stands out preeminently as […] the land of stark, staring, and stimulating inconsistency; at once the home of enlightenment and the happy hunting ground of the charlatan and the quack.” Elaborating on this foremost cultural conflict, he noticed how the “curious contrast to the practical, material, matter-of-fact side of the American is his intense interest in the supernatural, the spiritualistic, the superstitious.” As if a single individual embodied these cross-purposes as a national trait, Muirhead’s representative “American” was a special contradiction. Muirhead admits that the account of his social observations “is merely a record of personal impressions,” but his remarks succinctly testify to an important quandary at the end of the nineteenth century.¹

The literary critic Andrew Lang, writing in 1886, expounded on a similar antagonism. “Why,” asked Lang, “as science becomes more cock-sure, have men and women become more and more fond of the old follies, and more pleased with the stirrings of ancient dread, within their veins? As the visible world is measured, mapped, tested, [and] weighed, we seem to hope more and more that a world of invisible romance may not be far from us.” The attraction of supernatural causes and unseen fantasies, despite living “in a positive age,” was, in Lang’s estimation, on the rise.² Science’s knowingness and ever-expanding reach only seemed to foster and deepen a fascination with unshakeable terrors—with ghosts and other paranormal phenomena. The

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fundamental friction and perceived overlap between the domains of science and superstition, which both Lang and Muirhead pondered, are at the core this dissertation. Focusing on the years spanning their comments, I explore how these competing forces exerted pressure on, and were harnessed toward generative ends in, the work of four American artists.

The last decades of the nineteenth century were rife with both popular and specialized attempts to take stock of superstition, even distinctively obsessed with it—with defining and understanding the development of superstition, with gauging the perniciousness of superstition, with ascertaining the level of popular adherence to superstition, and with distancing the activities of contemporary life from bygone superstition. One article from 1889, for instance, noted “how desperately [superstition] has clung to mankind, with what difficulty and after how many years it has been practically subdued. For its subjection has been only partial after all.” The writer conceded, “Men’s minds are not yet ruled absolutely by the laws of exact science,” and “it is difficult […] to say where rational belief ends and superstition begins.”

Distinguishing a dividing line could indeed be difficult, if not impossible, though the question of what constitutes a “rational” human being was by no means unique to this moment. Yet in this post-Darwinian period, the authority of science gained new traction in assessing these questions and increasingly deployed itself as the chief guarantor of material progress.

While, generally speaking, the expanding supremacy of science and its pledge to banish superstition are the backdrop for the chapters that follow, this is not to suggest that
science presented a homogeneous face to the world.⁴ Although sharp distinctions between science and superstition long existed, and began to solidify in new ways in this period, they remained in flux and uneasily reliant on one another. The boundaries, that is to say, between science and non-science continually change through their mutual influence. As the scholar of literature and science George Levine has written, with an eye to this era in particular, “science is no monolithic entity: always in the process of becoming, its boundaries are never absolute, its definition never certain.” My study attempts to enter into some of the variability and incoherence around which such constructions of these terms inevitably swirled, to inhabit “the boundary between the hard scientific and the mysterious,” as Levine writes, the “boundary breaks down everywhere.”⁵ This project, then, is principally concerned with the permeability of borders and the fuzziness of categories, and if questions of scientific terminology remain somewhat unsettled, it is perhaps as it should be. For the works of art analyzed in what follows straddle, along diverse routes, this precarious borderland, yielding to the demands of interlocking discourses.

The intellectual inclusivity and sympathetic curiosity of the American philosopher and psychologist William James is paradigmatic here. In these decades, James blurred disciplinary barriers in the study of psychology, metaphysics, religion, and mysticism. By plunging into features of human experience often ignored by mainstream science, James also troubled professional and popular hierarchies. James maintained, as the historian Francesca Bordogna has written, “an insistence on transgressing boundaries separating fields of knowledge, types of discourse, and groups of inquirers.”⁶ In 1884, for example,
James helped establish the American affiliate of the Society for Psychical Research in Boston, which sought to investigate psychic phenomena according to the methods and criteria of science—grounding the possibility of ghosts as empirically verifiable. As Bordogna and other scholars have detailed, “psychical research occupied an ambiguous borderland of science,” and it was a means for James to challenge the separation of “orthodox science” and “superstition.”

The subsequent chapters examine four related crossovers in the visual arts and seek to clarify their specific differences and ramifications. Just as I hope not to oversimplify the myriad branches and activities falling under the rubric of science, I employ the term superstition to signal both the broadest possible divergence from an apparently scientific worldview and, in the spirit of James’s productive openness, to elucidate elusive zones where all is not entirely explainable. This dissertation, in other words, focuses more on the entanglements and various points of convergence—on the in-between—than on one arena or the other. The myriad histories and perspectives drawing together superstition, magic, and religion—as well as their relevance to science—are exceedingly complex, and it is not possible to amply delve into these fraught and much-debated relationships here.

Nevertheless, it bears mention that superstition and magic are often regarded as the foil to secular modernity. If, in one approach to the story of its disenchantment, western rationalism vanquished or suppressed magical thinking and superstitious belief, then any recourse to or reemergence of them are typically understood as residual or atavistic relics. Another approach finds modernity itself as inherently irrational whereby
economic markets and the mass media become pernicious, manipulative enchantments. Without discounting these approaches altogether, perhaps it is possible to take up a third view of magic or enchantment, to recognize, as the historian Michael Saler and scholar of literature Joshua Landy write, “the fact that modernity embraces seeming contrarities, such as rationality and wonder, secularism and faith.”\textsuperscript{10} Saler articulates this “antinominal” approach to enchantment, in which “modernity is characterized by fruitful tensions between seemingly irreconcilable forces and ideas. Modernity is defined less by binaries arranged in an implicit hierarchy, or by the dialectical transformation of one term into its opposite, than by unresolved contradictions and oppositions.”\textsuperscript{11} My dissertation comes into contact with this position by reconsidering how art, science, and superstition were bound to each other in an interdependent, relational web.

Thus this project departs from most studies of American art that tend to treat superstitious or scientific questions at the end of nineteenth century in terms of iconography.\textsuperscript{12} Without relying on visual codes that could fall under labels such as late Romantic or Symbolist, the paintings I concentrate on incorporate anti-rationalist and anti-materialist ideas while still being anchored in the everyday world through realistic visual idioms.\textsuperscript{13} These works of art communicate greater ambivalence about industrialized and materialist society; and they do not explicitly express discontent by withdrawing into otherworldly subject matter. Consequently, the episodes I track cannot fully be understood as nostalgically anti-modern.\textsuperscript{14} That is to say, these works are not the idyllic or pastoral turnings-away that are typically understood as reactions to the forces of industrialization, modernization, and rationalization; they do not present a clear wish to
become unfettered or escape from modern rationality—or to seek renewal from the over-stimulated conditions of modern life. And yet, to varying degrees, they partake of an underlying quest for a replenishment of mystery to a world apparently emptied of magic and rendered humdrum by science.

I treat these works as sites where, following Muirhead’s terms, the matter-of-fact and the superstitious meet. For the boundaries between these categories became less important than their superimposition. “The visible world,” as the art historian Michael Leja has phrased it, “was becoming an enchanted realm where fantasy and reality were difficult to distinguish.” Leja continues: “Spiritualism and occult philosophies overlapped the scientific work of […] William James […] and other psychologists formulating explanations for illusions, hallucinations, and deceptions in this period.” To account for the dynamism and complexity of this double-sidedness in art anew, I look not to the ghostly figures found in spirit photography, for example, but to the depiction of outwardly “normal” spaces—familiar, observable scenes not quarantined from worldly affairs. Thus my project charts a middle path between art-historical distinctions that divorce the hard facts of the real from the open-endedness of the imagination. It brings to the surface the indeterminacy and interpenetration of external material reality and inner psychic reality in heretofore unappreciated dimensions in this period. In these works, various aspects of supernaturalism are retrieved from the social fringes to extend their influence over daily life. I show how four artists highlighted the novel or strange in the midst of the familiar in order to recover vital experience lost in the pursuit of rendering
the world objectively. As a result, their paintings hint at the way irrational forces and passions afflict, maybe even govern, such notions as civilization and progress.

By striving to access something close at hand or beneath quotidian experience, these works paradoxically convey a more indirect ghostliness—a type of ghostliness that, almost imperceptibly, emerges from the placid surfaces of a sedate drawing room. However approximate, a comparison to period literature goes some way toward clarifying this specifically visual type of spectral doubleness. For it is near to what Andrew Lang, in 1886, called “a new kind of supernatural horror” in fiction. The supernatural element, advocated Lang, “should, as a general rule, be left in the vague.” Rather than setting about to “describe a ghost with all the most hideous features. It is wise to make as if you were going to describe him, and then break off.” Lang favors “adroit suggestion” over “actual description.” The case studies in this dissertation are oriented around painterly modes staked in mannerly facades, masterful verisimilitude, and everyday subject matter, but nonetheless they incorporate similar strategies of misdirection, suggestion, and ambiguity.

Some of the artists in the following chapters are not part of dominant narratives of American art. Foregrounding (at least) two artists operating on the periphery of mainstream currents necessitates grounding their works in biographical details. I pay attention to the individual life judiciously, I hope, in order to illuminate connections between the artists’ and their works. In these case studies, I take there to be what the art historian Thomas Crow has called “a high degree of intuitive likeness or parallelism between the two.” Excavating aspects of their lives helps to support and enrich the ideas
I unpack through analysis of the works themselves. While it can be difficult to gauge how readily the imprint of a life marks a work, I offer instances in which these artists’ lives corresponded—sometimes in unexpected ways—to their works. I resist, nevertheless, restricting the reading of the work to the private forces of biography, and instead appeal to personal circumstances to convey a clearer sense of formal meaning. I mobilize biography as one part of a larger network in which the painting was a part (and the artist one player). The work is the prime concern here—it ultimately has its own authority. In revealing unrecognized qualities in these paintings, I aim to make them perform in a critical dialogue with more established art-historical trajectories.  

The first chapter centers on the San Francisco genre painter Henry Alexander (1860–94), demonstrating how his *In the Laboratory* (ca. 1885–87) sought to manage the irrational imagination and assuage fears about science through his detailed handling of paint and distinctive compositional strategies. In the second chapter, *Hide and Seek* (1888) by William Merritt Chase (1849–1916) opens onto the promises of fantasy, altered states of consciousness, and multifaceted identity to an extent that it intersected with the emergent discipline of psychology. The third chapter addresses the painter and inventor Edwin Romanzo Elmer (1850–1923), whose unusual still life *Magic Glasses* (ca. 1891) probes death and commemoration, perception and memory in Massachusetts through vexed relationships between animate persons and inanimate objects. In the fourth chapter, *Russian Tea* (ca. 1896) by Irving Ramsay Wiles (1861–1948) registers his shift from commercial illustrator to society portraitist, the occult connotations of tea rituals, and the tactile mediumship practices of Spiritualist séances. It would be amiss to tie these
four principal figures together too closely. I see, however, their individual works as related, geographically disparate investigations of the possibilities and limitations of painting during these years. Each artist uniquely examined the multivalent conditions of and porous boundaries between scientific knowledge and superstitious belief, matter and mind, reality and fantasy, visible and invisible worlds in late-nineteenth century America.


8 Part of my hesitation with the term stems from awareness of its potentially derogatory connotations. For example, Arthur M. Lewis’s *The Struggle between Science and Superstition* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Company, 1915) uses the words superstition and religion interchangeably, as if an update of, for example, John William Draper, *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1874). The phrase, however, means differently in the opening credits of the *Twilight Zone* television series (1959–64), in which Rod Sterling, the show’s creator, intones that it is “a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man’s fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination.”


13 Charles Eldridge, for instance, has focused on artists who were part of a “refusal to deal with the world of fact” and an “imaginative flight from the empirical to the intuitive.” See Eldridge, *American Imagination and Symbolist Painting* (New York: Grey

14 T. J. Jackson Lears traces the American rejection of modernism and modernity by looking backwards to an idyllic past or to “premodern” traditions, what he summarizes as the “recoil from an ‘overcivilized’ modern existence to more intense forms of physical or spiritual experience supposedly embodied in medieval or Oriental cultures,” typified by the search for authenticity. See Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), xv.


19 I contend that these artists, as the art historian Alexander Nemerov has written of “minor figures,” may have “had a more untheorized or erratic sense of their work’s deepest import” than contemporaries now considered “artists as philosophers and cultural critics,” but that they “translated their hostility to cultural norms into innovative works of art.” See Nemerov, “The Author Replies,” *The Art Bulletin* 88 (March 2006): 64, 62.
In the middle of the 1880s in his native San Francisco, Henry Alexander painted a series of works featuring scientists in laboratories.¹ Alexander’s finest extant and most highly detailed painting, *In the Laboratory*, from about 1887, contains an assortment of bottles, beakers, flasks, test tubes, and other glass receptacles and metal instruments (fig. 1.1). These objects not only surround the prominent chemist and metallurgist Dr. Thomas Price seated before an open window but they also compete for the viewer’s attention.² The picture is related to the broad phenomenon of realist representations of the emerging professional class of scientists and doctors in the late-nineteenth century, as best exemplified by the portraits of Alexander’s Philadelphia contemporary Thomas Eakins. In *Professor Henry A. Rowland* (1897) by Eakins, for example, the workspace, sober attire, and contemplative mien of the physicist share certain affinities with Alexander’s portrayal of Price (fig. 1.2).³ Yet Alexander’s extreme exactitude—the painstaking attention with which the interior of the laboratory and building across the street are rendered in particular—diverges from the relatively nondescript setting of the Rowland portrait.⁴

*In the Laboratory* is so filled with chemical accoutrements that it departs from the identifiable *portrait d’apparat* tradition that Eakins’s painting more securely inhabits. In this picture, the amassed objects serve as more than signifiers of identity and markers of scientific ability. The spectator’s focus oscillates between, on the one hand, the figure of Price and, on the other, the objects and architectural details around him. Unlike Eakins’s portrait, Alexander’s idiosyncratic picture seems as much concerned with the spatial
makeup of the laboratory as with the glorification of Price. Even the painting’s title insinuates that something independent from portraiture is at stake—that site and placement are essential to its meaning.

This chapter explores how Alexander’s packed painting is underwritten by an attempt to seal off or contain dangers that could potentially arise from the unchecked imagination. His tightly executed and methodically organized canvas opens onto the problematic circumstances surrounding the public face of modern chemistry. In late nineteenth-century California, this branch of the sciences seemed to be especially uneasy about its foundations in premodern alchemy. As this chapter argues, Alexander’s technique here, predicated on rational control, provides the formal underpinnings for an artistic statement about unrestrained energies that animated San Francisco in this period. *In the Laboratory*, despite its efforts to curtail these wild forces, also registers this unruly irruption.

By joining the figure of Price with this particular environment of the laboratory, the painting speaks to period questions and anxieties about locating knowledge in specific geographical and visual ways. Through pointed juxtapositions between Price and the objects around him, *In the Laboratory* reveals a nexus that encompassed worries about the nefarious potential of chemistry, the role of art in legitimating scientific endeavors, and the challenges faced by the burgeoning artistic community of San Francisco. By drawing analogies between artistic and scientific practices, *In the Laboratory* highlights the link between fledging art institutions of the city and their capacity to underwrite the role of science in its cultural development during the post-Gold Rush era.
Chemistry and Alchemy

In the Laboratory’s compositional resemblance to and deviation from historical representations of alchemists helps to illuminate why picturing Price’s scientific space in the 1880s was such a vexed undertaking. His leftward facing chemist peers intently at the task before him as if an update of, for example, David Teniers’s hopeful transmuter of base metals into gold in An Alchemist in His Workshop, from the 1660s (fig. 1.3). Alchemical subject matter had its heyday in such seventeenth-century Netherlandish scenes, which often portray the alchemist’s search for the philosopher’s stone as foolhardy, arrogant, and blasphemous, particularly for daring to usurp the creative powers of God. An Alchemist in His Workshop—with its strewn books and shattered earthenware—suggests the recklessness of the alchemist’s mission and his efforts to exploit the secrets of nature. Paintings of this genre helped to align historically the figure of the alchemist with greedy conjurers and fraudulent charlatans, as well as with counterfeiters and forgers.⁵

The objects in Price’s laboratory, by contrast, are not a disorderly mess pointing to moral decay, but rather a collection of instruments in careful, geometric harmony. Instead of an indiscriminate massing of ceramics and glassware, Price’s workbench and cabinetry are organized; and the floor is devoid of the earlier picture’s smashed vessels. Disarray and haphazard display are eschewed in favor of logical arrangement. The orderliness of the workspace, moreover, suggests an orderliness of the mind, keyed to rational judgment and composure, not irrational thought or reckless behavior.⁶ Price’s head mirrors the shape of the glass alembic bulb to the immediate right, emphasizing the
conceptual agreement between him and his tools, between the origins of his ideas and the means for their implementation. Instead of looking disheveled and wide-eyed with excitement, Price is self-possessed and resolute.

A related painting by Alexander accentuates the sense of scientific mastery conveyed by Price’s deep connection to his instruments. *The Chemist* presents a murkier atmosphere inhabited by a scruffier scientist more removed from everyday concerns than Price (fig. 1.4). Alexander clearly sourced the figure from a contemporaneous autopsy scene by the Spanish painter Enrique Simonet Lombardo (fig. 1.5). His modeling of the scientist after this macabre picture suggests how Alexander was wrestling with modern science’s darker undertones, its lingering associations with sorcery, necromancy, and erotic depravity that informed the complicated identity of the scientist in these years. The chemist’s unkempt appearance and impetuous grasp of the bottle seem to pose the possibility of his mental and physical instability, as he precariously steadies himself with his hand on the tabletop. There is an element of danger or uncertainty associated with the potion he eyes, and it is perhaps not surprising that *The Chemist* graced the cover of a later edition of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, originally published in 1886, as if it was specially calibrated to the fiendishness found in Robert Louis Stevenson’s novella. Safely seated, Price’s hands and assured poise instead suggest a more harmless pursuit. Bathed in golden light, *The Chemist’s* primordial furnace burning in the background conjures up ties between alchemy—sometimes referred to as Vulcan’s art—and the forge. The papered-over window at the upper right accentuates the dim and cavernous quality of this chemist’s lair, pointing to concealment and secrecy.
In the Laboratory, conversely, is far from a lightless, subterranean chamber. Price’s room presents an airy, sterile antidote in which modern equipment—microscope and retorts, for instance—have replaced the roaring hearth. The glass containers have a cleanliness and translucence that the dingy receptacles in The Chemist lack, connoting a level of legibility and transparency about the nature of the task at hand. The high ceiling and repeated vertical linear elements—such as the various wood slants and the corner of the room—emphasize an upward expanse, a sense of ascending up and out, beyond the picture plane, perhaps both in a physical and spiritual sense.

In An Alchemist in His Workshop and The Chemist the window highlights each room’s detachment from the outside world, accentuating its isolation and eccentricity. In the Laboratory’s window, prominent and parallel to the picture plane, however, reinforces the connection to the external street, to the many faces of San Francisco. Whereas in The Chemist Alexander’s handling of the paint is looser and more coarsely applied and the objects more summarily described, In the Laboratory’s precise formal structure and polished application suggest the ways in which the picture works to suppress discordant tendencies that were associated with alchemy and that still clung to chemistry. Its surface finish, exacting clarity, and neatly shelved objects provide a foil to the comparative disarray found in The Chemist. In the Laboratory is an attempt to keep the sinister connotations of science at bay.
Golden Dreams

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the mania stemming from the acquisition of gold was especially pronounced. As chemistry became institutionalized as a distinct discipline during the eighteenth century, it tried to jettison its old attachments to the ancient search for metallic transmutation. Yet the origins of the mystical coupling of the production of gold—mining, smelting, and refining—and alchemy ran deep, remaining joined in a dark corner of the American imagination, perhaps nowhere more powerfully than in the state of California.

Gold was integral to the founding myths of the Americas. In California, most importantly, the phrase “golden dream”—a saying that referred to the alchemist’s futile quest—was resuscitated to describe fortune hunters in the Gold Rush of 1848–55. The desire to manufacture gold by artificial means still smoldered in various quarters of the United States. For example, one writer lamented gold’s continued ties to superstition in 1856:

It is not wonderful that the labors of the miner and of the metallurgist have at all times been linked with superstitious associations in the minds of men. The one pursuing his search in the depths of the earth, in darkness and uncertainty, only ministers to the demands of the other for a perpetual supply of those strange stony masses out of which the living metal is drawn.

Even respected members of the local scientific community were suspicious that chemists still harbored hopes of altering the properties of lead, tin, and other non-precious metals in order to generate gold. “Some [chemists] go so far as to predict that all matter may be found to be one element, in different allotropic states of condition,” asserted an 1883 report from the California State Mineralogist. “The golden dream of the alchemist was
based on this theory,” it worried, “and the same idea still finds [its] place in the deepest
thoughts of the modern chemist.”12 In California of the 1880s, the tantalizing possibility
of alchemical transmutation shadowed modern chemistry.

The search for gold, moreover, was characterized as a kind of fever, with
connotations of craving and contagion.13 In the context of the Gold Rush, after all, the
notion of a “rush” implies both the speedy traversal of immense distances as well as an
emotional surge, a thrilling intoxication. Taking a rather bleak view, some sources from
this period enumerated the ways in which the pursuit of gold was associated with
obsession and contamination. Reminiscences of the early influx of settlers to San
Francisco, such as in the books *Golden Dreams and Leaden Realities* (1851) and *Lights
and Shades in California* (1876)—the harsh aftermath insinuated by their titles—
presented the grim underside of the “golden dreams” that infected the region.14 In the
former publication, its author remarked mournfully on “the demoralizing effects of the
California gold mania,” and the unquenchable “thirst for gold.”15

The allure of gold and the obsession to procure it bordered on or seemed to result
often in psychosis in San Francisco in these years. Suicide and madness were scourges of
the city and believed to be the product of the failed schemes of treasure hunters who
came to the state—the common breakdown from “gold fever.” In 1860, reportedly a
staggering eighty-one percent of the nation’s suicides “were committed in the Pacific
district.” A decade later, suicide was still most prevalent in “the centres of gold-mining
excitement.” “Why are we so suicidal a people?” asked the *Western Lancet*, a local
medical journal: “San Francisco supplies in proportion to her population, three times as
many suicides as New York, [and] five times as many as Philadelphia.” San Francisco’s fixation on gold—in later years, in terms of the boom and bust cycles of mining stock speculations—created innumerable “physical wrecks of humans who were once men.” The insane asylum “has living witnesses to what this wild excitement leads. These are the mental wrecks—men who have gone stock mad.”16 Responding to the gloomy climate of San Francisco, a writer, in 1880, connected the atmospherics of the “phantom city” to the “nervous” energy of its economic engine—its unflinching greed, its “crushing” competition—and its “reputation of being the insane asylum of the world; the swell manufactory of madmen, the favorite morgue of the suicide.”17

In a less somber and direct way, the work of artist William Keith seemed to naturalize the link between the environment around San Francisco and gold. After the Gold Rush the colloquialism of California as the “golden state” lent a new dimension to the belief that the western United States was an earthly paradise overflowing with riches.18 The promise and possibility of gold in California was entrenched in the state’s self-definition—the “golden” opportunities awaiting its new arrivals tantamount to its sloganeering. Keith’s “glowing” depictions of the landscape capture the mystique of California as a land of gold (fig. 1.6).19 An artist of California’s “golden period,” Keith was especially well versed in capitalizing on the potential of the “magic land of golden light.”20 In paintings such as Evening Glow, the central importance of the precious metal to the region seems to suffuse the entire natural world. Keith’s facility in painting “the sun’s golden rays” brokers the broader symbolic significance of gold and normalizes a vision of abundance and material progress through mining of the metal.21 In the sparkling
sunset, Keith’s picture suggests how the physical properties of gold permeated San Francisco—the city of the Golden Gate—and its environs on an elemental level. Its shimmer of golden hues becomes a sky of “living metal,” as if to renew the alchemical doctrine of gold as the metal of the sun. As in Keith’s work, the appearance of gold was often relegated to landscape painting. Given gold’s associations with danger and derangement, it as if such depictions sought to keep the precious metal away from the hands of mere mortals.

If Keith’s picture deflects the perceived irresistible and riotous quality of gold in these decades onto the landscape, In the Laboratory works to tame it in a different way. It as if the golden streaks in Keith’s Evening Glow become atomized in the glass containers surrounding Alexander’s sitter. The chemist seems to have captured the flood of gold in his various vials, physically harnessing and subduing its more abstract, disorderly, or chaotic aspects. Similarly, the golden glow of The Chemist becomes localized and enclosed within Price’s vials, beakers, and test tubes. By bottling the power of gold, Price acts like a new Prometheus who bends the lightning of the heavens to his command and supervision. This compartmentalization of gold suggests a scientific mastery that was predicated on an effort to undercut gold’s deep-seated associations with the unpredictable magic of the alchemist, a proto mad-scientist figure who could commandeer the creative forces of nature to more threatening ends.
The Case of Thomas Price

*In the Laboratory* attempts to diminish chemistry’s roots in alchemy by subverting the visual tropes of alchemical precedents partly to distance its sitter, Thomas Price (1837–1912), publicly from quackery and occultism. By the time Alexander painted Price in his office, the chemist’s business was the largest, most technologically sophisticated, and most relied upon in San Francisco, and possibly on the entire West Coast of the United States. He became known, according to various newspapers, as an “expert [...] all over the State, in San Francisco, Oakland, and as far as Salt Lake City and Portland” and “one of the foremost chemists and assayers of the country.” Price emerged as a leading member of the San Francisco scientific community and his livelihood and standing depended largely upon his public persona and the trustworthiness of his character. He conducted analyses and examined mining properties on behalf of most major mining companies in the western United States. Thus his reputation hinged upon being accurate, reliable, and honest.

But certain connections existed between Price and the mythical alchemist. Price shared his surname with a reputed English alchemist from the late-eighteenth century who was, at the end of nineteenth century, “commonly set down in popular journals as the last of the alchemists.” That San Francisco’s Thomas Price hailed from Wales made the weight of alchemical history all the more burdensome. Not only was Price’s name and nationality cause for suspicion, but his dealings were as well. Price’s primary practice involved the assaying of metals, that is, the separation of base metals from
precious ones—an activity that conceivably constituted the nearest acceptable equivalent to alchemical transmutation.

In 1870, while delivering a lecture on the properties of gases, Price’s experiment went awry, “an explosion ensued, scattering the glass bottle and tubes into numberless fragments, while the contents blazed up in a shoot of flame reaching to the ceiling of the hall.” The fire badly burned Price’s face, neck, and hands, and a hail of broken glass injured audience members. One man, whose eye required removal after a flying shard struck it, eventually filed a lawsuit against Price. In the legal battle that followed, the chemist “denied that the explosion was the result of negligence, but simply an unavoidable accident.” The jury, nonetheless, held Price partially responsible for the destructive blast. Comments at and about the trial reverberate with broader fears about science running amuck in the period. The circumspect view of the scientist’s creation as out-of-control and of scientists as reckless, amoral, and villainous were also being examined in literature, much of which maintained a serious skepticism about, even contempt for, scientists, especially chemists.

San Francisco author W. H. Rhodes’s “The Case of Summerfield” closely resonates with Price’s predicament. In the short story, published in May 1871, not long after Price’s infamous mishap, a mad chemist threatens to set San Francisco Bay on fire unless the city pays him one million dollars. Summerfield—“Of chemistry he was a complete master,” writes Rhodes—concocts a potion that would spread an endless fire across the globe: “lurid radii of flames would gradually shoot outward until the blazing circumference would roll in vast billows of fire, upon the uttermost shores.” The story
became an immediate sensation when it first appeared in a local newspaper as fact. The reportorial pretense and the simple directness of Rhodes’s style shook readers “into startled and enquiring astonishment,” according to one writer. The story generated widespread alarm over whether the magnitude of the destruction it proposed was possible. That Rhodes penned the tale under a pseudonym heightened public fear and the mysterious circumstances around the story.28

Taken together, the fervor over Rhodes’s golden inferno of apocalyptic proportions and the explosion caused by Price illustrate how the work of the chemist was never far from anxieties about the perils of science in San Francisco in these years. Just the word chemistry, wrote one source in 1886, “recalls confused memories of […] chaos […] and danger.” The “sensations of awe and of mystery bordering on the supernatural […] have clung to chemistry ever since its entanglements with the superstition of alchemy.”29 These persistent complications surrounding chemistry and Price’s credibility uniquely inform Alexander’s picture.

Locating the Laboratory

Rendering the production of scientific knowledge benign and locatable was a crucial aim of In the Laboratory. After testing various liquid cure-all tonics on behalf of California’s Board of Health, Thomas Price endorsed Joy’s Vegetable Sarsaparilla in a series of advertisements in the 1880s and 1890s. Such remedies were all but explicit heirs to the alchemist’s elusive “elixir of life,” a recipe for eternal youth and immortality.30 Wedged next to regular newspaper articles, these endorsements more closely resembled news
reports than product advertisements. Affirmative statements about Price—“the leading chemist of the west,” for instance—accompanied images of the exterior and interior of his laboratory. One shows a small elevation drawing of the building that housed Price’s laboratory, noting that it “is a faithful picture of the well known establishment of Thomas Price & Son, at 524 Sacramento Street, S.F.”31 Another notice features a sketch of Price in his laboratory: he is exalted under a bold, capitalized headline for telling the public “A CHEMICAL TRUTH.”32 Amid tidy rows of bottles, Price pours out a dram of the serum for himself, as if to confirm its safe and salutary effects (fig. 1.7). A small, framed picture hung on the wall behind Price duplicates his drinking act, as though acknowledging the authority of a “fine art” portrayal in suturing his activity to the laboratory site and in effectively communicating his “careful chemical analyses.”

The advertisements for Joy’s Vegetable Sarsaparilla with images of the exterior and interior of Price’s laboratory attempted to provide a demonstrable and verifiable physical context for his conclusions about the product, tantamount to Alexander’s pictorial conclusions about the legitimacy of Price’s scientific endeavors and influential role within the profession. Alexander’s picture and these advertisements beg to be seen as two sides of the same coin—both strove to cement Price’s reputation as a respected professional, to make official his claims about the products, thereby distancing him from both hucksterism and alchemy.

The need to reinforce Price’s reputation visually in the mid 1880s was in part due to questions that emerged about his credibility and judgment on several occasions. When his “work” and “ability” were challenged after he conducted a chemical analysis in 1884,
for instance, Price responded by denouncing the integrity of the publication in which the anonymous criticism appeared. As an assayer, Price was part of the local government system that aimed to prevent fraud by assuring purity in the manufacture of gold ingots and coins, lending the battle over his reputation added municipal consequence.

In the Laboratory addresses these issues of integrity on Price’s behalf. It was part of a process of disclosure whereby findings in the laboratory, as the historian of science David N. Livingstone has argued, “frequently had to be dramatized in order to be stabilized.” According to Livingstone, “Where science was conducted—in what physical and social space—was thus a crucial ingredient in establishing whether an assertion was warranted.” Maintaining Price’s reputation as dependable and virtuous was a high priority, and understanding the need to solidify his good standing and eminence helps to clarify characteristics of Alexander’s portrayal of him. The painting stabilizes the public claims made by and about Price and functions as a kind of advertisement for him. By attempting to convince viewers that Price’s services were the “real thing,” In the Laboratory responds to emergent forces of mass advertising and news media.

The picture wed two different approaches to the fidelity of representation: both Alexander’s “realistic” surfaces and Price’s “faithful” scientific claims. The unseen brushstrokes further enhance its illusionism. The painting’s aggressive denial of the artist’s hand confirms that the image seen is like a slice of “real” life—it is meant to be persuasive by trumpeting truth. Most known works by Alexander he signed in bright red paint—as in the lower right corner of The Chemist (where the color acts as the blood-splattered counterpoint to the cold creepiness of the morgue in La Autopsia de Corazón).
Here, however, the brown color of his name is almost indecipherable, blurring into instead of standing out from the floorboards. This visual devise contributes to the critical role of location in the legitimation of the social uses of the chemist’s creative powers.

**Through the Window**

The most fundamental way that *In the Laboratory* seeks to harness the problematic connections between Price and alchemy is by connecting him to the external world, to the city of San Francisco outside his window. Beyond Price and his collection of tools loom two panes of glass and past those, a building whose façade is a lighter shade of brown than the walls and wood cabinetry of his workroom. The conspicuously placed double-hung window occupies approximately one-third of the composition. The window is broad and expansive, but the view is tightened to a single object—the building across the street. In a sense, the centrally located window dominates the interior and the diffuse natural light entering the room almost emanates from the building itself.

An ambiguity between the external sash and the internal sash of the window creates a planar disruption that further calls attention to the focused vista. Objects inside draw the viewer’s eye back into space. For example, the shapes of the interior metal stands and glass vials parallel the white Corinthian columns and pilaster that support the framed edifice. The progression from interior to immediate cityscape is enhanced by the white accents on the various glass containers that culminate in the whitewashed columns. The grayish triangle of Price’s furrowed brow is similarly repeated in an analogous dusty patch in the upper left pane of the interior sash. The brilliant gold solutions inside the lab
also reconvene in the muted yellow lettering on the structure’s facade. Set against the
leftmost column, a test tube effectively maps itself onto the column: we see through its
translucent glass, following it upward in one continuous movement that connects interior
and exterior, Price’s laboratory and the building.

Other paintings suggest how much of a key subject, structural element, and
communicator of information the window was for Alexander. *Snow Scene through a Winter Window* highlights a related interest in the movement between interior and
exterior through the dynamics of objects around a windowsill (fig. 1.8). The leaves of the
potted plants draw attention to similar branches and buds on the trees outside. The color
and shape of the pots correspond to the chimneys situated directly above them. The
painting’s original title—playing on “scene” to encompass that which is *seen* with the
eyes—also privileges the notion of transference between spaces, of looking past, of
looking deeper.

Alexander lavished comparable attention on the window in *Neglecting Business.*
The first state of the painting featured the firm’s name in block typeface above the heads
of the two chess players (fig. 1.9). Alexander later substituted a view of the building
across the street for the lettering as a way of initiating a greater exchange between the
office and the city outside (fig. 1.10). In the first version, the lettering seems to anticipate
its own removal. That is, “FLAKE,” here seen in reverse, suggests the way it, as painting
of paint, will peel, chip, or flake off the window, that the word will be eliminated.
Clearly, the liminal junction—and the potency of the union between outer and inner and
of language in the transitional space—was significant to Alexander’s artistic practice.
Nowhere was this more important than *In the Laboratory*. Its depth of field sharpens the building outside the window into crystalline focus.\(^{37}\)

**Regulating the Imagination**

The picture does more than just emphasize the building in the distance—it establishes an alliance between Price’s laboratory and an artistic site of seminal importance to San Francisco. The What Cheer House opened as a temperance hotel in 1852 to cater to the influx of miners and sailors during California’s Gold Rush (fig. 1.11). Robert B. Woodward, the founder, encouraged moral uplift and clean living and sought to transform his establishment into a venue of cultural distinction. He intended the hotel to be a bastion of wholesomeness in the face of a citizenry preoccupied with the pastimes of prostitution, gambling, and blood sports.\(^{38}\) To this end, the What Cheer House contained Woodward’s collection of assorted natural history objects, San Francisco’s first free library, and, significantly, its first art museum. Woodward initially hung paintings in the lobby, but soon had devoted permanent space to, as one source remarked, “a picture-gallery, and several fine pieces of statuary.” By the early 1860s, Woodward’s “project of laying in San Francisco the foundations for an art gallery which would one day vie with the best collections of the eastern cities” was well under way.\(^{39}\)

The legibility of the building beyond the window frame of Price’s laboratory suggests the picture’s acknowledgement of and dependence upon the larger artistic community of which Alexander was a part—two different, but not necessarily dissimilar, faces of late-nineteenth-century San Francisco. The two sites beg to be read in tandem.
The room’s orthogonal lines all converge in the vicinity of the What Cheer House, calling attention to the recession from one space to another, with its classical capitals supporting the high art aspirations of its mission. Both their organic, stylized foliage and the floral motif of the balustrade echo the curvilinear forms of Price’s glassware. The arrow-like pipettes at the edges of the window also point toward the building.

The tie between the foreground and the background can productively be traced to Alexander’s artistic training at the Munich Royal Academy in the late 1870s and early 1880s. The figure of Price is remarkably reminiscent of the standing woman in Johannes Vermeer’s *Woman Holding a Balance* (fig. 1.12). Both right hands gingerly hold an object between thumb and index finger; both left hands rest on the flat surface in front of each figure. Each figure’s arms and hands extend from the body and are placed in relationship to the table in a nearly identical manner. Their three-quarter view, slightly cocked heads, downcast eyes, and absorbed countenances are also strangely similar. The tight brushwork and small scale of such Dutch genre subjects from the seventeenth century formed the pedagogical core of Alexander’s time in Munich. By the 1880s, most paintings coming out of Munich, as an English art critic observed, “follow the style of the small Dutch masters.” The main catalyst for this phase at the academy was Ludwig von Löfftz, Alexander’s principal instructor, who was known for his nearly “exclusive study and imitation of Dutch masters.” If Alexander did not know Vermeer’s work directly, he was likely aware of at least one of the many versions after it. His picture owes a considerable debt to its skillful interchange between foreground and background scenes.
In the Laboratory’s relationship to Vermeer’s painting suggests the degree to which its meaning hinges upon a consideration of both realms of the canvas. In Vermeer’s Woman Holding a Balance, the picture-within-picture device qualifies our understanding of the main action in the foreground. The Last Judgment scene on the wall unlocks the allegory, as an analogy is drawn between God judging souls and the woman—long believed to be weighing gold—adjusting the scales. Through the secondary picture, Vermeer’s painting cautions against an over investment in earthly possessions and vanity; it intimates the value of temperance and balanced judgment.42 This juxtaposition of one spatial region providing commentary on another area of the picture also finds expression in Alexander’s In the Laboratory.

The building is pulled into Price’s space with the partial reflection on the glass wall at the upper left. This sense of doubling recurs on the face of the What Cheer House: the letters “OUSE” are reiterated below in the completed word “HOUSE.” The fully visible “U” and “S” can read as the objective pronoun “us” (i.e., you and me), a linguistic conceit that further spans the chasm of the unseen street. It is as if the chosen vantage point isolates and accentuates the word so that the building itself declares, “It’s us!” The word implicates the site, as if calling upon the declarations and relationships between people and objects, particularly buildings, that were motifs of gothic literature—Edgar Allan Poe’s The Fall of the House of Usher (1839) with the “vacant eye-like windows” of the Usher mansion—and popular imagery from an earlier era, such as the projective transformation in The Effects of Imagination (fig. 1.13). In the late-nineteenth century, the personification impulses in the work of writer Henry James register on a more subtle
and psychological level. In his travelogue *The American Scene* (1907), James describes the skyscrapers of New York in human terms: “their long, narrow faces” give way to one “thousand glassy eyes” and “myriad arteries and pores.” As he “commune[s] with it,” James writes how the building “was to speak to me audibly enough” and with “irresistible lucidity,” suggesting a profound and intimate relationship between person and structure.

The buildings’ assertive volubility in *The American Scene* is part of a larger tendency in James’s writing, as Bill Brown has argued, for character to subsume objects. Brown claims a slippage from the individual and the building to the merging of edifice and human consciousness: “James replaces the physical world with a psychological world while transposing thoughts into things, giving substance to thinking.” The lapse between objects and human cognizance in the work of James are indicative of the way external objects come to represent inner character in the emerging consumer culture of the late-nineteenth century. This tendency was also part of emergent psychological discourses that drew parallels between the construction of human consciousness and architecture.

Recall how Alexander’s adaptation *The Chemist* substitutes the supine body in Simonet’s painting for vessels of containment. Alexander also transforms the human heart in the earlier picture into the glass bottle in his own. Similarly, the head of the woman becomes the alembic under the chemist’s hand. If that picture works through the substitution of animate and inanimate parts, *In the Laboratory* seems to involve a more complex interdependence and reciprocity between corporeality and objects, and it moves
toward collapsing the distinction between human figure and building to disclose a person-like essence haunting it.  

As in James’s book, the What Cheer House’s status as an object recedes because of the typographic statement; instead, the character of the building announces itself. The What Cheer House was known as a kind of speaking building or structure alive with language. The cacophony of international voices that reverberated from the inside made the hotel, wrote one visitor, “like a Babel in point of the different languages spoken within its walls […] [A]ll the civilised tongues of Europe and America, are daily heard within its precincts.” As a semipublic space where the city’s diverse inhabitants regularly came face to face with one another, the declamation on the external front of the What Cheer House seems to inscribe its internal verbal activity on the outward façade in the painting.

The use of lettering anticipates the exclamatory headlines that hover above Price’s head in the newspaper advertisements. But text is just one means by which the picture suggests that the What Cheer House has a kind of consciousness or metaphysical potency (fig. 1.14). The way the upper set of windows open roughly the same distance as Price’s window creates the sense of a shared air circulating between them—as if the laboratory and the What Cheer House respire as one. These two fully visible windows echo Price’s eyes: they are, like his eyelids, about two-thirds shut; the upper slat of the lab’s window, like eyebrows, resemble his; and the upper panes of the lab’s interior sash act like his spectacles—even the ashen patch of the left window rhymes with the smudge on the same half of his eyewear. The white highlight on the mullion is picked up directly below
on the ridge of Price’s nose, as if a continuation of the accent. His sideburn seems to approximate the space just right of the building. Underlying these correspondences is a sentient architecture, responsive to its occupants’ perceptions and attuned to the expressive potential of the site’s intellectual foundations. The unconscious transfer of thoughts or desires onto the inert structure is at work in this picture.

To see the building as a semi-animated presence via a face in the window, consider also the local account when “an apparition appeared in a window pane” of another building (fig. 1.15). The Mason Street Specter was an unexplained, ghostly imprint “of a man’s head and shoulders in a window.” This visage generated an uproar, with thousands of visitors reportedly thronging to see it. Woodward, the proprietor of the What Cheer House, purchased the “specter-bearing window” for exhibition. Alexander’s painting comes into contact with this connection between Woodward and the purported apparition.

Critical response to Alexander’s work helps to parse the way this vestige was central to the artist’s mode of intertwining the animate and inanimate. After praising Alexander for his “close study of the things represented, and a desire to paint them as they really look,” the prominent art critic Clarence Cook admonished a different painting that he exhibited at the National Academy of Design in New York in 1884. Its “fault,” Cook wrote, “is a want of artistic subordination of the unimportant to the important.” As with In the Laboratory, accessories that would normally be considered secondary were given equal visual weight at the expense of the human figures, as Cook censure implies. The objects around Price may appear unnecessary—“unimportant”—to the conventions
of portraiture. Implicit in his critique is a blurring of living presence and lifelessness whereby the human actor is, as Cook observed, overshadowed by objects and environment. The lack of hierarchy between interior and exterior is what would likely have rankled Cook about *In the Laboratory*, but it also what makes this picture especially compelling. Cook turns to that picture’s “ghostly lighting,” writing, “the place looks as if it had been painted during a partial eclipse of the sun.” Cook’s assessment—that celestial bodies are unusually aligned and that something is eerily out of balance—suggests the fundamental uneasiness provoked by Alexander’s technique and compositional strategies. Alexander’s realism, as Cook’s comments suggest, sets up a dialogue between how things “really look” and the “ghostly.” His is an idiom realistically bent on, rather than at odds with, plumbing phantasmal dynamics; it commingles the matter-of-fact and the unexplained or supernatural in a distinctive way. Echoing Cook’s sentiments, *The Argonaut*, a San Francisco periodical, observed pithily the following year: “Alexander is engaged in a number of mysterious portraits.”

Returning to Eakins illuminates an additional dimension of how *In the Laboratory* seems to productively approach the “ghostly” and “mysterious.” The art historian David Lubin has argued that Eakins’s portrait of *Professor Rowland* conveys much more than the triumphal proclamation of scientific progress (see fig. 1.2). The portrait instead undercuts confidence in scientific positivism via the darkened conditions of the room, the device that the sitter holds in his hand like “a ghostly magic wand,” and the stylized and abstruse diagrams and formulae emblazoned on the golden frame. According to Lubin, the portrait can “be understood as proclaiming there to be
enveloping mysteries that mere positivism, for all its self-assurance, can never plumb.”

“All is not fully rational,” writes Lubin, and the portrait is redolent of interior depths of character that forever “remain hidden beneath the surface.” In the shadows, Rowland is a kind of “latter-day wizard or necromancer, a premodern alchemist.”

Eakins’s portrait expresses misgivings with scientific positivism by suggesting that there are interior depths of human subjectivity that science cannot access, that an individual’s mind and emotions can never be fully brought to light.

If Eakins created a visual means by which to suggest a sense of his sitter’s unfathomable mental richness, always out of reach to both science and the viewer, Alexander’s shifty reckoning with psychology is attained through the volubility of objects corresponding with unsettling consistency to the sitter. Alexander’s painting clearly takes pains to make even more things “accessible to the light.” The detailed rendering of the sheer workaday quality of the scientific laboratory, what Lubin calls “the most prosaic of settings,” attempts to stifle and stamp out the shadowy and mysterious quality of the premodern alchemist that Lubin finds doubling Eakins’s depiction. Yet inaccessible mysteries of mind arise from the relationship between Price and the objects around him.

The building works as a speech bubble might. In its very meticulousness, it is as if the lettering above Price’s head transforms the scrawled hieroglyphic markings around Eakins’s frame into visual legibility—though it likewise suggests that there are unknowable depths to the mental work being undertaken therein. The multivalent utterance conjures an impression of interior information that eschews privileging the
human presence in the picture. The painting weirdly suggests how intimate disclosure or interior revelation might be possible through the lifeless object. Thus even in its efforts to render this space as ordinary or safe, the picture is attuned to the stirrings of imaginative excess. These incalculable depths of mind seem to be shaken up by the subtle activation of the What Cheer House. The possibility of wild flights of the sitter’s imagination are directed toward, and controlled by, the What Cheer House. The rigid geometry of the building, window, and shelves suggest the institutional capacity to manage and stabilize chemistry’s risky acquaintanceship with alchemy. Further, it is as if Price’s mind is regimented by the building not only to oversee the deleterious potential of his occupation but also to stress how artistic imagination trumps scientific ingenuity.

**Shaping the Social Order**

The What Cheer House’s status as an intensely present object in *In the Laboratory* suggests the larger significance of the institution to San Francisco. It played a critical role in the how art and science were enlisted in the service of shaping the social order, a key concern of Woodward’s agenda. The initial success of the What Cheer House allowed Woodward to assert himself as a member of San Francisco’s financial elite. Woodward’s zeal for collecting art increased when he ventured to Europe in the late 1850s. In Florence, Italy, he met the expatriate American artist Virgil Williams and subsequently visited Williams’s studio in Rome and commissioned copies of Old Master paintings for the What Cheer House and for his home in San Francisco. Woodward soon persuaded Williams to relocate to California and placed him in charge of the art collection upon his
arrival in 1862. In adopting Woodward’s goals to transform the artistic and social fabric of the young city, Williams settled into the What Cheer House and set about planning a more ambitious undertaking: the construction of a larger painting and sculpture gallery on Woodward’s five-acre estate.

Open from 1866 until 1893, Woodward’s Gardens featured a zoo, aquarium, park, conservatory, mineral and natural history specimens, and “a small but select Art Gallery.” A popular all-purpose retreat from the vices of the city, the venture also served as an extension of and a platform for Woodward’s didactic schemes, the seeds of which originated at the What Cheer House. The What Cheer House’s mission of health, virtue, and education directly opposed San Francisco’s reputation as a rough-and-tumble mining town and benighted outpost on the edge of the world. The hotel, located in the heart of the city, was intended as an antidote to the Barbary Coast district, where saloons, gambling halls, and brothels flourished and made vice and degeneracy synonymous with San Francisco since the Gold Rush. With this came widespread condemnation that, as one newspaper put it in 1878, “San Francisco does not care for art and learning.”

In challenging this perception of the city by founding institutions that promoted both art and learning, Woodward’s project was contingent on the edifying potential of display. The What Cheer House was the first pocket of enrichment and cultivation for the change he hoped to foster on a larger scale at Woodward’s Gardens. Joining “nature, art and science,” print material espoused an educational philosophy rooted in close observation. Through “giving delight to the eye,” Woodward aimed to stimulate “the spirit of scientific inquiry” in the visitor. In his project of transforming the city into a
more urbane metropolis, similar ideas about the natural world undergirded the basis for social ordering and moral attainment as those that played out through Woodward’s exhibits. For example, his inclination toward the classification and presentation of fauna took the form of both living animals and stuffed specimens. The Zoögraphicon exhibition brought together painting and taxidermy as well as the activation of the latter through “life-like attributes and movements.” Similarly, on the grounds of the park tamer live animals mixed with taxidermic specimens, testing visitors’ ability to distinguish the real from the replica. Both of these examples from Woodward’s didactic agenda showcased an obsessive devotion to verisimilitude, an interest in accessories that accurately imitated situational conditions, and the uncertain divide between living beings and lifeless objects—three characteristics of Alexander’s In the Laboratory.

Whereas Woodward’s Gardens represented the culmination of his vision, the What Cheer House was a testing ground, a laboratory for his ideas about educating the populace through representation. Alexander grew up amid such scrutiny that sought to parse genuine from fake gold and living from taxidermy animal. His picture is in dialogue with the questions raised by this scrutiny about the need for institutional support in the growing metropolis. Alexander would have come into contact with the What Cheer House through his involvement with the San Francisco Art Association and as a student at the California School of Design in the early 1870s. Virgil Williams’s goal of fostering an artistic and intellectual community in San Francisco relied heavily upon teaching. For Williams, the creation of art was not simply rote and mechanical; it was intellectual work that required both perceptual and conceptual skills.
Williams encouraged a younger generation of artists with the hopes of securing San Francisco’s future as an artistic center and repudiating the view that it was merely a cultural backwater of violence and vice. As Williams’s pupil, Alexander possibly studied and painted from pictures and objects in the What Cheer House—it was just four blocks away from the school. Williams’s death in December 1886 may have inspired Alexander to commemorate his former teacher by focusing on the site of their mutual engagement with art. On one level, the identification of Alexander with the building makes vivid a self-exteriorization or projection of Williams, who was “ever inclined to keep himself in the background,” as the San Francisco Art Association memorialized him in early 1887. Viewed as an almost contiguous space, it is as if the profusion of objects in the What Cheer House spill over into Price’s laboratory, suggesting concomitant missions. Given that roughly since its inception the What Cheer House was closely tied to the artistic development of San Francisco, the visual connections between his laboratory and the building serve to analogize the affinities between scientific and artistic spaces and practices.

*In the Laboratory* visualizes the social necessity of the art institution as espoused by Williams and Woodward, who championed art in combating vice. Vermeer’s themes of harmony and balance seem to be at work in Alexander’s picture, which, via the prominence of the What Cheer House, underscores art’s importance in facilitating the particular mission of science here as well as to society at large. Dissatisfaction with the business-first attitude of the city, and wariness of its railroad and mining tycoons, was characteristic of Williams in particular. The short-lived regional art boom had subsided
by the 1880s, and San Francisco developed a generation of artists only to see them flee to New York. Local artists find “neither intelligent criticism nor support” and “yearn for emancipation from the galling conditions that surround them,” complained The Art Amateur in 1880, continuing, “there is little to inspire and develop such men as these in San Francisco, and there is so much to hamper them that their remaining there seems almost a misfortune.”

Alexander was especially attuned to the artist’s plight in San Francisco, leaving for New York in April 1887, likely not long after he completed In the Laboratory. The picture seemed to be his last paean to advancing the cause of art in San Francisco on both aesthetic and social grounds. By making the connection to the laboratory, it stresses painting’s own intellectual underpinnings and responds to period debates about painting as a liberal art as opposed to a mechanical craft. In 1880s San Francisco, the fine arts as a distinct conceptual category were on less firm footing than in the Northeast. The founding of large municipal art museums in this period solidified such distinctions. San Francisco’s lack of a major public art museum was a pressing concern in the 1880s, and the hope to rectify the lack of an artistic infrastructure was prompted by persistent feelings of inferiority. Admiring the establishment of museums in Boston and New York, for example, an 1880 article in the Californian lamented that so much “[t]ime will be required to effect the desired transformation” in San Francisco.

By systematically joining the perception of Price’s laboratory with the What Cheer House, the painting attests to the mutual integrity and urgency of these two modes of invention and to pertinent incorporative concerns about San Francisco’s cultural
standing in the nation at large. The letters above Price take on symbolic national significance when read as the acronym for the United States, suggesting the need to incorporate San Francisco as culturally relevant to the nation at large. In negotiating the correspondences between artistic and scientific practices in San Francisco, In the Laboratory evinces an understanding that both pursuits were inextricably linked in the city’s development. The status of the artist, like the profession of the chemist, was some years away from acquiring institutionalized respectability in San Francisco.

Coda

Alexander’s artistic struggles and suicide align him with the alchemist, suggesting another way this mysterious figure also haunts In the Laboratory. Alexander, reportedly “despondent over the inability to sell his pictures,” drank a draught of carbolic acid in a New York City hotel room in 1894. His rapid downfall, as recounted in newspapers, oddly recalls how the archetypal alchemist subordinates everything to his obsessive “golden dream,” only for his fruitless exertion, estrangement, and destitution to end in a toxic overdose. In the Laboratory visualizes the overlap between art and science in San Francisco, but the circumstances leading up to Alexander’s death also underscore an artist-as-alchemist model of painterly identity. The transmutation of matter is an apt metaphor for both the alchemist and the visual artist. From base metal to gold and from pigment to painting, both the alchemist and the artist attempt a kind of mystical conversion of physical substances—the crucial effect of In the Laboratory is the assertion of this relationship.


Underscoring a more clear hierarchy of differentiated pictorial elements, Eakins wrote in a letter to Rowland: “The most prominent thing in the picture will be the head.” Quoted in Bennard B. Perlman, “Eakins and Rowland,” *The Baltimore Sun* (April 8, 1994).


“Second Report of the State Mineralogist,” in *Appendix to the Journals of the Senate and Assembly of the Twenty-Fifth Session of the Legislature of the State of California* (Sacramento: James J. Ayers, 1883), 157. In an 1887 speech delivered before the New York College of Pharmacy, one enthusiastic scientist declared: “The history of alchemy
is a beautiful study, and the results of the alchemist’s labors are now commercial treasures, although his theories were not demonstrated. The possibility of the transmutation of the metals, however, is perhaps not altogether unreachable; […] Who of your modern chemists will boldly disclaim the possibility of that feature of the aged alchemist’s dream? In this connection, I can almost believe that the cycle of time may bring us once more to the ground the old alchemist occupied, and that modern science may lighten up the path of the future chemist with the golden dream of other days.” See J. U. Lloyd, “Theoretical and Practical Pharmacy,” American Druggist (April 1887): 63.


14 The act of descending into a gold mine, into the murky bowels of the earth, with its dirt and desolation, helps encapsulate the particular dichotomy between surface glitter and subterranean darkness inherent in California Gold Rush culture. “The Life of the Gold Digger is one of severe and unremitting toil,” as one writer put it, whether the hot, claustrophobic netherworld was a twenty-foot hole or a bottomless underground tunnel. G. B. Earp, “Life at the Diggings,” The Illustrated London Magazine 1 (July 1853): 45. See also Maturin M. Ballou, “The Toil for Gold,” Ballou’s Monthly Magazine 7 (February 1858): 196; and E. S. Carson, History of California: From Its Discovery to the Present Time (Boston: John P. Jewett & Company, 1854), 240.


20 “The Editor’s Brief Case,” Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine 82 (March 1924): 130; and Everett C. Maxwell, “The Structure of Western Art,” in California’s Magazine: Edition de Luxe, Vol. 1 (San Francisco: California’s Magazine Company, 1916), 35. For Keith and color, see also, for example, “Art Notes,” Appletons’ Journal of


22 In 1880, one critic wrote, “the picture which pleases the buyer in San Francisco is one of brilliant and intense effects—of blazing sunsets,” perhaps with Keith in mind. See William H. Rideing, “Artists in San Francisco,” The Art Amateur 2 (1880): 51.

23 “Blow to Contractors,” Los Angeles Times, March 24, 1897, 9; and “Spring Street Paving,” Los Angeles Times, November 9, 1897, 8. For Price’s reputation, see also “Thomas Price Metallurgist and Assayer,” The Industries of San Francisco (Payot, Upham & Co., 1884), 182.

24 Educated at Normal College in Swansea, Wales, and the Royal School of Mines in London, Thomas Price came to San Francisco in 1862. He worked first as an assayer with Kellogg, Hewston & Co. and supplemented his career by teaching chemistry at the San Francisco City College and Toland Medical College, where he received a doctorate in medicine. In 1875, Price started his own assaying firm that, by 1887, purportedly had expanded to thirteen assistants. See The Bay of San Francisco: A History, Vol. I. (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1892), 422–424; and Dan Owens, California Coiners and Assayers (Wolfeboro, New Hampshire: Bowers and Merena Galleries, 2000), 171.


26 “A Queer Suit,” New York Times, May 1, 1876, 8


33 Thomas Price, “A ‘Solemn Warning,’” San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin, October 11, 1884, 2. Price would later be tested during a trial in Los Angeles that raised questions about his methods. The case rested on the strength of his testimony about the material composition of asphalt. The corporation held culpable by his findings repeatedly tried to discredit Price’s analysis and his reputation and he offered him a bribe not to testify. Price was required to repeat tests that he had initially completed in his laboratory in public. On the stand for five hours, Price worked to convince the judge and community of the impartiality of his assessment and to disabuse them of the idea that he harbored any secret alliances. For the sordid trial, see “Asphalt Analysis,” Los Angeles Times, March 22, 1897, 5; “Afternoon Session,” Los Angeles Times, March 23, 1897, 9; and “Paving Jobbery,” Los Angeles Times, March 27, 1897, 14. For Price as “trusted,” see also “Pays Last Toll,” Los Angeles Times, October 16, 1912, 16.

34 The passing of counterfeit or base coins was widespread in the immediate years after the discovery of gold. The federal government quickly authorized, in 1850, an assay office in San Francisco and the branch mint opened four years later to address the urgent need of converting miners’ gold into coins. Despite these precautions, spurious coin continued to compete with legal coin, however. See “Biennial Message of Governor William Irvin,” Appendix to the Journals of the Senate and Assembly of the Twenty-Third Session of the Legislature of the State of California, Vol. V (Sacramento: J. D. Young, Supt. State Printing, 1880), 51; and “Facts about Gold Coins: Expert Vassar and the Millions He has Charge of,” Ballou’s Monthly Magazine 72 (August 1890): 133.

35 David N. Livingstone, Putting Science in Its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 23–24. Coming to terms with the spatial arena from which Price’s statements originated was provided a powerful answer to the culture of quackery in the late nineteenth century, when the promotion of


38 For its pastimes and reputation for lawlessness, see Gary F. Kurutz, “Popular Culture on the Golden Shore,” *California History* 79 (Summer 2000), 280–315; and Robert A. Burchell, “The Loss of a Reputation; Or, the Image of California in Britain before 1875,” *California Historical Quarterly* 53 (Summer 1974), 115–30.

Munich Academy artists of the preceding generation emulated the indeterminate backdrops, painterly brushwork, and *alla prima* technique taught by Wilhelm Leibl that was rooted in Spanish Baroque portraiture. The second phase of Munich realism emphasized painstaking detail, the elimination of visible brushwork, and figures situated within completely rendered interiors. On the different stylistic currents at the Munich academy and how they influenced American artists, see Michael Quick, “Munich and American Realism,” in Quick, Eberhard Ruhmer, and Richard V. West, *Munich and American Realism in the 19th Century* (Sacramento: E. B. Crocker Art Gallery, 1978), 28–34.

In 1866, the French art critic Théophile Thoré announced the rediscovery of Jan Vermeer and attributed to him some 70 paintings, all of which were in European collections at the time. See, for example, Stanley Meltzoff, “The Rediscovery of Vermeer,” *Marsyas* 2 (1942): 145–66. For the quotes, see Joseph Beavington Atkinson, *The Schools of Modern Art in Germany* (New York: J. W. Bouton, 1881), 36; and Professor E. P. Evans, “Artists and Art Life in Munich,” *The Cosmopolitan* 9 (May 1890): 13. Alexander also likely received instruction from Wilhelm Lindenschmidt and Karl Raupp. For his German education, see Burke, 370.


Notions about mind and architecture sharing similar structures were becoming codified during this period. Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) makes use of an extended metaphor that compares the mind with the city of Rome. On connections
between the human body and architecture see, for example, George Dodds and Robert Tavernor, ed., Body and Building: Essays on the Changing Relation of Body and Architecture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002).


49 “Mason Street Specter,” San Francisco Chronicle (December 9, 1871), 3.

50 [Clarence Cook], “The National Academy of Design: The Autumn Exhibition,” Studio n.s. [1], no. 7 (November 8, 1884): 81.

51 “Art Notes,” The Argonaut 17 (August 29, 1885), 12.


53 Ibid.

54 In the Laboratory synthesizes seventeenth-century alchemical imagery and early nineteenth century German Romanticism’s placement of the window as parallel to the picture plane. In Dutch and Flemish genre scenes, the window is usually at an oblique angle and functions as a light source, while focusing the attention on the view through the window is a particularly German Romantic innovation. See Lorenz Eitner, “The Open Window and the Storm-Tossed Boat: An Essay in the Iconography of Romanticism,” The Art Bulletin 37 (December 1955): 285.

The picture revises the use of the mind opening onto space through the device of the window as formulated by German Romantic painting—a trope with which Alexander would certainly have been familiar. While in this tradition mentality is often allowed to
detach from the body, to roam over water and land, here all potentially wild musings and fanciful speculations are replaced by the What Cheer House. In Caspar David Friedrich’s *Woman at the Window* of 1822, for example, we similarly find that there is no transition from what is near to what is far, no significant mediation between foreground and background, except in the form of the figure. Her mind is released into a metaphysical beyond, as the frame of both the window and the painting opens distant views onto that which might exceed our existence in a material time and space. The juxtaposition is between the earthbound and the imaginative, between the terrestrial and the supernatural. For Friedrich’s picture, see, for example, Claude Keisch et al., *Spirit of the Age: Nineteenth-Century Paintings from the Nationalgalerie*, Berlin (London: National Gallery, 2001), 70–71; Robert Rosenblum and H. W. Janson, *19th-Century Art*, 2nd edition (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2004), 178–79; and Lutz Peter Koepnick, *Framing Attention: Windows on Modern German Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 43–45.

55 Williams settled in Boston upon his return to the United States in 1860, but Woodward soon called, purchased all his paintings, and convinced Williams to come west. See Ruth Nicholson Post, *Virgil Williams: “He shaped the dawn of Western Art”* (Calistoga, California: Illuminations Press, 1996), 21–23.


Alexander almost certainly visited Woodward’s Gardens because he painted a scene from Gilbert and Sullivan’s comic opera *The Mikado* when performed there in 1885. Alexander’s painting *Yum Yum (Scene from the Mikado as Played in San Francisco)* is unlocated. The Zoographicon was exhibited from 1874 to 1889 to much fanfare.

Toby Rosenthal, who hailed from Strasberg, Germany, and had received training in Munich the previous decade, also taught Alexander at the California School of Design. Before Alexander left San Francisco for additional training at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, Germany, around the fall of 1875, his paintings were included in several of the Art Association’s exhibitions in 1872, 1873, and 1875. For the exhibitions, see James L. Yarnell and William H. Gerds, *The National Museum of American Art’s Index to American Art Exhibition Catalogues* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1986), 77.

See A. McF. Davis, *Boston Transcript*, March 5, 1889, 6.

Besides helping introduce Californians to the long tradition of European painting with his reproductions in the What Cheer House and Woodward Gardens, Williams was the foremost instructor to the first generation of San Francisco artists. As an early and important member the San Francisco Art Association, founded in 1871, Williams was the primary force behind the establishment of an art academy in 1874. Williams, elected unanimously, became the first director and teacher of the California School of Design. The curriculum of the art school, the first west of Chicago, reflected the experience and intellectual values of Williams. He modeled its pedagogy along traditional lines: students began their studies by copying two-dimensional works before moving to plaster casts of antique sculpture and later direct observation of life. For Williams, see Post, 36–44 and 46–67; “The School of Design,” *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, February 24, 1874, 7; B. P. Avery, “Art in California,” *The Aldine, the Art Journal of America* 7 (April 1874): 72; “Art in San Francisco,” *The Art Amateur* 2 (1879): 10; and “Art Notes and Hints,” *The Art Amateur* 16 (May 1887): 129. For the institutions, see also Stephen Mark Dobbs “A Glorious Century of Art Education: San Francisco’s Art Institute” *Art Education* 29 (January 1976): 13–18; and Raymond L. Wilson, “The First Art School in the West: The San Francisco Art Association’s California School of Design,” *American Art Journal* 14 (Winter 1982): 42–55.
In 1860, the What Cheer House relocated from the adjacent building to the southwest corner of Sacramento and Leidesdorff streets, where it remained until destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906.

From 1872 to 1876, the San Francisco Art Association (and the California School of Design after 1874) were located at 313 Pine Street, and from 1876 to 1893 at 430 Pine Street. See *Artist-Teachers & Pupils: San Francisco Art Association and California School of Design: The First Fifty Years, 1871-1921* (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1971).

In 1886, Alexander's studio at 31 Post Street was seven blocks away from 524 Sacramento Street, the offices of Thomas Price & Son. By 1887, Alexander was at 240 Montgomery Street, just five blocks away. See Ellen Halteman, *Exhibition Records of the Mechanics' Institute* (Los Angeles: Dustin Publications, 2000), 90; and Ellen Halteman, *Exhibition Records of the San Francisco Art Association, 1877-1915* (Los Angeles: Dustin Publications, 2000), 15.

Meeting of the Directors of the San Francisco Art Association, January 17, 1887, Archives of California Art, The Oakland Museum, Oakland, California.

Alexander is understood to have also "faithfully painted the What Cheer House," perhaps referring to a separate painting of the building in elevation. If such a painting exists, it is now lost but further indicative of the personal significance of the building and its role in the community's artistic life.


Art was increasingly becoming a refuge for religious emotion, aesthetic value as subsuming the role religion played in approaching spiritual or mystical concepts, and perhaps referring to a separate painting of the building in elevation. If such a painting exists, it is now lost but further indicative of the personal significance of the building and by extension, the ideas generated there. See "Emerges from the Ashes of the Great Fire," in *The Art Digest* 12 (October 15, 1937): 11.

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For Alexander’s departure, see “Art Notes,” The Argonaut 20 (April 16, 1887): 11. In the Laboratory was featured at both the San Francisco Art Association and the Mechanics’ Institute in 1891. See Ellen Halteman, Exhibition Records of the San Francisco Art Association, 1872–1915 (Los Angeles: Dustin Publications, 2000), 90; and Ellen Halteman, Exhibition Records of the Mechanics’ Institute (Los Angeles: Dustin Publications, 2000), 15. The lapse in time between In the Laboratory’s supposed completion and its first exhibition in 1891 may suggest a slightly later date for the picture.


“At and Artists,” Californian 2 (August 1880): 185. By the early 1890s, however, vocal impatience abounded. “To-day this city should have a well-equipped museum of fine arts,” complained one local writer, San Francisco “is phlegmatic, is behind the times.” See “A Growing City,” Californian Illustrated Magazine 2 (July 1892): 329. “[T]his city should have a museum of art,” another grumbled. “The lack of such an institution is not merely a cause of regret, but is a disgrace to a city of the size and wealth of San Francisco.” “At Last San Francisco is Waking Up. It Wants an Art Museum,” Californian, reprinted in The Studio 7 (March 19, 1892): 147. The M. H. de Young Museum, an outgrowth of the California Midwinter International Exposition in 1894, where the fine arts and mechanical arts each occupied separate buildings, was not officially established until 1895. Despite industrialist Leland Stanford’s short-lived intention to create a public art museum in San Francisco, Woodward’s enterprises were among the closest the city came to a public art museum during Alexander’s life. The Stanford’s seem to have originally intended to for their proposed museum, in honor of their deceased son, to be a public structure in Golden Gate Park. (But it was built in 1894, as a privately-owned museum, in Palo Alto, now Cantor Center at Stanford University).


CHAPTER TWO
William Merritt Chase: Fantasy and Selfhood

In William Merritt Chase’s *Hide and Seek*, from 1888, two girls dart in the shadows of a sparsely furnished interior (fig. 2.1). Participating in the titular game, the figures echo one another with their forward leans, jutting elbows, cascading curls, and white pinafores. But in this interplay of near and far, the background girl is less distinct than her foreground companion, seeming to flicker across the murky expanse of red floor as if a phantasmal presence. The picture also accentuates uncertainty by withholding which figure plays which part in the game, since the distant girl steps to another threshold—pairing them in terms of action as well as appearance. Ambiguity is further heightened through the prominence of the wide floor, which Chase punctuates with pulsating brushstrokes so as for it to almost become another character in the scene. The austere yet potently charged interlude has been remarked upon by the art historian Susan Sidlauskas, who notes how “the blank assumes an almost material presence that acts upon both the figures represented, and upon the viewer whose curiosity they arouse.”¹ Taking a cue from Sidlauskas’s observation, this chapter analyzes in greater detail the ways in which the painting utilizes this empty space as an expressive force.

The implications of the exploratory gulf and the uncanny sameness of the figures push *Hide and Seek* into richer, more contradictory territory than Chase’s other pictures of this period. In shifting between different perceptual registers, the painting obscures clear-cut boundaries between so-called fantasy and reality spaces. By considering how it subtly negotiates this mixture of tendencies—and how the ordinary and the strange interlace—this chapter proposes a more capacious view of Chase’s relationship to the
realm of the imagination, and it investigates the way this picture mobilizes fantasy toward psychological ends. For *Hide and Seek* visualizes a mode of conflicted, decentered selfhood that represented the passage from a Victorian to modern conception of psychological interiority. The painting dialogues not only with the birth of psychology as a discipline but also with new, widespread attention given to an array mental phenomena in this formative era. The painting was thus part of a larger cultural conversation about selfhood and the representation of interiority, its possibility and limits.

It may seem unusual to place Chase under the heading of fantasy and psychology. Typically his paintings are treated in terms of their leisure subject matter or bravura technique—each in its own way an appeal to surface that can be regarded as the very opposite of a fixation on imagination or interiority. The issue of where the psychological or inwardly penetrating resided in Chase’s art was often a pressing one in his own time, and his pictures’ supposed excessive preoccupation with, as one critic put it in 1887, “external conditions” was among the chief criticisms leveled at him, particularly in the 1880s. Aware of such criticism, Chase later responded, generally, saying, “Do not imagine that I would disregard the thing that lies beneath the mask, but be sure that when the outside is rightly seen, the thing that lies under the surface will be found upon your canvas.” Chase’s statement and *Hide and Seek* call for a more nuanced understanding of placid, mannerly surfaces and all they can conceal. *Hide and Seek* enables a reconsideration of the relationship between exterior surface and interior essence in Chase’s work by setting up different conditions for their investigation, and it complicates
the notion that the artist’s painterly brushwork could not signify in a more psychologically probing way.

**The Threshold of Fantasy**

*Hide and Seek* strikes a delicate balance between real and fantastical spaces—between representations rooted in actual versus imagined worlds—in a way reminiscent of the escapades of Alice from Lewis Carroll’s stories *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871). An illustration from the opening pages of Carroll’s first book suggests how the painting moves toward, without being confined to, a comparable fantasy scenario (fig. 2.2). Having just left her sister on the riverbank, young Alice pursues the white rabbit through a passageway that, in Carroll’s words, “went straight on like a tunnel” before it “dipped suddenly down.” Finding herself in a “dark hall,” she discovers a small door behind a curtain, which she is shown gently pulling back in artist John Tenniel’s depiction. Alice thus embarks on an adventure into an unknown netherworld, a space akin to a dream, descending into a mazelike construction. A down-the-rabbit-hole experience, we might say, jibes with *Hide and Seek*.

Chase’s painting is another locale of sisters, one of whom also gazes after a furtive white presence—a flitting before her eyes that is initially “nothing so very remarkable.” It communicates a related energy as this popular story, an awareness of something “curiouser and curiouser,” as Alice would say. These inquisitive, similarly-attired figures at portals rhyme with Tenniel’s image of Alice, sharing its sense of being
on the verge of physically reaching out to peel back layers, to enter another corridor—as well as to metaphorically puncture surface in search of some depth—and to begin a journey into an atmosphere out of joint.\(^7\) One critic, in 1888, seemed to be grasping after this indistinct feeling of something inside out or upside down in the painting, wondering about “the action of the little girl going solemnly out in the wrong direction.”\(^8\) The massive chair, almost as large the girl, contributes to this “wrong,” off-kilter aspect. Her head appears at its level, and yet the chair begins to dwarf her as she edges away, calling attention to a reversal of proportions, a vertiginous perspective or scalar disorder, as if her diminution is less about a recession into space than about skewed, topsy-turvy imbalance.\(^9\)

This echoes the moment, which Tenniel’s illustration immediately precedes, when Alice, drinking and eating, alternately shrinks and grows, becoming, “a giantess and a pigmy,” as one writer in the period described.\(^10\) The picture evokes these disconcerting fluctuations of large and small, which are accentuated by the constant shift in point of view between foreground and background. In this manner, Chase’s painting seems suspended between the here-and-now of an ordinary interior and a potential threshold to a domain free from logic—“a play of sense and nonsense, a chaos-cosmos,” as philosopher Gilles Deleuze characterized the land Alice inhabits.\(^11\) If it mitigates this chaos or pulls back from the brink, Chase’s picture still quietly revels in this strand, wending a careful path between the domestic and the fanciful. The usual rules of space and time are not quite obeyed, and the scene offers a prelude to a sort of labyrinth.
Critics seemed to touch upon something of this destabilization of ordinary reality as well as its incongruity to Chase’s oeuvre in 1888, calling *Hide and Seek* “a clever eccentricity” and one of his rare “clever artistic fancies,” in which the “spacious room” possesses a “peculiar charm.”\(^\text{12}\) The devotion of such a large portion—nearly half—of the composition to the broad and shadowy middle ground, which palpitates with undulating paint strokes, plays up its oddity. The sheer emptiness of the room was the locus of several critics’ comments. One called *Hide and Seek* “an enchanting picture of two little girls playing hide-and-seek in a wide dim interior—remarkable for [...] the perspective effects.”\(^\text{13}\) For another, as if slightly mystified by the openness of the area, it seemed to constitute “a picture of a dark wood floor.”\(^\text{14}\) A third critic located the sense of unsettledness in the vacant ground itself, remarking how “the suggestiveness of the empty room is full of fancy.”\(^\text{15}\)

That *Hide and Seek* might allude to Carroll’s world of “fancy” is signaled by the professional and personal circumstances surrounding Chase in these years. One of his main artistic and social haunts was the exclusive and secretive Tile Club. A member since 1879, Chase made regular appearances at their West Tenth Street headquarters, “the entrance to which,” the artist’s biographer wrote, “judging from descriptions, must have been almost as circuitous as that to Alice’s rabbit-hole.”\(^\text{16}\) The name Alice also had special import for Chase: in 1887, he married Alice Gerson, whose father’s residence was another hangout for him and his friends.\(^\text{17}\) There, “sometimes they drew fantastic pictures.”\(^\text{18}\) Alice was seventeen years his junior and thirteen years old when they first met in 1880, and she worked as his model for several years. Their union was a sudden
one, at least partly owing to the fact that the day after the nuptial ceremony she gave birth to a daughter, who the couple also named Alice. The coincidence of these two unexpected Alice-related occurrences “startled” the artistic community and constituted, as one newspaper styled it, a “double surprise.”

A resurgence of interest in Carroll as well as increased consideration of the value of fancy and imagination in these years also informs Chase’s picture. Attitudes, for example, toward the fairy tale were undergoing a shift at the end of the nineteenth century, which had been a rich period for compiling, translating, and introducing German stories in the United States. Yet, despite its continuing popularity, many came to regard the fairy tale as a vanquished form. Commentators wrote of the erosion of wonder from the triumph of scientific and rational modernity, going so far as to suggest that it had usurped the relevance of fancy. The “old-time fairy-tale,” observed one writer in 1890, is “gone with the old beliefs” and the “fancies of the past have given place to the facts of the present, and this is a practical age.” The disintegration of its cultural efficacy was, as an 1892 article entitled “The Decline of Fancy” saw it, due to the “advancing Science”: “The marvelous influx of scientific knowledge, by which we have been almost overwhelmed in this age, has sounded the knell of fancy.” The fairy tale provided the quintessential example of how the realm of “fancy”—and seemingly anything magical or mysterious—was rapidly being reduced to, as one writer put it, the “uninteresting” explanations of science. Simultaneously, attempts to enliven science resorted to calling upon the fairy tale in order to enhance its appeal. “Science may be dry and uninteresting, but […] can become] as enchanting as a fairy tale,” proclaimed an article in 1894.
Science thus both bore much of the blame for the divestment of fairy-tale fancy and traded on that very capacity to enchant for its own purposes.  

*Hide and Seek* seems aware of, perhaps even somewhat resistant to, the undergoing transformation that “sought to tame, regulate, and instrumentalize the fantastic projections of these tales.” Rather then resorting to the depiction of talking animals, elvish creatures, or otherworldly spheres in the vein of some of his contemporaries, Chase’s artistic engagement with fantasy was more earthbound and secured in the contours of actual existence. *Hide and Seek* treads a fine path between these poles and conceives of a re-invigoration of fantasy as something beyond tropes of easy legibility. The attempt to marshal imagination without going to extremes of subject matter was a far more complex maneuver. Emphasizing intermediate space and mobilizing ambiguity toward more psychologically probing ends, Chase’s picture posits a version of alterity as part of the human subject. *Hide and Seek* dissolves a clear distinction between ordinary and make-believe worlds, as if, instead of giving itself over to the latter, it aims to identify how the latter is contained within the former. Situated at this threshold, it seems to approximate in paint the vague sensation of a dream world as overlaying the waking one, all the while investigating this subtle interpenetration. Fantastical elements in *Hide and Seek*, then, arise as part of a lens through which to disrupt and re-perceive the commonplace.
Altered States

*Hide and Seek*’s subtle foray into fantasy dovetails with what Chase termed “queering” strategies, which were his efforts at seeing and depicting ordinary objects in an unusual way. In his teaching, for instance, Chase advocated apprehending the mundane with fresh eyes and perceiving something unfamiliar in the familiar: “Try to queer your composition somehow. See it in some way which it would never occur to you to approach it.”

Emphasizing form over content, Chase encouraged experimentation from his students, warning “against the rut, and the danger of seeing things ‘in a tiresome way.’” As part of his “hatred of conventionality,” he aimed to “uproot any tendency to routine in the minds of his students.” To this end, he periodically held “‘queering’ contests in which the student was advised to imagine the most unlikely seeing of his subject.” Chase awarded a prize for the best result—“some of them were very queer,” recalled his daughter.

As an “erratic” spark to “the mental fillip,” this tactic constituted a kind of estrangement from reality, a way of showing how discarded, banal moments could yield a surprise or secret—that was the hope, at least. This push toward “queering,” however, seemed to have certain implicit limits and to not admit “too much subjectivity.” Even as a “painter of things,” noted one article on Chase, “his function was to show us how much beauty there is in things we see every day and scarcely notice.” Here, “beauty,” while indicating the transformation of everyday things into an aesthetic thing, might also be thought of as an ill-defined catch-all for whatever eludes language, a way to pin down Chase’s aim to make strange. The idea of fantasy delineated above syncs up with Chase’s recommendations to students to: “Try to paint the unusual thing.” Understood in these
terms, Chase’s “queering” suggests, rather than leaving the knowable world, an attempt to enter it more deeply and expose its potential otherness.

A painting such as Still Life, Fish (1912) reveals additional dimensions about the way in which fantasy—even a kind of dream space—functioned, and impinged upon so-called everyday reality, in Chase’s work (fig. 2.3). Chase repeatedly returned to the depiction of splayed, dead fish against non-descript backdrops that dissolve into shadows. With dark tonalities and slashing brushstrokes, Chase’s fish still life paintings comprised his largest body of work in the years after 1900. While Chase’s fish still lifes may owe something to his French contemporary Antoine Vollon, whose related works Chase knew, an alternate, more unexpected example of the agonized convulsions of dying is pertinent here. The Deluge Towards Its Close, completed about 1813 by the English-born American painter Joshua Shaw, was attributed to Washington Allston, when Chase acquired it through Allston’s heirs and gave it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1909 (fig. 2.4). The museum’s previous transaction with Chase, in 1908, had been the acquisition of one of his fish still life paintings, its first. Shaw’s canvas and a still life of fish by Chase thus sequentially ordered in his dealings with the institution. Chase’s work is linked to Shaw’s in other ways.

Chase’s Still Life, Fish, produced almost one hundred years after, is smaller in size though proportionally quite close to Shaw’s marine scene. Chase’s twisting forms distill some of the apocalyptic tumult of Shaw’s tangled and blanched figures. The silvery skate and the cold, wet flesh under the hazy moonlight share pallid tones. Both works represent moments of extinguished life, of displaced and disfigured bodies torn
from the ocean. Still Life, Fish seems to reprise the earlier picture in their mutual insistence on “shiny, slippery” remains, to quote one assessment of Chase’s talents with fish. The bloody gash on the belly of the skate—a “monster” from the sea, according to Chase—is at the center his composition. It is as if Chase reformulates a detail from the lower right quadrant of Shaw’s canvas—as if the brown and red earth tones from the tract of sandy shore in the lower foreground become the ledge in his picture. Diagonal and flattened carcasses are pushed up against the picture plane in both works; and the inverted Y of the skate’s tail approximates the jagged fissures on either end of the felled tree trunk. Although the genus of the creatures differs—Shaw’s writhing snakes and doglike beast, Chase’s skate and scaly fish—they are all doomed animals comprising allied series of staring eyes and open-mouthed grimaces. Shaw’s painting was “the opposite” of “cheerfulness,” wrote one critic in 1914, “a wall of gloom.” Fish, so odoriferous and prone to rapid decay, were about the most potentially revolting of foods and, according to another critic, also lacked uplift: “Fish, and dead fish at that, are not soul-aspiring subjects.” Chase’s dark reduction is like its own contained, “eerie landscape strewn with corpses.” Although Shaw’s painting “lacked the delicate imagination that connects physical horror with psychological mysteries,” as the New York Times referred to it in 1909, Chase’s reworking of this “imaginative landscape” opens onto the hard-to-pin-down line obscuring these different paradigms of artistic imagination.

Still Life, Fish and other works certainly display the technical flourishes with which Chase famously rendered the surface appeal of quotidian objects. But there was an obsessive quality shaping these pictures, not just in terms of the number of works he
produced. Shaw’s painting is more like a moody Romantic dreamscape than a religious painting, and, similarly, Chase’s sustained infatuation with painting fish had its origins in his dreams. In Chase’s telling, he was passing a London fishmonger in 1904 when he became enraptured by the “spell” of a fish and “stood for some time gazing at it.” He continued on his way but “could not forget the fish.” It “haunted his dreams as the face of a beautiful woman is supposed to obsess the painter’s imagination in fiction.” For years, it was reported, Chase worked “on the subject [of fish] with concentration of mind and feverish energy.” This interest bordered on a compulsion, and he went so far as to worry, “I suppose some day I shall be known only as a painter of fish.”

This fear that he would only be remembered as a painter of fish almost collapses the distinction between the artist and the fish itself. Chase’s story also analogizes “face” and fish such that fish stands in for a person. The skate in particular, the centerpiece of *Still Life, Fish*, was associated with a “superstition,” as one period source described, that “arises from the resemblance which the fish […] bears to the human face, and possibly to medieval representations of the Virgin Mary.” The art historian James Thomas Flexner seemed to take for granted this degree of intimate recognition with fish when he called these works Chase’s “most emotional pictures.” Flexner observed how “the viewer feels Chase’s personality fighting to express itself, but almost always it seems to get smothered under the technical virtuosity […]. With flashing Munich brushstrokes, Chase depicted dead fish whose cold but expressive faces communicate pugnacity, futile anger, macabre despair.”
The emotional and psychic resonances at the core of Chase’s fixation on fish reached a comic-nightmarish apogee in James Montgomery Flagg’s *Nocturne—After Chase*, from 1914 (fig. 2.5). It explicitly joins the fish still lifes and the oneiric. Chase’s bulging, bespectacled eyes and bristly hairs match the features of the bloated and wide-eyed sea creatures that descend upon him from the painting above his bed. The image stresses how fish troubled Chase’s often restless sleep, how they struck an unruly, unbidden, or wayward cord during the night. He has fish on the brain, but with a frightening, even pathological edge, like demons that cannot quite be exorcised. The image brings together fish still lifes and dream fantasy in the extreme. It is as if the figure of Chase is convinced, in a fit of night terrors, that the painted fish in still life can awaken from the dead and consequently that the only thing more real than the real world is the non-real nightmare. The material surface comes alive. Flagg’s sketch builds on the notion that irrational instincts and inner drives sustained Chase’s fish paintings. It exploits the way they seemed to tap into a region of the psyche beyond conscious activity and to unsettle his innermost being. This vexatious slumber teeming with piscine hordes calls upon a Whistlerian neologism for a nighttime landscape but also plays upon Chase’s last name. Fish chase after Chase.

Such puns were not incidental, for Chase’s still life paintings seemed to inspire metaphor and word play. Chase, in reference to his keenness for the genre, took advantage of the term’s double meaning: “While there is still life there is hope.” The critic James Huneker commented in 1915: “Of Mr. Chase’s fish volumes have been written, so I sha’n’t pause to praise their piscatorial pulchritude (which grievous
Variations of the idiomatic expression “to run up an alley and yell ‘fish’” or “shouting fish up an alley” discourage discussion, telling an interlocutor to leave a topic alone or simply to go away. Another writer, in 1917, seemed to relish lapses into archaic dialect, extolling the “beauty of brushwork, […] color, […] sumptuousness and ease of craftsmanship […] of Chase’s ‘kittle o’ dead fish.’ But some people see nothing in still-life whatever—and other again want a story, and what story except a fisherman’s yarn is there to passel o’ fish?” Fish are the basis of many expressions—a fish out of water and so on—but the idea of a fish “story,” reinforced here by “a fisherman’s yarn,” points to the all but indecipherable line between bald truth and concocted fiction that Chase’s work seems to straddle. That is, a Chase still life painting might be said to be its own brand of misdirection or fish story, “[a]n improbable tale; a cock-and-bull story.” Fish, prevarication, psychological instability were so wholly entwined that a 1902 source viewed a man who “told the whole truth and nothing but the truth about his catches would be regarded as a fit candidate for an examination as to his sanity, for truthfulness to such a morbid extent would be taken as a sign of nervous disease or as a distressing mental hallucination.” Flagg’s depiction of Chase’s own “mental hallucination” arises from similarly blurred boundaries around factuality, fabrication, and fish.

The image recalls an earlier episode involving Chase, altered states of consciousness, and creatures of sea. In the summer 1880, Chase and his Tile Club compatriots traveled to the outer reaches of Long Island, a place perhaps especially conducive to imaginative projection because, as one member of the club cautioned,
“There’s nothing there.” On previous excursions, its members were known for making “sketches of the strangest objects.” En route aboard a tugboat, “[t]he smells, the dust, and the noises [of the city] disappeared as if by magic.” The account of their trip thus frames their voyage as a transfer into an alternate reality of sorts, for it is as if “New York were a thousand miles away.” During the first night, camped at the site of the wreck of a schooner “cast high upon a desolate beach,” members of the party become stricken with drug-induced-like visions: “There are some subtle things that were known to an alchemy that is dead and gone long years since—properties that, when taken into the body, played strange pranks with the mind, and caused it to leave its customary and normal channel and wander in strange paths.” Colleagues climbing the ship’s mast to scribble hasty sketches, seemingly unconscious, abruptly awaken one artist: “What concerned them all, what frightful hallucination possessed them, Polyphemus could not divine.” But he looked upon his friends, “in the deepest, most distressed perplexity and anguish of expectation.” They became “mysterious watchers of the night,” and he “scarcely dar[ed] to credit the evidences of his sense or believe himself awake.” It amounted to “the most extraordinary, incomprehensible, and alarming spectacle.” Whatever nocturnal delirium gripped them is not remembered in the morning. Though “troubled” by the episode, Polyphemus kept what he had seen to himself. The artists scatter off to work, finding “nothing,” but when they regroup: “Every canvas brought in had a sketch on it of a sea-serpent! Every sketch-book held from one to a dozen designs of gigantic snakes, lashing the ocean with interminable coils.” The article tells that the lone witness “held his peace,”
and it asks the reader to “draw his own inferences and likewise hold his peace” about the bewildering visions.\textsuperscript{61}

Chase’s lost painting of the immense sea monster slithering ashore survives as a reproduction in \textit{The Century} in 1882 (fig. 2.6).\textsuperscript{62} In the lower right quadrant, the work is signed Briareus, his Tile Club alter ego. All its members had pseudonyms, and Briareus, sometimes regarded as the son or son-in-law of Poseidon in Greek mythology, was “a giant of the sea” and represented “the gigantic forces of natures which appear in earthquakes and other convulsions, or the multitudinous motion of sea waves.”\textsuperscript{63} Given the creature’s direct gaze, the way its wing effectively proffers the letters below it, and the connotations of the name, the image reads as a self-portrait.\textsuperscript{64} Like a monster from the deep itself, the image emerged during a fugue state—from a wellspring of unconscious, somnambulant activity. It was the product of a mind “wander[ing] in strange paths.” While probably embellished for effect, the written record of the escapade suggests a degree of invention that goes well beyond normal, daily experience: a trance condition and other bizarre incidents—the group is soon visited by a quasi-Biblical, pestilential swarm of mosquitoes that was “like one of the plagues of Egypt.”\textsuperscript{65} \textit{The Sea Serpent} was perhaps Chase’s first pictorial self-identification with the beastly, primordial sea-dweller that he reworked over time. This is not simply to blur the distinction between creator and creation, but to attempt to articulate how dream space and imagination suffuse and get worked through in \textit{Still Life, Fish}. A chain of wild bursts of irrationality—an almost anarchic psychic topography—weirdly shadows the painting. This connection
demonstrates how frenzied, hypnotic, “haunted” mental states were continually at issue for Chase.

**Doubles**

While *Still Life, Fish* reveals an ulterior side to Chase, *Hide and Seek* is an exploration of how imaginative projection converged with this duplicated selfhood. It plays on the notion of Chase chasing himself, for the effect of “queering,” of making the world appear differently in *Hide and Seek*, intersects with the problem of pictorial duplication and the way in which imagination intercedes in the reproductive faculty of representation. Along with the doubled figures in the painting, the shape of the canvas is echoed in the picture by the frame in the left foreground, for example, as if we are seeing a picture of a picture, transforming the girl there into a kind of surrogate viewer. The painting’s self-referential doubling, moreover, is informed by Chase’s multivalent persona. In her biography, for example, Roof traced the artist’s “double life” to adolescence, when

> William Chase made his first and last appearance on any stage. So successful was he, in spite of his agonized fear that some friend would pierce through his heroic disguise and report him to his parents, that he was promoted to a speaking part of one line after a few days. For a time he was held by the lure of the footlights, then the fear of discovery conquered, and he gave up his double life.66

Contrary to Roof’s claim that he entirely abandoned his foray on the “stage,” Chase’s theatrical interest ultimately merged with or served as the basis for the conception of his artistic self-fashioning. Chase, who considered himself “the black sheep of his family,” seems to have channeled the early performative inclination into his artistic multiplicity and shifting social selves.67 Chase was the paragon of the self-styled, self-promotional
artist, and represented a new form of public selfhood so carefully assembled and managed in the late nineteenth century. In her investigation of the social and cultural constructions of American artists in this period, the art historian Sarah Burns has shown how Chase uniquely took on different “versions of artistic identity” over the course of his career. “In his various guises, from young bohemian to well-groomed professional,” Burns argues, “Chase embodied the instability of artistic identity at the turn of the century.”

This notion of a “double life,” underwritten by an affinity for acting a part, however, had greater ramifications for the complex multilayering of Chase’s art, specifically *Hide and Seek*’s adherence to doubling and dissimulation. The relevance of this “double life” persisted in subordinated or rejiggered ways in his work and life. Chase maintained a steadfast interest in outward appearances, lavishing fastidious attention on clothing, for example. A striking figure, Chase was, remembered a fellow artist, “the cynosure of all eyes.” One period comparison to a renowned English dandy evokes his relationship to multiplicity: “There was no ignoring this ‘Beau Brummel with the vitality of ten men.’” Another student remarked, “His dress was part of his art psychology.” The importance of this facet of performance extended to the masquerades he organized and attended, gatherings that allowed him the opportunity to indulge in “disguise” by, for example, wearing seventeen-century costumes (fig. 2.7). This interest recurred in, for example, the dressing up of his children after figures from masterworks by the likes Velázquez, and in his productions of *tableaux vivants*, for which he was the most well-known enthusiast of his day and likely the model for the artist who stages them.
in Edith Wharton’s novel *The House of Mirth* (1905). As a teacher, Chase’s painting demonstrations were considered virtuosic “performances,” akin to dramas of duration equal to the theater.

Something of this theatrical orchestration is relevant to *Hide and Seek* with its architectural frame, open floor, and curtain. Yet Chase’s “double life” also played out in more elusive terms, which, in turn, inform the painting in subtle ways. Alter egos seem to have been a forte of Chase. His chameleon-like nature is evinced by his many pseudonyms. One—Briareus—connoted multiplicity, for the mythological creature was sometimes regarded as 100-armed and 50-headed. During his student years in Munich, Chase was known as “the Holy Ghost,” one third of the “Holy Trinity” comprising artists Frank Duveneck (“the Father”) and Walter Shirlaw (“the Son”). Chase was dubbed a “sphinx” by a student in 1888—a hybrid monster with the head of a woman and the winged body of a lion, in the mythological account, or, more generally, one who is mysterious or unfathomable; in essence, a riddle or a teller of riddles. Although not a nickname, the label suggests how Chase could be a multifarious, enigmatic, and baffling personality. The art critic Clarence Cook similarly referred to Chase as “many-sided” in 1888 and another newspaper account, in 1889, alluded to him as “mercurial.”

Chase, quoted in 1887 on the occasion of his first solo exhibition, seemed to embrace this deep-seated multiplicity when he stated, “an artist is never twice the same man.” The potential double meanings of Merritt (i.e. merit) and Chase are apropos as well as the different permutations of his name that appeared in the public press and private correspondence over the span of his life, including William Merritt Chase,
William M. Chase, Will M. Chase, Will Chase, Willie Chase, W. M. Chase, and Wm. M. Chase. He was also referred to as “Chasey.” His fleet of pet names for his wife and eight surviving children—his first son and namesake William Merritt Chase, Jr. died in 1891—also convey the ever-expanding multitudinous dimensions of Chase. Not only were his biological offspring—with their twofold monikers that he devised—like extensions of himself but his many students were also like progeny: “I believe I am the father of more art children than any other living man,” boasted Chase. Just months before his death, Chase expressed the desire to exist in multiple, stating, “I would like to live four times.” In a sense, he had.

This layering of personalities was also apparent from Chase’s encounter with James McNeill Whistler in London in 1885. Whistler gave Chase the sobriquet “Colonel,” and he also referred to Chase, possibly more derogatorily, as “the Masher of the Avenues,” which plays on his last name, implying a man who makes advances toward and “chases” women. Given the broader context of Chase’s myriad names, these designations as an idiosyncrasy of Whistler only partially explains them. They span high and low: the former signifies authority while the latter is on the level of the street and involves socially transgressive behavior. In addition to pointing up multiplicity and inner division, the overarching point here is the constancy of Chase’s negotiation between public and private selves, between outward appearances and interior variability. Hide and Seek seems to be concerned with this gap between external surface and a more mysterious, multivalent underside.
That questions of duality—as epitomized by softening or concealing the more extreme edges of fantastic projections—especially motivated Chase’s artistic universe in 1888, consider *Lilliputian-Boat Lake.* The first state of the painting features a young girl precariously poised on the edge of the Central Park pond, as if about to slide disobediently or escape into the water (fig. 2.8). Furrowed brow, beady eyes, and pursed lips contribute to her piercing, almost accusatory, scowl. But her confrontational mien was later revised, drastically altering the mood of the picture (fig. 2.9). Her bracing left arm and extended fingers—a protective, almost adversarial gesture—come to rest in her lap, replete with a bouquet of flowers, highlighting a new solidity, even submission. Her appearance has been considerably softened in the second state, perhaps exaggeratedly so. With rosy lips and cheeks, an overarching shift to docility has occurred. On one level, the change is a simple beautifying or brightening of atmosphere. But on another level, the change points to that which is masked by or lurking beneath a deceptively simple veneer.

The figure’s displeased grimace suggests how circumspection, even an air of menace, was a facet of Chase’s art in 1888, perhaps all the more so because of its eventual removal. The covering up of an antagonist presence with a conciliatory one is furthered by the elimination of the male figure at right, elevating her into the definite focal point of the scene. She becomes at home in the park, tucked into as opposed to standing out from it. One critic enthused about how, in the revision, “her festive little appearance delicately corresponds with the intensely civilized scene.” No longer an aberration or grating force, she has become fully integrated into the social order. This Janus-faced relationship between “civilized” comportment and disruption suggests how
these questions were located in the form of young female figures for Chase. She serves as “testimony to his unusual talents […] at knowing how to catch the charm of fair visible things,” continued the critic. But together the pictures seem to suggest that there is no innocence without a little darkness. *Lilliputian-Boat Lake* is the only known reworking of its kind by the artist, and, along with *Hide and Seek*, it was his other major (non-portrait) painting featuring a girl prominently in the foreground from 1888. With the scaled-down boats giving way to scaled-down figures, *Lilliputian-Boat Lake* almost seems to partake of the Swiftian allusion of its title and to invoke fantastical inversion.

Another painting further demonstrates that Chase was working through how fantasy would function in his art from the beginning. This engagement was, early on, rooted in understatement and misdirection, and in how, using clever details, a painting could gesture toward a gothic aspect but then pull back from fully embracing that spirit. The painting *Out of the Way* (ca. 1877) speaks directly to *Hide and Seek*’s foundations (fig. 2.10). For *Hide and Seek* is constructed in much the same manner as *Out of the Way*, variously titled during Chase’s life as *A Mysterious Corner* and *A Dreary Corner*. Although separated by a decade, he exhibited this painting several times in the 1880s, including in the year prior to painting *Hide and Seek*, another horizontally oriented canvas of nearly identical dimensions. *Hide and Seek* compositionally recalls this work as well. With the two girls positioned along an energized diagonal running from the lower left to the upper right corner, *Hide and Seek* adopts the structure of *Out of the Way*, with its similarly angled building. Chase repeated the diagonal format in other pictures but never with the same sparseness, monochromatic arrangement, and careful
correspondences found in *Hide and Seek*. It is a populated revision of sorts. More than just the lower-left to upper-right crosswise setup, *Hide and Seek*’s action likewise takes place between one corner and another, as if the foreground girl in *Hide and Seek* might have come to occupy the position at the projecting corner in the foreground of *Out of the Way*.

Both pictures play on the theme of surprises just around the corner. Both are images of, as one critic described *Hide and Seek* in 1888, “expectant curiosity.” The children’s doubling echoes the paired doors in the early picture, and the lower edge of a window or picture frame recalls the placement of the window in its upper left quadrant. In both pictures, the upper right part of the canvas offers the faintest suggestion of a space beyond; they are both compressed spaces with no immediate exit for the figures or for the viewer’s eye. Indeed the high façade in *Out of the Way* makes the scene a walled-off enclosure, surrounded like a quasi-interior more than a vistaed landscape. *Out of the Way* might be said to function like a cinematic establishing shot to *Hide and Seek*’s indoor setting: *Hide and Seek* transposes the outdoor locale—taking us inside this foreboding “old stone house; doors shut and windows barred,” as one reviewer remarked—while maintaining much of the same underlying organization. The rusticated stone base is reprised in reduced fashion as the interior strip of base molding. The ovoid cobblestones of the earlier work anticipate the broad brushstrokes of the later work’s middle ground. Chase’s handling—looser, to be sure—approximates its own brand of stacked, undulating mounds receding in a brownish brick-crimson, grainy swath. One painting is punctuated by the blue of the street sign; the other by the blue of the
chair. More than just their compositional affinities and similarly tonally restrained color schemes, however, it is their mutual emphasis on ground and floor terrains as spaces of charged mystery that is at issue.

Reviewers were struck by the puddle of red blood under the doorway in *Out of the Way* as a mark of gothic aberration. “And these stone walls,” asked one critic in 1880, “what do they signify? Is the pool of blood that gathers under the door intended for a tragic suggestion?” He voiced difficulty reconciling the “tragic” or grisly with the picture’s “commonplace surroundings,” as did other critics. The aftermath of the drama of life and death unfolds on an everyday street. Writing in 1887, the critic for *The Art Interchange* commented that the picture “conduces to a mysterious and gruesome influence which renders it one of the most imaginative of [Chase’s] works.” The picture was “gloomy” evidence of his “melodramatic imagination,” according to another. The flecks of paint that constitute the “blood lying before a narrow closed door,” as another critic described it, become, on one level, reworked and revised in *Hide and Seek*. Although the floor of *Hide and Seek* cannot be said to overflow with the blood of *Out of the Way*, its suggestive potential becomes expanded as color, as pure pigment, on a related inscrutable surface, in a related setting.

*Out of the Way*’s “somber silence” finds its way into the expansive area of *Hide and Seek*. It too is a pregnant space with which critics were not easily able to come to grips. Something of the earlier picture’s grim strangeness undergirds the later picture as well. *Hide and Seek*’s borrowings point to the way it carries over the “mysterious,” though not exactly “gruesome” slaughter, and to the way it is suffused by Chase’s
reckoning with “imagination.” It is a mutation of this youthful thread, a mature distillation and more complicated instance of this intermingling of the ordinary and the unusual. Out of the Way shows how the abject and “mysterious” were bridged with the everyday and reveals the origins of Hide and Seek. One is a German backstreet, produced while Chase was a student at the end of his education at the Munich Royal Academy, the other a New York City interior, produced in the wake of his first solo exhibition, yet the two pictures share a kinship in the air of mystery at their center. The bloody patch in Out of the Way is transformed into his more assured and broadly brushed paint application, as if converting the iconographic into the pictorial. But how faint or easily overlooked is the blood, not lurid or sensational—no more of the macabre touch than the occasion requires.

It is this investment in “suggestion”—prompting the “what do they signify?” question—that continues to be worked through on the level of form in Hide and Seek.

Chase’s investigation of more imaginative terrain was thus uneasy from the start—laden with a degree of subtlety that could lead to confusion. Though Chase avoids the overtly gothic or “gruesome” note, mystery and suggestion nonetheless inform Hide and Seek and remained issues on which Chase ruminated. In 1903, for example, Chase was, noted his biographer Roof, “horrified” by the German Symbolist Franz von Stück for his “childish striving for the gruesome.” Although his work’s “contrived ghouliness” was, as Roof put it, “naïve in its efforts to inspire the shudder,” Chase paradoxically praised “some beautiful pictures” by Stück’s Swiss predecessor Arnold Böcklin. After seeing works by Böcklin, the French poet Jules Laforgue, for one, remained “stunned by this sense of unity in the dream, this self-blinding in regard to the
fantastic, this impeccable naturalness in the supernatural.” Chase, German-educated and attentive of trends in European art, also reportedly found some aspect of Böcklin’s explorations of “fantasy” and “imagination” worth remembering.

If “the gruesome” smacks of immaturity—seems too easy or too obvious—then perhaps Chase’s inclusion of it in *Out of the Way*, however unshowy, graduated to a different yet related register in *Hide and Seek*. The gruesome note that he enacted and even theorized about was part of the way he proceeded through the world; it was more than just something to be overcome or discarded, more than just some youthful indiscretion—rather, it was a revitalizing force that threw a lasting shadow over his lifetime. *Hide and Seek* recalibrates the offbeat, “gruesome” element of *Out of the Way*, offering a kind of limit for Chase’s approach to the fantastical. Instead of provoking a visceral reaction, *Hide and Seek* mobilizes its affiliation with the “childish” realm toward a more subtle psychological intrusion.

That *Hide and Seek* is to some extent the transposition of *Out of the Way* contributes to the painting’s Carrolllesque twisting. Alice’s tumble into Wonderland was, after all, not “so very much out of the way,” as Carroll begins the second paragraph of his story, though soon after Alice concludes that “Everything is so out-of-the-way down here.” Like Alice, who is simultaneously on the riverbank with her sister and in Wonderland, Chase’s figures seem to occupy disparate worlds simultaneously. This strategy of suspension is close to the “hesitation” (on the part of both protagonist and reader) between reality and dream that defines “the fantastic” as proposed by literary theorist Tsvetan Todorov and to what Farah Mendlesohn has categorized as “liminal
fantasy,” in which the “seemingly ordinary story feels like fantasy […] and irresolution of the fantastic becomes the locus of the ‘fantasy.’”  

The Structure of the Interior

The picture’s venture into labyrinthine byways à la Alice in Wonderland suggests a shared underlying interest. Identity, or “confusion about identity,” as one literary scholar has put it, is an overwhelming concern of the Alice books. They are about, observes Karen Coats, “the desire to know, to understand, and most of all, the desire to know oneself, to be oneself.” After falling down the rabbit hole, Alice feels she is no longer herself and wonders who has taken her place. The White Rabbit mistakenly calls her Mary Ann. By drinking from a bottle and eating from a small cake she becomes unsure of her self: “Who in the world am I? Ah, that’s the great puzzle.” The Catapillar’s cryptic “Who are you?” question and Alice’s uncertain reply: “I’m not myself, you see.” Alice’s bifurcated concept of self when she recalls: “But it’s no use now to pretend to be two people! Why, there’s hardly enough of me left to make ONE respectable person!” And so on. The problem of shifting identity, of a self that is less than steadfastly secure, is a principal theme of Carroll’s story, and Chase’s painting veers into related territory. Its course toward an Alice-like world aslant opens onto a space of epistemological uncertainty that is cued to probing psychological concerns. In Hide and Seek, the slippery, yet lingering, element of fantasy is connected to an investigation of identity, to an attempt at making sense of a divided self.
Doubling and crisis of identity converge around a kind of mental mirage in *Hide and Seek*. For in addition to being aligned with a broad sense of creative fantasy, the word “fancy” could also connote “delusion.”

The question of interior double life was central to the emerging discipline of psychology during these years. Terms such as “double consciousness” and “double personality” were especially integral to inquiries from diverse quarters in the latter part of the 1880s. Psychology was largely centered on the study of the two-fold nature of the mind. In his essay “The Hidden Self,” published in the March 1890 issue of *Scribner’s Magazine*, the philosopher and psychologist William James commented on “submerged consciousness,” the part of the self that is obscured, that which “has long been vaguely talked about as unconscious mental life.” James speculated that “the total possible consciousness may be split into parts which coexist,” that “the secondary self, or selves, coexist with the primary one.”

What James called “the hidden self,” his friend the Boston physician Morton Prince asked rhetorically, that same year, “have we all a second personality […] which observes, remembers and governs our actions more than we dream of?”

Decades earlier, anatomists reported that the brain itself was dual, composed of two hemispheres, each in charge of separate functions. In the 1880s and 90s, on the cusp of Freud’s credited “discovery” of the unconscious and publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), the uncertain contours of the self were vigorously and systematically investigated by theorists and practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1897, for example, the New York doctor Rufus Osgood Mason asked whether “normal, ordinary people, possess a second personality, deep-down beneath their
ordinary, everyday self, and that under conditions which favor a readjustment, this hidden subliminal self may emerge?\(^{15}\) Such deliberations fostered a new framework for considering older assumptions about two opposing selves within the human personality. The issue of inner duality was intertwined with, and became more palpable through, instances of individuals leading double lives of various sorts. For example, a newspaper account in 1883 related “the case of a woman who passes her life in two entirely distinct and alternating states.”\(^{16}\) In one of many period fictions exploring double selfhood, the 1884 “hypnotic romance” *Double Life; or, Starr Cross* by Herbert E. Chase (no relation), a sleepwalker reveals, “I feel as if I were living two lives at once.”\(^{17}\) What perhaps once simply would have qualified as a case of mistaken identity was in 1888 burdened by the double-mindedness of everyday experience. “Beware of Your Double,” cautioned a newspaper headline that year, “you have one and he will get you into trouble.”\(^{18}\)

*Hide and Seek* is contiguous with these period explorations of duplicated selfhood. The overlap between a seemingly innocent game and a more nefarious form of pursuit condensed in the phrase “hide and seek” in these years. For instance, in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), perhaps the most extreme of all second-self stories, the quest to reveal inner duality is articulated using this formulation. Mr. Utterson remarks in his search for Hyde: “If he be Mr. Hyde, ’he had thought, ‘I’ll be Mr. Seek.’”\(^{19}\) A theatrical adaptation of the tale opened in New York in March 1888, though the phrase had broader currency.\(^{20}\) For instance, an 1888 piece on “A Woman’s Double Life” relates how “Dr. Jekyll himself hardly excelled her at playing hide and seek with herself.”\(^{21}\) Another article observed that the “theory of the double
personality […] enables man to play hide-and-seek with himself.”¹²² *Hide and Seek*’s figures seem to occupy the imbrication of this meaning and the more ordinary one.

The setting of *Hide and Seek* represents a kind of psychic locality or, to put it another way, the visualization of a mental topography. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the metaphorical link between the interiority of the mind and an interior dwelling space became especially pronounced. Along these lines, Walter Benjamin’s descriptions of the nineteenth-century bourgeois interior, for example, emphasized how it was a “stimulus to intoxication and dream.”¹²³ This formulation also recalls John Locke’s influential seventeenth-century conception of the mind as an empty room, and something from this overlap gets played out in *Hide and Seek*. Variations on the mind-as-room metaphor permeated specialized philosophical discussions as well as popular articulations in Chase’s own time.¹²⁴ For example, Sherlock Holmes explains to his sidekick Watson “that a man’s brain […] is like a little empty attic,” in Arthur Conan Doyle’s inaugural detective story *A Study in Scarlet* (1887).¹²⁵ One scholar, writing in the mid twentieth century, found it “difficult to think of [Chase] as a single personality” and even likened the artist to “a large, rambling, many-mazed and many-roomed mansion,” ever consternating to navigate.¹²⁶ *Hide and Seek* is freighted with a degree of this psychological complexity, with a sort of inner realization, or with something akin to the feeling of being watched.¹²⁷ It is as if the viewer both shares the outlook of the foreground participant and also finds that she comes into our field of vision, thereby creating the sense of another watcher’s presence.
It is almost as if one figure is looking at another version of herself or as if the picture enacts a recursive loop. The resemblance between the two figures in *Hide and Seek* arises in part from the fact that the Juanita Miller, the daughter of Chase’s friend and fellow Indiana native Joaquin Miller, reportedly posed for both girls—so alike in costume and posture—and compounds its sense of doubling.¹²⁸ The background figure seems to be on the verge of arriving at the wall edge to peer past it like the foreground figure. In this image of discovery and anticipation, the girl’s on-the-verge action suggests the lifting of a veil—an operation of uncovering and disclosing. This repetition makes it appear that pulling back the distant curtain might reveal yet another identical room and distant figure *ad infinitum*—an endless regress akin to the *mise-en-abyme* or droste effect. Thus the meta-representational aspect of the painting pushes toward picturing a zone of introspection—watching yourself watching yourself watching...—in the way that intellectual James E. Cabot defined “Self-consciousness,” in 1878, as “the mind returning upon itself and its impressions.”¹²⁹ If *Lilliputian-Boat Lake* offered clues to the careful attention Chase gave to the interchange between the double and warily observed figure in 1888, *Hide and Seek* compounds and internalizes these components—not just spatially, as a physical interior, but as an approximation of a zone of psychic interiority, as a scenario allied to prevalent ideas of mindscape or headspace.

In this process of self-scrutiny and psychic dislocation, crucial is the way the floor activates “that continual vanishing away, that strange perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves” characteristic of modern subjectivity.¹³⁰ The wavy paint strokes seem to retain the residual presence of that which was elided. This emphasis recalls the centrality
of the floor in two short stories exploring the psychic intimacy between characters and their interiors. In Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), the murderer–narrator dismembers and hides a body under the floorboards only for the sounds of the beating heart there under to ring ever louder in his ears. “There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever” on the “flooring of the chamber.” But this bloodless, pounding floor becomes a sensation generated and felt internally, as Poe collapses the site with its action upon his consciousness. The floor physically marks the narrator’s entrapment and records her psychic unraveling in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). As the story unfolds, she spends more and more time crawling on the floor of her barely furnished room—her descent into madness literally takes her closer and closer to the horizontal plane. In her downward spiral, she attacks it, finding “the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered” by her own hands. Yet it is perhaps the key difference between Poe’s and Gilman’s stories that speaks to Chase’s picture. Whereas gothic abnormality—murder, body parts—is immediately apparent in Poe, the tumultuous psychological aspects are couched within the veneer of bourgeois respectability and normalcy and emerge more gradually in Gilman.\(^\text{131}\)

In *Hide and Seek*, it is as if this floor area reinscribes as the point of emergence the surplus element that held *Out of the Way* together—enacting “what the submerged consciousness makes the hand do automatically is unknown to the consciousness,” as William James wrote in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890).\(^\text{132}\) The energy associated with the original idea ended up transferred to a different and apparently innocuous idea, as the painterly coils and fluctuations here seem to dislodge or carry with them something
akin to what Oliver Wendell Holmes called, in March 1888, the “pebbled floor of consciousness” or that threshold arena of mental awareness that was becoming more widely talked about as simply the floor of consciousness. Indeed, the term “subconscious” was defined to apply “perceptions which do not appear above the ‘floor of consciousness.’” The chasm in *Hide and Seek* thereby visually explores a similar conception of a liminal psychic space. As a subtle investigation of psychological states and the “self,” the picture reframes our understanding of both Chase’s artistic world as well as how metaphors of mind could register visually in the late nineteenth century.

**Coda**

Chase spent some four years contemplating his last monumental *Self-Portrait*, which he finished in 1916, the year of his death (fig. 2.11). Chase took his time with the painting perhaps because it stood for a kind of homecoming, as the finished commission was bound for Indiana, the state of his birth. Rather than a triumphant late-life return, however, the self-portrait conveys the artist in the grip of ragged weariness and existential crisis. In the shadows of the dark half of the room, Chase is rumpled and drained of pretense. His guard is down, the jig is up, the performer is unmasked. The art historian Nicholai Cikovsky has interpreted this late work as “a disclosure of Chase’s artistic predicament.” Uncharacteristically, Chase is not “assertively confident” but “disheveled in appearance, faintly indifferent, indecisive, even anxious in pose, and confined and enclosed in private space.” As Cikovsky points out, “the late self-portrait is the culminating reflection on the disintegration of Chase’s artistic purpose.” Perhaps
most revealing, Chase stands before a large empty canvas that dominates the composition. Messy, confused lines and uncertain starts visualize Chase’s psychic turmoil and defeated state. The bare painting within the painting emblematizes, notes Cikovsky, Chase’s “emotional condition.”\(^{136}\) Its rough, abstract patch of scribbled brushstrokes and smeared daubs communicates “inner darkness, disturbance, and disarray.”\(^{137}\) *Self-Portrait* shows a psyche nearly stripped bare, the weakening, or even collapse, of the ego’s fictions. It is a poignant admission of doubt and irresolution.

When asked about “the empty canvas in the painting,” Chase replied that it “is my masterpiece, the alluring, tantalizing great picture which I always hoped to paint and have never quite succeeded in creating.”\(^{138}\) Fostering the connection between emptiness and mental projection, Chase also spoke of “a blank canvas on a high frame on the wall of [his] studio” as being “for the pictures that I paint in my mind.” He elaborated: “I am sorry I cannot show you the picture quite as I see it. I am always trying but it keeps ahead of me the more I advance, and must remain something that no one can see but myself.”\(^{139}\)

In her obituary for the artist, his biographer Roof equated the physical person of Chase with a comparable gap: “It is Chase the man […] who has left the empty space. There is the irretrievable loss.”\(^{140}\) In these statements, the void serves as a trope at once elusive and in plain sight. If in his *Self-Portrait* psychological unease and empty terrain explicitly join, then the seeds of this conjunction may have been embryonically present in *Hide and Seek*. Its murky, gestural passages—so near a related apparition that “keeps ahead”—anticipate how paint more emphatically declares itself as paint at the center of *Self-Portrait*. If his *Self-Portrait* is the ultimate face off with his condition, then this turbulent
reckoning seems to have been embedded, as a more complex gestation—even as an insistence on opacity—in *Hide and Seek*. The empty area as a site of psychological investigation presages this final revelation—a fulcrum point in 1888 that was destructive if given free rein but also destructive if denied.¹⁴¹
Susan Sidlauskas, *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 75. Elsewhere Sidlauskas calls the background girl “a ghostly apparition,” noting how “the thinness of the brushstrokes and lack of definition give material form to her immanent disappearance from sight” and that “she stands in a different perceptual space from her playmate.” See Susan Sidlauskas, “A ‘Perspective of Feeling’: The Expressive Interior in Nineteenth Century Realist Painting” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1989), 182. This potentially to the radical openness of *Hide and Seek* adds to the art historian Kathleen Pyne’s claim that it was “one of the most sophisticated visual experiments by an American artist in the period.” Kathleen Pyne, “William Merritt Chase,” in *The Quest for Unity: American Art between World’s Fairs, 1876–1893* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1983), 96. Similarly, the painting is called “an anomaly in Chase’s oeuvre,” in Wendy Kail’s entry on the painting in *The Eye of Duncan Phillips: A Collection in the Making*, ed. Erika D. Passantino (Washington, DC: The Phillips Collection and Yale University Press, 1999), 146.


“The Fine Arts: The Wm. M. Chase Exhibition,” *The Critic* 166 (March 5, 1887): 115: Chase is a painter of “external conditions”—“he loves surfaces”; “His talent is as superficial as it is brilliant.” William Murrell, “William M. Chase,” *The Seven Arts* 2 (July 1917): 391: Chase had “an excessive preoccupation with the externals of life…. Chase was a shrewd observer, but he lacked that penetration into character—that observation with the inward eye.” William Howe Downes, “William Merritt Chase, A Typical American Artist,” *International Studio* 39 (December 1909): 36: Chase “avoids… metaphysics, dealing rather with the phenomena which are pictorially effective by virtue of their form, light, and shade, and giving us a faithful… rendering of the external world.” The word “psychology” here is used to encompass such characteristic period criticisms of his first one-man show in Boston in 1886 and New York in 1887 as lacking “soul,” “depth,” the use of an “inward eye,” and being unconcerned with “metaphysics,” for example. Chase, to some degree, turns these criticisms on their head.
in *Hide and Seek*. See “Gallery and Studio,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (March 6, 1887), 2: “little of his work has soul in it”; Chase is the “apostle” of a school of painting that neglects the loftier things: “dignity of purpose, depth of meaning and poetry in sentiment.” “An Exhibition of Mr. Chase’s Works,” *The Art Interchange* 18 (March 12, 1887): 82: His “absorbing passions for the technical problems of his art.” “Mr. Chase’s Work and Its Place,” *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* (December 1, 1886), 7: Chase is primarily concerned with “the surface of things”; “to penetrate further demands earnest search of brain and heart, [and] of soul”; he is accused of insufficiently probing the “impulses of the human mind.” “Art Notes: What is a Finished Picture?” *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* (December 8, 1886), 10: The author, contrary to most other critics of Chase, suggests that it is wrong to equate “incompleteness” and “swiftness and sketchiness of Mr. Chase’s work” with “lack of thought, poverty of idea and superficiality of seeing.”

4 Katherine Metcalf Roof, *The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1917), 316. Roof’s biography was undertaken with the cooperation of Chase’s widow, mother, and friends.


6 Ibid., 2, 15.

7 Reporting on the London stage adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* the same year, the *Washington Post* described, “Alice was […] a pretty little girl in a simple white frock and with long hair hanging down her back.” See “Alice in Wonderland,” *The Washington Post* (January 1, 1888), 11. For the stage production, see also “‘Alice’ on the Stage,” *New York Tribune* (January 23, 1887), 12.


9 Chase’s *Portrait of Little Miss Howell* (ca. 1886; private collection) likely features the same chair, except that, there, the young girl is logically scaled. In other words, the girl and the chair are appropriately proportioned—a contrast that accentuates the chair’s disruptive effect in *Hide and Seek*. For the other painting, see Ronald G. Pisano, *William Merritt Chase: Portraits in Oil, Vol. 2* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 68–69. With *Hide and Seek*, a “radical and mysterious” painting, Chase “has defied the laws of gravity. The picture or mirror on the wall slides upward beyond the canvas edge, the empty chair floats unanchored, and the girl hovers before the light.” See Kail in *The Eye*
of Duncan Phillips, 146. For Chase as not interested in stable impression of “real” space, see Gallati, William Merritt Chase: Modern American Landscapes, 1886–1890, 174: “Defined by irregularity, imbalance, and dislocation, these normally stable architectural confines [in Hide and Seek] defy the logic of the ‘real’ in which floors meet at right angles, and bodies occupy parallel planes in correct proportional relationships.” See also the discussion of Lecoq de Boisbaudran’s (1802–97) teachings oriented around the psychological tensions achieved by the expressive use of space in Susan Sidlauskas, “A ‘Perspective of Feeling’: The Expressive Interior in Nineteenth Century Realist Painting” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1989).


11 Gilles Deleuze, The Logic of Sense, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. Constatin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), xiii. According to Deleuze, Carroll “remains the master […] surveyor of surfaces—surfaces which were taken to be so well-known that nobody was exploring them anymore” (93).


14 “Recent American Landscape,” Art Amateur 19 (June 1888): 2.

15 “Art Institute Pictures,” The Chicago Tribune (June 3, 1888), 26. See also John B. Cecelia Casserly, Chicago Times Herald (November 28, 1897), quoted in William Merritt Chase: Interiors in Oil, 102: “its wide expanse of floor.”

16 Roof, The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase, 77. “Tiles and the Makers of Tiles,” The Book Buyer 3 (December 1886): 439: “From its very entrance, it is peculiar, […] and its peculiarity can be best explained by saying that […] habitues grow more and more enthusiastic over its quaintnesses, until, at last in attempting to describe it, they simply rave, and, […] take refuge in talking nonsense.” Bryant, William Merritt Chase: A Genteel Bohemian, 77: to gain access to the Tile Club meant passage “through a dark tunnel.” Arthur B. Frost, a student of Chase and fellow Tile Club member (ca. 1886), illustrated Carroll’s Rhyme? & Reason? (1883) and A Tangled Tale (1885) for American audiences.
Scholarship on Chase has persisted in dating his marriage to February 1886, the year prior. See, for example, Ronald G. Pisano, *William Merritt Chase: Landscapes in Oil, Vol. 3* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 21. But Gallati, *William Merritt Chase: Modern American Landscapes, 1886–1890*, 48, n. 2, presents the most persuasive account, citing the couple’s marriage certificate from 1887.

Roof, *The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase*, 70. Chase was perhaps artistically attuned to fanciful depictions in these years due to his friendship with the artist Frederick Stuart Church, whose scenes of nymphs, mermaids, and witches could sometimes intermingle homey innocence with an inimical or threatening undercurrent. In Church’s work, as one writer put it in 1880, “so curiously are grotesquerie and wholesomeness combined.” For the quote, see “The Younger Painters of America: First Paper,” *Scribner’s Monthly* 20 (May 1880): 15. For the tamed and whimsical as easily spilling into the ferocious and violent, see also F. S. Church, “An Artist Among Animals,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 14 (December 1893): esp. 752–753, 755, 756, 759; and Church’s *Panic-Stricken Animals* in *Harper’s Weekly* 31 (December 3, 1887): 876. Chase and Church were nearly inseparable friends in the early 1880s, and they congregated in the household of Julius Gerson, the manager of the art department at the lithographic firm Louis Prang. See Roof, *The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase*, 65–75. Chase even had some say in the design of one of Church’s best-known works, *Silence*, an enshrouded mummified head with a fresh flower under its desiccated nostrils. The etching was widely exhibited and circulated throughout the 1880s, and Church produced a number of oil and gauche variations after it. The overall simplicity of the composition—the head, much of it unworked, floats on the blank page—was reportedly the result of an abrupt intervention by Chase, who, upon encountering Church “about finishing” it, commanded him to “Stop right there.” *Silence*, then, constituted a kind of collaboration, in which an odd subject—full of “fancy” and “witchery,” wrote one critic—and pictorial understatement, apparently due to Chase, came together. See Roof, *The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase*, 68; and Barnet Phillips, “F. S. Church in His Studio,” *Harper’s Weekly* 37 (October 7, 1893): 959. On the composition’s the debt to Chase, see also David Dearinger, *Paintings and Sculpture in the Collection of the National Academy of Design: 1826–1925* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2004), 104. In subsequent versions Church elaborated the composition, adding a more prominent ledge and well-defined surroundings, for example. Church illustrated Carroll’s poem “The Walrus and the Carpenter” in William Swinton and George R. Cathcart, eds., *Golden Book of Tales* (New York: Ivison, Blakeman, Taylor, and Company, 1882), 231. His illustration reappeared in related compendiums by the same publisher in the following decades. The art critic
Clarence Cook belatedly proposed that Church and Carroll “would make a first rate team” in his *Art and Artists of Our Time, Vol. III* (New York: Selmar Hess, 1888), 287.


20 For Carroll, “fairy tale,” and “fancies” in these years, see, for example, “‘Alice’: What the Author Says About Her,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (April 16, 1887), 6. Carroll’s *Sylvie and Bruno* was published in 1889. The popular distinction between imagination and fancy has its roots in the writing of Samuel Coleridge and is more a matter of degree than kind. Generally speaking, in Coleridge’s view, imagination designated a higher, more original form of creative power, whereas fancy was its subservient, lesser sibling. Though treated as highly complex concepts, the terms were also used interchangeably, commonly bleeding into one another throughout the nineteenth century. See, for instance, D. B. Lang, “Point Counterpoint: The Emergence of Fancy and Imagination in Coleridge,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16 (March 1958): 384–397.


25 Perhaps this is not far from the process of “the substitution of knowledge for fancy,” as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno put it in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1989), 3. For Chase as understanding his enterprise as skeptical of science, see Gallati, *William Merritt Chase: Modern American Landscapes, 1886–1890*, 48, n. 27: “Most of this work [Impressionism] I consider as
more scientific than artistic.” See also Roof, The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase, 272, 274: “When he found that his oldest son instead of turning toward art was interested in electricity and mechanics, Chase was deeply bewildered. Instead of protesting, however, he contented himself with such dark allusions as that he ‘was glad that Bobbie was at the top of the house where he could only blow the roof off with his experiments.’ But in time he came to have a quite deferential attitude toward his scientific son and would inquire […] of some mysterious phenomenon.”

26 Jack Zipes, Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 2. L. Frank Baum The Wizard of Oz (1900), a book influenced by Carroll’s Alice stories, to be an “indigenous” fairy tale. Quoted in Jane Darcy, “The Disneyfication of the European Fairy Tale,” in Issues in Americanisation and Culture, ed. Neil Campbell, Jude Davies, George McKay (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 181: “Disneyfication as a process could be said to have begun in April 1900, when L. Frank Baum wrote in his introduction to The Wonderful Wizard of Oz that ‘it aspires to being a modernized fairy tale, in which the wondernment and joy are retained and the heart-aches and the nightmares are left out.’” A principal modification to the new conception of the fairy tale was the jettisoning of its macabre aspects. Chase’s family acted out parts of Baum’s book—like the protagonist in Oz, Chase’s second daughter was named Dorothy. See Bryant, William Merritt Chase: A Genteel Bohemian, 162. William Leach, Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture (New York: Random House, 1993), 252: “In the new consumerist American way, Baum broke the connection between wondernment and heartache. People could have what historically (and humanly) they had never had: joy without sorrow, abundance without poverty, happiness without pain […]. Baum rejected that side of life.”

27 As much as it was about the desire for artistic education abroad, Chase’s well-known statement—“My God, I’d rather go to Europe than to Heaven!”—also shares in something of this preference for terrestrial transcendence over traditional promises of otherworldly redemption.


1915): 198: “Do not try to paint the grandiose thing. Paint the commonplace so that it will be distinguished.” Also quoted in Roof, *The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase*, 319. “Art and Artists,” *The Globe and Commerical Advertiser, New York* (December 24, 1906), 7: “Some artists are capable of painting the Crucifixon in the same way they would paint a cabbage; others can make a sublime achievement of a gluepot and a pair of spectacles.”


34 According to Carol Forman Tabler, Vollon’s fish are less dead than in the anguished act of dying. See her “Antoine Vollon and His Smashing Pumpkin: On Media Hype and the Meanings of Still Life,” *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 1 (Autumn 2002). Other precedents are certainly plausible, as both Chase’s and Vollon’s work recalls tenebrous Spanish still life paintings from the seventeenth century, for example.

35 Controversy surrounded the attribution in 1909, despite Chase’s insistence that the work was by Allston. See “Painting of Deluge Doubted as Bogus,” *New York American* (December 5, 1909): Chase is called “one of America’s greatest experts,” and “said that… he was absolutely certain that the picture was by Allston.” The painting was apparently still attributed to Allston as late 1965, despite Shaw’s name having been put forward in 1909. For the debate, see also Albert TenEyck Gardner and Stuart P. Feld,

36 Shaw’s painting measures 48⅓ x 66 inches and Chase’s 32 x 39⅓ inches. The height of Shaw’s is roughly three-fourths of its width, and the height of Chase’s is about four-fifths of its width.


38 That Chase’s fish still life paintings were often rhetorically set—by both the artist and his critics—within an Old Master context further suggests how a previous era inflected them—a relationship to the past that The Deluge Toward Its Close bridged. Ellen E. Roberts, “Anxious Consumption: Paintings of Food at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” in Art and Appetite: American Painting, Culture, and Cuisine, ed. Judith A. Barter (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2013), 175: “critics understood these [fish] pictures in the Old Master context.” For Allston’s reputation as an American “old master” would have yielded the kind of affiliation that Chase’s evocation of venerable techniques sought to inspire. For Allston’s Old Master status, see, for example, Henry T. Tuckerman, The Book of the Artists (New York: G. P. Putnam and Son, 1867), 137; and “Art in Boston,” The Artist and Journal of Home Culture 2 (October 1, 1881): 316. References to Allston as “the American Titian” abound. For Allston’s Old Master techniques and other period comparisons, see also Lance Mayer and Gay Myers, American Painters on Technique: The Colonial Period to 1860 (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 2011), 61–64. For his allegiance to Old Master techniques, see, for example, Gallati, William Merritt Chase: Modern American Landscapes, 1886–1890, 48, n. 27. Chase’s “American style,” was described by one critic as “a composite, blending indistinguishably the influences of old and new schools of painting”—producing a “paradoxical synthesis” of the art of the Velazquez and the high-key palette of Impressionism. See William Howe Downes, “William Merritt Chase, A Typical American Artist,” International Studio 39 (December 1909): xxix.


A detail of the foreground of Shaw’s painting accompanied a *Sunday Magazine* article in the *New York Times* addressing evidence for the Biblical flood. A fish still life by Chase is referred to on the corresponding page in the main section of the newspaper. See “The Flood Proved by Existing Tablets,” *New York Times* (March 27, 1910), SM8; and “Some Pictures of Technical Mastery,” 8. Chase is also mentioned in the article “News and Notes of the Art World,” SM15.


Russell Lynes, *The Art-Makers: An Informal History of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1982), 22. See also Miriam Carroll Woods, “Joshua Shaw (1776–1860): A Study of the Artist and His Paintings” (MA Thesis, UCLA, 1971), 96–103; and John Caldwell and Oswaldo Rodriguez Roque, *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Volume I* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), 275: “Shaw’s context is more emotional and romantic than religious; the ark is shadowy and unreal, and the overwhelming impression is one of horror and death.” In Shaw’s picture, the distant ark is obscured in the haze of the horizon. An ark is not just a boat but is also, more figuratively, a vessel or sanctuary that protects. The curved shape, or arc, of the bowl—another kind of vessel—in Chase’s image may play on this term.

At the time of the Met’s acquisition of *The Deluge Towards Its Close* in 1909, an article in the *New York Times* described its “romance” as “that of a boy who loves the

46 Roof, The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase, 216; and “A Storied Cod,” The Mentor 16 (February 1928): 62.


48 Roof, The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase, 305.

49 Chase likewise moved toward obscuring these neat divisions between himself and his fish creations when he commented: “In painting a good composition of fish I am painting for myself.” See William Henry Fox, “Chase on Still Life,” Brooklyn Museum Quarterly 1 (January 1915): 199.

50 “Our Five Skates,” Forest and Stream 51 (December 17, 1898): 491. See also “Fish Superstition,” Notes and Queries 3 (April 3, 1869): 311: “The skate, when open and exposed… bears great resemblance to a human face… [and can have] a certain resemblance to… pictures of the Virgin Mary.” For an array of superstitions about fish, see also “Superstitions about Fish,” Chicago Daily Tribune (July 2, 1882), 10; and “Trout and Superstition,” New York Times (February 16, 1890), 19. For a related move from religious subject to still life, see Chase’s quote in Roof, The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase, 279: “If you can paint a pot, you can paint an angel.”

52. For another association of Chase with the dominion of sleep, see the “Prize Picture by Pillow M. Case” in the Society of American Fakirs exhibition catalogue of 1895 in the Roland G. Pisano Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Box 4.

53. For the Nocturnes as “a category that Whistler had stamped as distinctly his,” see John Siewert, “Rhetoric and Reputation in Whistler’s Nocturnes,” in Linda Merrill et al., *After Whistler: The Artist and His Influence on American Painting* (Atlanta: High Museum of Art; and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 64.


58. “The Fish Prevaricator,” *The Watchman* 84 (July 17, 1902): 20: “What has been elegantly called ‘the gentle art of lying’ has become so inseparably conected [sic] with fishing that to part one from the other seems like a destruction of all the unities.”


Chase’s exhibition of a self-portrait under the alias in 1886 supports this idea. The Tile Club excursion and Chase’s depiction recall the anecdote in which Chase, “burlesquing a state of despair over some pretended neglect,” hurled himself into “the oozy bottom of the lake” in Central Park. He “promptly and unexpectedly disappeared beneath the surface of the lake, to the horror of all.” But “he soon climbed up… dripping mud and water.” See Roof, *The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase*, 73–74.


Roof goes on to assert that Chase “had a talent for impersonation,” and that he “seriously entertained the idea of becoming an actor.” See her *The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase*, 258, 259.

On Chase’s “personal appearance” as “part of his concern with the thing of the eye,” see Roof, *The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase*, 261–262.


On these occasions, see, for example, “Costume Reception at the Academy of Design,” Harper’s Weekly (February 9, 1889): 111. See also Chase paintings such as Self-Portrait as Colonel Johan Claeszoon Loo (Detail after Frans Hals) (1903).

For Chase’s expenses on the clothes of his wife and children circa 1888, see Bryant, William Merritt Chase: A Genteel Bohemian, 136. The control Chase exerted over his comparatively helpless sitters could border on torturous. In at least once instance, Chase bribed his daughter to the point of physical exhaustion. Roof relates how she fainted after posing from him for hours (273). In a similar story, a young Chase “thrust” the head of a calf through “a large knot-hole” and had his brother attempt to hold “the bewildered” animal, which “struggled violently in his arms.” Chase was immune to his brother’s calls to “hurry.” See Roof, The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase, 11–12. For Chase, tableaux vivants, and Edith Wharton, see Judith Freyer Davidov, Women’s Camera Work: Self/Body/Other in American Visual Culture (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 61–62. For Chase’s activities in posing tableaux vivants, see, for example, “Town and Country Life,” Town and Country (May 24, 1902), 18. Robert Storr calls Chase’s depictions of his studio from early 1880s “opera stage-like,” in his “A Room of One’s Own, a Mind of One’s Own,” in The Studio Reader: On the Spaces of Artists, ed. Mary Jane Jacob and Michelle Grabner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 49.

“Art and Artists,” New York Globe and Commercial Advertiser (November 10, 1909), 10. See also Chase’s recommendation to a student to become a theatrical stage painter in Roof, The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase, 312–313.

See Bryant, William Merritt Chase: A Genteel Bohemian, 77: “Chase became Briareous because of his prodigious output.” Another literary version of Chase is the character Munson in Francis Hopkinson Smith’s roman à clef about the Tile Club (therein the Stone Mugs) in The Fortunes of Oliver Horn (1902)—a name close to the word monsoon, another monumental force of nature.

“Art Study in New York,” New York Sun (December 16, 1888), 7. Elsewhere Chase is simply “the Master.”

See also “A German Critic on American Art,” The Art Amateur 11 (September 1884): 78: “The way in which she fixes her piercing look on you without herself betraying anything, puts you in mind of a sphinx.” Though referring to the sitter’s appearance in particular, this comment also suggests Chase as the author of such inscrutable looks. For the sphinx generally, see Elihu Vedder’s painting The Questioner of the Sphynx (1863; Museum of Fine Arts Boston) and Oscar Wilde’s book-length poem The Sphynx (1894). For Chase’s “cryptic” admonishments to his students, see Roof, The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase, 183.


Cf. Chase: “It usually takes two to paint a good picture—one to paint and the other to stand by with an ax to kill him before he spoils it.” Quoted in Gary Lawrence et al., Houses of the Hamptons, 1880–1930 (New York: Acanthus Press, 2007), 72. Chase is “so clever in ten different directions that he can never decide on one,” according to “Pictures by Wm. M. Chase,” New York Times (March 2, 1887), 4.

Referring to his boyhood in Indiana, a newspaper article observed how he used to go by “‘Merritt’ as they called him in those days.” See “Art and Artists,” The Globe and Commercial Advertiser, New York (December 24, 1906), 7.

See letters from his friend Robert Blum in Roof, The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase, 146–147. Additionally, Chase was skewered as “Pillow M. Case” in the Society of American Fakirs exhibition catalogue of 1895 and as “Willie Chaste” in its catalogue of 1898. See the catalogues in the Roland G. Pisano Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Box 4.

For example, his daughter Alice was known as Cosy. See Bryant, William Merritt Chase: A Genteel Bohemian, 107. For the death of his son, see “Died,” New-York Daily Tribune (July 6, 1891), 7. Chase was forgetful of names, according to Roof, The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase, 259.


89 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a “masher” is “a fashionable young man of the late Victorian or Edwardian era, esp. one fond of the company of women” and “a man who makes indecent sexual advances toward women.” For this phrase in reference to Chase, see James McNeill Whistler, The Gentle Art of Making Enemies (London: W. Heinemann, 1890), 185; and Sadakichi Hartmann, The Whistler Book (Boston: L. C. Page & Company, 1910), 191. For an example of a man labeled a “masher” for living a “double life,” see “He Lived a Double Life,” National Police Gazette 53 (December 29, 1888): 16.

90 For additional commentaries stressing the division between different personae, see: Roof, The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase, 305: “he felt a humility perhaps not realized or understood by those who knew only the mask and habit of the outer man.” Guy Pene Du Bois, “Robert Henri: The Man: An Evolution from Radicalism to Tolerance,” Arts and Decoration 14 (November 1920): 36: “An artist’s work sometimes stands between his public and himself. This was most unquestionably true of the late William M. Chase. …[I]t may be said, in unfriendly quarters, that the William M. Chase of the parlor attained greater prominence than the William M. Chase expressed in his pictures.” Nathan J. Timpano stresses the appeal of the “un-American,” foreign quality of Chase’s paintings in the 1870s and the artist’s status as a cosmopolitan European–American hybrid upon his return to the United States in 1878. The open-ended question of Chase’s dual Americanness and/or un-Americanness was another novel component to the persona that Chase performed. See his essay “Marketing the European–American: William Merritt Chase, Munich, and the Märchenkönig,” in American Artists in Munich: Artistic Migration and Cultural Exchange Processes, eds. Christian Fuhrmeister, Hubertus Kohle, and Veerle Thielemans (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2009), 179–192.

91 Chase seems to have altered the composition sometime after 1894, according to Ronald G. Pisano, William Merritt Chase: Landscapes in Oil, Vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 62.

For the convergence of young female and boat as sustaining weighty, adult matters, consider also the possible sexual innuendo from a letter Chase wrote to Alice while away on a trip: “The darlingest little boat here is named Alice. I have a row in her every day and think of you.” Quoted in Roof, The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase, 84. There is a considerable history of nautical double entendres that play upon the association of boating with sexual intercourse. Take, for example, the mixture of nautical and sexual terms in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night: “You mistake, knight. ‘Accost’ is front her, board her, woo her, assail her” (1.3.46–47). Here, “front” means to come alongside; “board” means to enter a ship by force, but also sexually; and “assail” puns on sail. Chase remarks on his knowledge of Shakespeare in “Painting,” The American Magazine of Art 8 (December 1916): 52. In 1867, Chase served for three months aboard the USS Portsmouth, based in Annapolis, Maryland, as part of the naval apprentice program. See Bryant, William Merritt Chase: A Genteel Bohemian, 10–11.

The travel in imaginary lands in Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (1726) centers around seafaring: a shipwreck, Gulliver’s theft of a fleet of Lilliput’s rivals, his rescue by ship, and so on. The disorder of hallucinations in which a person sees people and objects as tinier than they actually are is interchangeably referred to as Alice-in-Wonderland Syndrome and Lilliputian Syndrome. For Swift and Carroll as literary allies, see, for example, Phyllis Greenacre, Swift and Carroll: A Psychoanalytic Study of Two Lives (Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press, 1955).


“An Exhibition of Mr. Chase’s Works,” The Art Interchange 18 (March 12, 1887): 82.


“An Exhibition of Mr. Chase’s Works,” The Art Interchange 18 (March 12, 1887): 82.

For this tension in Chase’s work in the 1870s, see also “American Art: Annual Exhibition of the National Academy of Design,” Newark Daily Advertiser (April 18,
Chase’s *Keying Up* (1875; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts) is “almost repulsive […] and yet is morbidly fascinating.”

102 Katherine Metcalf Roof, *The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1917), 200–201, 199. For another reaction employing the same term, see Frances Lauderbach, “Notes from Talks by William M. Chase,” *The American Magazine of Art* 8 (September 1917): 437: “A certain group of painters in New York paint the gruesome. They go to the wretched part of the city and paint the worst people. They have the nickname the Depressionists.”


105 The question arises whether the unexplained event is “an illusion of the senses,… a product of the imagination” or “an integral part of reality—but then this reality is unknown to us.” Todorov puts it thus: “The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty.” Tsvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), 25.

106 “Liminal fantasy” is situated at “the threshold into the fantastic.” There is “leakage” between “the fantastic” and “our world,” but we do not “cross the portal,” so to speak, for “confrontation… reduces rather than intensifies the fantastic.” Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), xxiii–xxiv. See also Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 11: The uncanny “is, in its aesthetic dimension, a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming.”


For the early history of psychology, see Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: Basic


122 “Is Man Less a Man Because He is a Minister,” New York Evangelist 66 (January 17, 1895): 9.

123 Quoted in Eli Friedlander, Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 100. For the way terms such as “inner” and “interiority” came increasingly to refer to both individual mind and dwelling space in this period, see 100–111.


127 Hide and Seek, with its figures deprived of facial presence, coincided with various “strategies of defacement” in period literature, experiments that “the sought to bypass the face’s representation of an individual’s interior world.” These attempts to understand inner life constituted a “turn away from the face” and “a turn toward the interior” that were part of a broader shift and central to an emerging modern exploration of consciousness. See Sara Elizabeth Blackwood, “The Portrait’s Subject: Picturing Psychology in American Literature and Visual Culture, 1839–1900” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2009), 26.

128 See Roof, The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase, 279. The identities of the figures have been subject to conjecture. See Kail in The Eye of Duncan Phillips, 146. Bruce Weber, for example, supports Roof’s assertion in Bruce Weber and Kate Gillespie, Chase Inside and Out: The Aesthetic Interiors of William Merritt Chase (New York: Berry-Hill Galleries, Inc., 2005), 44; as does Donelson Hoopes, American Impressionists (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1972). Chase had previously completed the pastel Little Miss Miller (ca. 1885) and another oil painting of her (ca. 1886), both of which are now lost.
J. E. Cabot, “Some Considerations on the Notion of Space,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 12 (July 1878): 235–236: “If we mean Self-consciousness—the mind returning upon itself and its impressions, and qualifying these as true or false, real or unreal […]—we may say that Space is the creation of the mind.


In an analogous way, Roof described *Hide and Seek*: “In painting the atmosphere of a dark interior, the sense of light in the dark, Chase has been extraordinarily successful.” Of course this statement can be read in the obvious way, as being about lighting effects, but it can also be read in a more figurative way, that is, as something benign coexisting with something unknown. See Roof, *The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase*, 278.


William Fleming, *Vocabulary of Philosophy, Psychological, Ethical, Metaphysical* (New York: Scribner and Welford, 1890), 305. See also Frederic W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), 14: “The idea of a threshold of consciousness—of a level above which sensation or thought must rise before it can enter into our conscious life.”


Cikovsky, “Interiors and Interiority,” 43.

Ibid., 63.


It is less that Chase abandoned the earlier interest in fantasy than that its contents were continually rearranged and transformed. For is not in Chase’s refusal to fully engage with the realm of fantasy again the confirmation of his lasting attachment to that failed relationship? This gels with D. Scott Atkinson’s assertion that “instead of a linear development there were certain subjects and moods to which Chase returned time and again during his career.” See his “Shinnecock and the Shinnecock Landscapes,” in D. Scott Atkinson and Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., *William Merritt Chase: Summers at Shinnecock, 1891–1902* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1987), 28. See also James Thomas Flexner, *The World of Winslow Homer, 1836–1910* (New York: Time Life Books, 1966), 96: “Typically, when [Chase] took on a new style he did not discard the old but added it to a continuing repertoire.”
CHAPTER THREE
Edwin Romanzo Elmer: Ways of Knowing

In Edwin Romanzo Elmer’s Magic Glasses, likely from 1891, a magnifying glass balances atop the wide mouth of a vase or spoon holder (fig. 3.1). The power of magnification is not utilized, but instead its convex surface features distorted and inverted reflections of a window and landscape entirely outside the viewer’s line of sight. This austere composition belongs to a long and well established tradition of painting minutely rendered reflections on the surfaces of drinking vessels, metal objects, and crystal globes, such as in Vanitas with Violin and Glass Ball (ca. 1628) by Pieter Claesz (fig. 3.2).

Departing from this Dutch precedent, Elmer’s work isolates the polished lens and eschews casting the painter’s likeness on its face. Meticulous brush strokes also remove the artist’s hand, and the lack of any depicted hand to actually clutch or steady the grip of the instrument further establishes this appeal toward objectivity. Yet for all its deliberateness, as this chapter outlines, unseen but implied bodily presence is reasserted in the painting in more furtive ways.

In Magic Glasses, unemotional and mechanical traits are pushed to the point of disquietude. The picture is like a highly intensified vanitas, stealthily overturning expectations. Nothing else in American still life painting comes close to its odd symbiosis of the cold impersonality of technology with subtly affective allusions. This partly accounts for what has been called the “eerily obsessive” character of Elmer’s art and what some writers in the twentieth century have labeled as proto-magic realist or proto-surrealist. This chapter aims to account for the enigmatic undercurrent in Elmer’s
painting that such designations intimate—contending that it is a more thoughtful and culturally illuminating work than it may initially appear.

*Magic Glasses* upsets strict distinctions between hard/lifeless and supple/vital forms, between scientific calculation and sympathetic magic. It is one of a small number of extant oil paintings by Elmer, a principally self-taught artist who worked in and around Ashfield, Massachusetts, most of his life. He was also, particularly during the 1880s, a tinkerer and inventor. These different aspects of Elmer’s elusive career productively come together in this painting, which indexes scientific puzzles and existential questions. As a meditation on death and visual perception, it is an effort to find the right tone between forensic detachment and weepy devotion. The painting probes rather than resolves this tension. For Elmer seems to have found the usual paradigm unsuitable to such an exploration, and he was, as a result, prompted to undertake a more experimental response to the problem of the material and metaphorical borderline between flesh and objects. *Magic Glasses* is an attempt to think about, in a fresh manner, commemoration of the deceased. More specifically, it speaks to how memory could reside in or arise from human interaction with material things. The painting was thus in dialogue with certain intellectual currents of the period that investigated links between visual perception and associative memory. Ultimately, it dramatizes the way mere matter could evoke memory and emotion at the end of the nineteenth century.
Puzzles

The painting’s ambivalent relationship to a culture of scientific naturalism is underwritten by an affiliation with what is best conceptualized as a puzzle. The magnifying glass, especially, was historically most closely connected with uncovering the microscopic intricacies of nature as revealed through scientific pursuits—the field of botany and procedures of classification, for example. Though in the latter part of the nineteenth century its use was becoming widespread in other disciplines. As epitomized by his work as an inventor in the 1880s, Magic Glasses’s engagement with unlocking this ostensibly rational sphere can partially be located in Elmer’s knowledge of science and mathematics.

Elmer contrived and constructed innovative devices. He was, together with his brother Samuel, in the business of manufacturing washing machines and clothes wringers in 1879. This venture, however, seems to have quickly been supplanted by Elmer developing original inventions. Elmer’s Double-Acting Churn, a contraption he designed with his cousin, appeared in 1880. Patented as “Gearing for Churn Powers,” they produced it in five different sizes, the largest of which had a capacity of twelve gallons (fig. 3.3). Elmer also invented and patented a “Shingle or Roof Bracket,” in 1885, which adjusted to the pitch of any roof and served as a support for the board on which the roofer stood. His artistic skills would undoubtedly have aided in the execution of the patent drawings, which helped validate an idea, establish intellectual ownership, and transform it into a commercially viable product. Elmer evidently invented, but did not patent, a larger machine, with more moving parts, for the production of whipsnaps—the silk ends
of horse whips—individually in 1886, and he was in the whipsnap business with his brother into 1887, possibly after. Maybe unsatisfied with technical objects alone, Elmer turned more fully to the possibilities of painting and perception.

Around 1890 painting became a greater focal point in his life, and he apparently did not make any additional inventions. Though his newfound commitment to artistic endeavors marked a shift away from inventing, *Magic Glasses* echoes some of the inventive, scientific quality that undergirded his patents. It is tempting, for instance, to see formal similarities between the churn powers diagram and the painting, between the construction of intricate mechanical parts—its circular gears turning against each other—and the carefully cradled glass aperture in the painting. As Betsy Jones remarked in her exhibition catalogue on the artist, “*Magic Glasses* intrigues us in the way that a complex piece of machinery does.” Like Elmer’s inventions, *Magic Glasses* suggests ingenuity rooted in the fine coordination and calibration of interconnected components. They seem almost of a piece.

The painting calls into question how something is put together insomuch that it resonates with another domain of the magnifying glass in these years. Arthur Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), the first work of fiction to feature the magnifying glass as an investigative tool, importantly aligned the device with the puzzle of detective work. *A Study in Scarlet*, with its American edition published in 1890, was the first of Conan Doyle’s many stories that refined and popularized the notion of investigating criminal acts under the banner of solving puzzles, frequently with the aid of the magnifying glass. The title signals how this confluence of puzzle and magnifying glass
was entangled in visual territory, since it calls upon a two-dimensional artistic “study,” a preparatory drawing, sketch, or painting. In the story, Sherlock Holmes describes the case as his “study in scarlet,” and he uses the magnifying glass to survey the murder scene. An illustration from the story shows him scrutinizing the German word for revenge written in blood, for example (fig. 3.4). The image of the intrepid detective scouring a room for clues with a magnifying glass has become a standard trope of the whodunit. Not only is the enterprise in which the characters are engaged understood as a puzzle, but the stories themselves are also exercises in puzzle solving for the reader. The supreme rationalist Holmes, with his “science of deduction,” parses the clues of a baffling misdeed to cleverly arrive at a resolution of such puzzles.

*Magic Glasses* is informed by a similar circulation of ideas that connect the magnifying glass and the puzzle with sleuthing. That is to say, this meaning of the puzzle, as a kind of challenge to unravel a mystery, attaches to the painting. Part of its inscrutability comes about because it upsets the normal usage of the magnifying glass, which is evident in the illustration from the story. Holmes’s eye lines up with its lens, his hand tightly clasps its hilt, and Watson’s fingers gesture to its scrutinized object in close proximity. The painting re-appropriates the magnifying glass toward unexpected ends, atomizing a scene behind the beholder and also dismantling the Holmesian idea of what a mystery entails. Making sense of this turnabout, this inbuilt and demanding exercise seems part of the puzzle that it provokes.

Elmer had a penchant for solving and devising knotty puzzles, such as those appearing in various newspapers. His niece, for example, observed how he honed his
analytical skills by “doing advanced and difficult problems” in *The Boston Post*. “He was often the only one sending in the correct answer,” she recalled.\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, in *The Boston Globe*’s recurring column “Puzzle Problems,” Elmer regularly both submitted accurate explanations to its logic puzzles and mathematical problems, and he also posed his own questions for readers to ponder. In one issue of the newspaper, for example, Elmer challenges, maybe gently taunts, another frequent respondent to the column, who was “so well pleased with hard nuts why do[es]n’t he crack the [puzzle] I published.” Elmer then lays out his problem about ascertaining the distance from the earth to the moon from a particular vantage point: “Supposing a man to be placed alone on a small island with every data at his command such as period of the moon, diameter of earth, etc, with the single exception of the distance to the moon. How would he measure the distance?” Elmer writes, “The solution to this problem is beautiful, all the more so because I have never seen it in any scientific treatise. If no one can solve this I will be pleased to send [the] solution if desired.”\textsuperscript{16} This statement alerts us to Elmer’s predilection for obscure and complicated puzzles and that he kept apprised of current scientific literature.

*Magic Glasses* paralleled Elmer’s attention to these written thought experiments, and a puzzle quality inflects the picture.\textsuperscript{17} The geometry of spatial relationships and of measuring distances between orbs in the aforementioned example seems apposite to it. Moreover, visual puzzles, published in newspapers including *The Boston Globe*, for instance, were becoming increasingly pervasive in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Various sorts of embedded image puzzles, optical illusion puzzles, and rebus puzzles were also used on advertising cards for a wide variety of products.\textsuperscript{18} Compare an
image from a series called American Puzzle Cards of the previous decade to *Magic Glasses* (fig. 3.5). In this double image puzzle, the stem of the glass chalice serves as the outline for the profile of two upside-down human faces. The action of turning the card around to fully discern the faces, which emerge from the dashes and flecks of the table surface, is similar to the maneuvering that might take place for the viewer to fully recognize the fact that the right side of the reflected image in the magnifying glass in *Magic Glasses* is of the same scene as the left side, only upside down. The gestalt psychologist Edgar Rubin later adapted this card, around 1915, for his hidden faces figure–ground illusion that became known as Rubin’s vase. Rubin used the two-shape scenarios of the card to show how the human eye can only maintain one shape at a given moment. In the 1880s and 1890s, the study of visual perception relied on similar techniques in related discussions of retinal focus as well as in other emerging research on the physiological and psychological processes involved in seeing. Elmer’s painting subtly stages its own kind of visual puzzle: it is an investigation of perception that, like the card, hinges upon relationships between physical objects and human presences, even nodding towards the activation of human presence vis-à-vis objects themselves.¹⁹

**Depicting the Dead**

If the idea of the puzzle suffuses its formal character and conceptual underpinnings, *Magic Glasses* is also concerned with questions of human presence, specifically mortality and transience.²⁰ It reckons with presence and absence, at once calling upon and subverting customary still life iconography. In Claesz’s seventeenth-century *vanitas*, for
instance, references to human impermanence and the inevitability of death include the skull, timepiece, tipped glass, and cracked walnut (see fig. 3.2). In a different way, the humble, isolated objects of Francisco de Zurbarán’s *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges, and a Rose* (1633; Norton Simon Museum) are rendered with affecting simplicity and likewise take on symbolic associations. The hushed stillness and unadorned coldness of *Magic Glasses* to some degree evokes these types of historical precedents, in which objects on stone ledges and against dark backdrops transmit bodily and metaphysical connotations. In light of Elmer’s interest in invention and in difficult puzzles, *Magic Glasses* works to update still life conventions that prompted viewers to meditate on mortality. In these years, as will become clear, Elmer grappled with concerns that linked death with art, specifically that of his own making.

Pictorial memorials to the dead dominated his artistic output during the 1890s. Elmer created numerous posthumous portraits of recently deceased family members for regional patrons in the form of enlarged oval-format photographs touched with crayon and airbrushed with paint. In one example, the white crayon highlights provide a halo-like effect around the figure’s head, and the gradation at the lower edge of the image curiously suggests her physically vanishing status, almost enacting her passage from the material world (fig. 3.6). The first recorded public exhibition of Elmer’s work was a similar portrait of a dead postmaster, which hung at the local post office in May 1890. Commissions for these multi-media works of commemoration seem to have been the main means by which Elmer earned income from his art in subsequent years. Elmer’s
effigies became the models around which representations of the departed were
promulgated in his small-town community.

Around 1890, death was omnipresent and had personal reverberations in Elmer’s
life and art in other ways. *The Mourning Picture*, now Elmer’s most well-known work,
was a response to his young daughter Effie unexpectedly succumbing to pericarditis in
January 1890 (fig. 3.7).23 The fatal inflammation of a membrane enclosing her heart
induced the breaking of her parents’ hearts. In the painting, the artist and his wife Mary
assemble before their clapboard residence on a hill overlooking western Massachusetts.
Like a cutout companion in the yard where she used to play, the figure of Effie is both
disproportionally large and detached from her parents—the transitional slope of the lawn
between them somehow dissonant. She seems to exist in a world parallel to, but apart
from, that of her family. It is as if the bisected canvas delicately joins otherworldly and
earthly spaces, even as the figures remain separate. This apprehensive integration of
disparate realms is accentuated by the central tree between them, by the indoor furniture
on which the adults incongruously sit, and by the incorporation of at least two light
sources, one originating directly in front of Effie that contrasts the sunlit area and the
shadowy one behind her.24

*The Mourning Picture* is a quasi-amalgam of sentimental depictions of dead
children that appeared throughout the nineteenth century and more contemporaneous
photographic views of rural homeowners flaunting their economic and social status.25
Elmer’s handling of the co-existence of the living and the dead, however, is particularly
striking. There is a palpably “haunting” quality about the dead girl that earlier precedents
generally lack. This wavering between describing the dead and the living seems to take a meta-critical turn with the prominence of the doll, as if to acknowledge the fraught, paradoxical conditions of a living representation of a dead girl and to suggest her absence through an anthropomorphic substitute. The objects in the right foreground—the stroller at angle of incidence with his chair, the wavy ribbons of the hat that summon her gaze—both link them to and underscore the figures’ remoteness from Effie.

Whereas *The Mourning Picture* seems to function as the outward mode of address for Elmer’s familial mourning—the couple is located outside their house, for example, and the painting was exhibited publicly in 1890—*Magic Glasses* is its private and inwardly structured complement. In this regard, *Magic Glasses* can be read as the less effusive sequel to *The Mourning Picture*. It is as if *Magic Glasses* condenses and elaborates what is found in the two leftmost windows behind Elmer holding his Boston newspaper: the still life of the lower story and the mirrored surface of the upper story. This reversal is also expressed in the paintings’ respective genres: if *The Mourning Picture* is essentially a landscape punctuated by still life elements, *Magic Glasses* is a still life punctuated by a landscape. It is as if *Magic Glasses* issues instead from the world behind that glass—the world inside that dark house—the world of private grief. The painting looks out from it and seems to try to capture something inmost, opaque, and radically invisible.

How can one perceive the experience of another’s grief beyond obvious outward signs? Such a question about the gap between sufferer and witness underlies *Magic Glasses*, I would argue, as much as *The Mourning Picture*. Rather than approaching death
in a maudlin or codified way, *Magic Glasses* is an attempt to memorialize the dead without using them. As if the death of his only child—the only child he and his wife Mary would ever have—was not traumatic enough, the death of his father sorrowfully bookended 1890. That Elmer exhibited *The Mourning Picture* for the first time in November, the same month his father died, serves to multiple the grief weighing upon his activity as a painter. While questions of remembrance were most critical to Elmer’s art in these years, death consistently shadowed Elmer from an early age. For example, his birth in 1850 preceded the deaths of five siblings, including a brother whose first name he shared. It was almost as though he stepped into the place of that dead Edwin upon arriving in the world.\(^\text{27}\) Less immediate perhaps but also looming was the extreme manner in which death colored his entire ancestral legacy, which had deep New England roots. A chronicle of the town, written in 1888, suggests how his family’s past remained relevant to the present: “The Elmers were one of the early families in the settlement of Ashfield.”\(^\text{28}\) Though omitted from this particular narrative, their history was marked by a series of troubling and violent events.

High child mortality rates and premature deaths aside, madness, suicide, and murder ran in Elmer’s family. Gad Elmer, an ancestor who fought in the American Revolution, committed suicide in Ashfield in 1819, for instance. In 1829, Elmer’s uncle Alfred slit the throat of a two-year-old neighbor with a razor and severely injured the infant’s grandfather with an axe. This “melancholy and distressing murder” was widely reported, perhaps due to the “horrid” and “shocking” nature of the crime. The *Greenfield Gazette* wrote that Alfred Elmer “sometimes had thoughts of committing suicide” and
“fancied himself commissioned from Heaven to kill 3 persons, and derived his warrant, as he says, from the 11th chapter of Revelation.”

He died in “the insane asylum at Northampton” in 1868. A fervent religiosity also contributed to the suicide of the artist’s brother Darwin in 1859. Reportedly “a believer in the Second Advent doctrine” that “the end of the world was near,” he hung himself after “brooding over the awful day.” In one letter in his possession, “his mother reproves him for losing interest in ‘the religion of the family,’” and another contains “an allusion to the ‘family religion.’”

Their mother Susan Elmer, who died in 1878, was a follower of William Miller, a preacher from nearby Pittsfield, Massachusetts, who predicted that the second coming of Christ would occur in 1843—with subsequent revisions to the date—based on scriptural typology. Millerism, a controversial Christian sect formed out the Second Great Awakening and one of various strands of antebellum millennialism, spawned splinter groups in the wake of the non-ending of the world (known as the Great Disappointment), including Adventists. Miller’s theological prediction amounted to, as the historian of American religions Gary Laderman describes, “both an orgy of death and the end of death.”

Consequently, death based in apocalyptic expectation was a fixture of Elmer’s upbringing and wide network of relations, though there is little indication that he shared these religious beliefs in adulthood. Rather, as his niece remembered, Elmer was not affiliated with any church, but for funerals he “called the Unitarian minister to preside.”

In addition to those of his daughter and father, there were other deaths to oversee in these years. In 1882, Elmer’s sister-in-law Alma, who lived with his family, died at the age of
In 1885, the artist’s uncle Wilson hung himself in his barn in a “fit of despondency.” Although becoming increasingly commercialized in this period, the funerals Elmer administered were generally simple affairs: the body would be prepared by the family; the ceremony would take place in the home; and it was not uncommon for friends of the deceased to dig the grave and to fill the hole once the body had been interred. In 1902, the funeral for his closest brother Samuel was held at Edwin’s home, for example, and he served as the executor of Samuel’s estate. Battling illness in 1923, Elmer, whose “anxiety deepened with the days,” shot himself in the same month that his daughter had died.

Returning to Elmer’s art making circa 1891 amid the context of his suicide and broader familial heritage, mourning the dead assumes more acute ramifications. Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) dominates analyses of grief. His seminal essay distinguishes between the two mutually exclusive states, the former normal and the latter pathological. For Freud, mourning, “the reaction to the loss of a loved person,” involves great psychic labor, the tremendous concentration of mental energy. The “work of mourning” is a kind of hyper-remembering of all “the memories and expectations” bound up with the lost person. Even though “the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged,” mourning is supposedly finite. In melancholy, Freud argues, a certain internalization of the lost object that is part of normal mourning goes awry, and—in contrast to the divestment, the getting over, the being done of mourning—it has no end. “The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound,” according to Freud. In an effort to revise Freud’s sharp distinction, the literary scholar Anne Cheung, among
others, has proposed “an alterative formulation” in order to “negotiate between mourning and melancholia in a more complicated, even continuous way.”

40 Freud, in his later work, also considered the possibility that mourning was irreparable—the rupture occasioned by the death of a loved one as beyond any resolution.

41 The frequency of distressing occurrences in Elmer’s life likely aroused grief as an ongoing burden. An American medical volume from 1886 wrote about this sense of bereavement as interminable sorrow: “Few, if any, of the passions are more severe or more injurious than grief,” which “consumes slowly, and undermines the constitution, and is much more permanent in its effects than most any of the passions; and, where it is very deeply seated, sometimes proves fatal.” Among those activities that will help “assuage grief,” according to the tract, is “the study of any art or science.”

42 Elmer’s early family history also suggests what has been called “inherited mourning,” whereby the artist assumed long-past suffering, becoming its heir. 43 Suffice it to say, the devastation of loss and the problem of representing grief, itself a kind of death or attenuated form of suicide, factored prominently in Elmer’s life and necessarily impacted his art in the early 1890s.

*Magic Glasses* explores how the labor of mourning may extend into objects in the material world that serve almost as embodied memory. In the wake of material reminders of the deceased prompting a powerful phenomenological pull, *Magic Glasses* obliquely stages the complicated process by which an emotional investment in objects might come about. Traces of the dead, for example, permeated Elmer’s eerily alive portraits for his niece, who remembered, “how frightening it was to sleep in a room with the walls lined
with the ‘dear departed ancestors.’” Mary Elmer, moreover, had a particularly problematic relationship with the affect-drenched belongings of her beloved daughter. The waves of anguish she felt were all the more acute in her encounters with the objects of Effie. His niece recounted: “Her grief was so terrible” that she “became neurotic.” She implies that because of the emotionally charged character of the objects, Elmer “gave away her [Effie’s] pet lamb, kittens, and the hen ‘Dody’” and “stored Effie’s clothing, books, and playthings.” It was like Effie’s ghost haunted their house, for Mary also had them vacate it, a building that Elmer had constructed himself. The fate of personal effects in this account—and of clinging to the lost person through present things—is not far from the “melancholy associated with physical objects” that the literary scholar Peter Schwenger discusses, a melancholy that “is generated by the act of perception.” As Schwenger comments, “This perception, always falling short of full possession [of the object], gives rise to a melancholy that is felt by the subject and is ultimately for the subject.” This type of melancholy permeated Elmer’s later years and was exacerbated by the objects of departed loved ones that surrounded him. In 1891, Magic Glasses reinterprets the *memento mori* still life tradition to communicate about the potentiality of the memento in its more ordinary sense, as an object kept as a reminder of a person—its Latin etymology literally meaning the imperative, “remember!”

As William James wrote about in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), these circumstances around the painting also evoke how life can seem to be immediately present in things. “Who does not ‘realize,’” asks James in the chapter “The Perception of Reality,” “more the fact of a dead or distant friend’s existence, at the moment when a
portrait, letter, garment, or other material reminder of him is found? The whole notion of him then grows pungent and speaks to us and shakes us, in a manner unknown at other times. “Indicates that he is not using the term in the ordinary, psychological sense, but in a stranger, more occult, more physiological sense.” His appeal to the faculties of smell, hearing, and touch in the form bodily trembling, in addition to sight, strengthens this usage. James discusses how, for a child especially, the resemblance of the material object to “what it is held to stand for” is of little consequence. Even with adult “fetishes” a great deal of importance instead resides in “the mere materiality of the reminder,” to which the inward attachment can “gain in corporeity and life.” In a later work, James invokes the image of a dead child to similarly muse on his “sense of the deeply stirring mystery, preciousness, and promise of all embodied and ephemeral forms of life.” He remarks that “to anyone who has ever looked on the face of a dead child or parent the mere fact that matter could have taken for a time that precious form ought to make matter sacred ever after. It makes no difference what the principle of life may be, material or immaterial, matter at any rate co-operates, lends itself to all life’s purposes. That beloved incarnation was among matter’s possibilities.” By seizing on ordinary objects and infusing them with new significance, Magic Glasses probes a kind of material incarnation—making visual the perceived slippage between an active presence that resides in a material object and one that more passively serves as a reminder of an absent person.
Perception and Memory

*Magic Glasses* engages with the complex process whereby material objects assumed new associations in lieu of the body of the deceased. As a means to investigate further the ways in which objects could stimulate emotional attachment and sustain the memory of the dead, it is useful to return to the painting’s relationship to visual perception. This picture stresses the position and opposition from which viewing is made possible as much as what is seen. That is to say, it emphasizes the operation of seeing.

The magnifying glass is not simply displayed as an isolated object but is repurposed from its usual application as amplification. As a detail of the painting helps illuminate, its angled position and meticulous delineation makes it resemble the human eye (fig. 3.8). With its black pupil center, colored iris layers, and near-white surround, the almond-shaped reflection that is the focal point of the composition seems to gaze out like an eye. Beyond this resemblance, Elmer’s careful rendering of the reflections on the central device also approximates the interior structure of the eye. The protuberant tilt of the magnifying glass summarizes the interior compartments of the eye and the optic nerve as illustrated in, for example, a cross-sectional drawing from *How We See* (1882) by the ophthalmologist Swan M. Burnett (fig. 3.9). Another diagram from the same publication demonstrates how the virtual image of the world is initially inverted on the retina in the act of seeing, which is suggested by the two right-side-up and upside-down halves that the painting joins at its center (fig. 3.10).53 As “the time-honored conundrums” of vision, James coupled “why we see upright with an inverted retinal
picture, and why we do not see double.” The lenticular construction in *Magic Glasses* accentuates the eye-like properties of this meeting of doubled and inverted images.

The human eye and the magnifying glass were considered conceptual and descriptive allies. As one period medical source explained, “Behind the iris is a lens, as opticians call it, or a magnifying glass.” That a window in duplicate is prominently featured in the roundel in the painting also substantiates its connection to the eye. Terms such as “eye-windows” were employed to refer to the area around the eyes as well as to eyes themselves. Another publication from the 1880s, for example, wrote of “the cornea or transparent membrane forming the glass of our eye-window.” Similarly, the eyelids were “compared to a pair of outside shutters for this window, which are put up when we go to sleep, and taken down when we awake.” The now well-worn trope of the eye as a window to the soul was prevalent during the era, too. “[A]ll must at times have felt as if the eye of another was not his, but he; as if it had not merely a life, but also a personality of its own,” remarked one doctor. “What a strange interest thus attaches to that little darkened chamber of the eye! Into it the sun and stars, the earth and the ocean, the glory and the terror of the universe, enter upon the wings of light, and demand audience of the soul.” As this statement broaches, eye contact can be such a peculiar and precious thing. Elmer’s painting seems attuned to these metaphors and this type of rare power—even cosmic intensity—that was bestowed upon or contained within the eye.

The eye-like portal works to make human presence felt in Elmer’s still life. This conjunction of glass object and human eyeball was fundamental to the use of glass eyes as substitutes for missing ones—the replacement of the original “vitreous body” with “a
“glass globe,” as one article put it. The painting is in alignment with the eye as a fragile membrane separating and connecting the inner and outer worlds. Here too it is situated as a mediator between exterior and interior. Eyes and glass lenses are tokens of one another in a broader sense, as if the orb might open onto a vast inner universe. This magnifying glass as eye condition approaches, to borrow a phrase from Roland Barthes, “a metaphoric composition.” Elmer’s depiction seems to draw on “the matrix of a new trajectory of objects which are in a sense the different ‘stations’ of ocular metaphor.” In its allusive rotundity, “objects apparently quite remote from the eye are suddenly caught up in the metaphoric chain.” Glass, so susceptible to breakage, is an apt emblem for bodily frailty and vulnerability. A mood encapsulated by such phrases as a glassy stare or an icy look are apropos to the painting as well—the poet Walt Whitman, for example, scans “the glassy eye of the dying” in Specimen Days (1882).

Elmer may have been inclined to confront sight and bodily death in this manner since his father, Erastus Elmer, had worked as a peddler of eyeglasses. Magic Glasses takes on an added dimension because Erastus’s foray as a dealer in equipment used to aid vision was precipitated by a calamitous farming accident that resulted in the loss of his left eye. The late 1870s portrait of Erastus, who was labeled “insane” in the official census of 1870, offers a candid confrontation with the mutilated, blind left side of his face (fig. 3.11). In this stark portrayal, he rests his left arm on a side table, and the Vs of the jacket lapels and waistcoat, framing his white shirt, lead up to his open eye—doing so not unlike the sloping sides and curved spouts of the vessel that holds the lens in Magic Glasses. These two paintings are in conversation. Particularly unflinching is how his
single eye and the disk are both positioned slightly left of center and approximately two-thirds up their respective canvases. His skin and eye color are reiterated in the tones of the spheroid landscape, and the loops of his necklace piece are echoed in the crossing of the etched leaves on either side of the translucent surface. That the suspended device blends binocular and monocular visual conceits—the latter mode of vision lacks the same capacity for perceiving depth via retinal disparity—to enfold a distant space is all the more reminiscent of Erastus’s wounded body and limited sight. In addition to this combination of his father’s vocation as a salesman of spectacles and partial sightlessness, recall also that Erastus’s death roughly coincided with the date of the painting’s creation.

This inanimate-made-animate correlation suggests how Magic Glasses was imbued with a lingering corporeality. Even more so than referencing a specific person, however, it seems to advance this relationship in an effort to capture the fleeting and the delicate as an uncanny emanation or residual memory. The complex relation of perception to memory was being theorized about at the end of nineteenth century in particular. “The science of vision was increasingly understood to involve human physiology and psychology,” as the historian Daniel Pick has written, rather than only “questions about the mechanics of light and optical transmission.” Indeed, these decades witnessed broad multidisciplinary interest in how and what we see, as well as rapidly proliferating medical technologies—the x-ray in 1895, for example—and advances in microscopy made the unseen available to human vision, the invisible knowable. The myriad ways in which visual perception encompassed more than sensational stimuli were also being uncovered and studied. The German philosopher
Friedrich Lange, for example, explored the role of understanding in deciphering the sensations of the eye. The retina receives an impression that is different from the image that comes to conscious perception; therefore, seeing is something more than just being passively receptive to light. Visual perception is bound up with and activates a host of mental processes, including emotion and memory.⁷⁰

William James’s research into perception and memory are especially relevant to *Magic Glasses*. In the chapter “The Perception of ‘Things’” from *The Principles of Psychology*, James writes that the stream of sensory input notably entails these features of the mind in sorting and selecting from experience: “the moment we get beyond the first crude sensation all our consciousness is a matter of suggestion, and the various suggestions shade gradually into each other, being one and all products of the same psychological machinery of association.”⁷¹ In the process of perception, at issue is, as James puts it, “the paths of association irradiating from the sense-impression,” and association is, for James, the entire “stock of ideas,” such as character, memory, and experience.⁷² James describes how the sound of words and the look of images can assume their purely sensational or “unnatural aspect,” discriminated to some extent from “understanding.” In his example of “an isolated printed word” repeated over and over, “[i]t stares at him from the paper like a glass eye, with no speculation in it.” The “associative processes” involved in perception are likewise undercut or diminished “when we turn a painting bottom upward.” Not only does James’s overarching focus—linking perception and memory—resonate with Elmer’s depiction but so too do the
particular examples he employs to illustrate the difference between sensation and perception: the simile of the “glass eye” and the reversal of a painted image.\textsuperscript{73}

Similarly cued to paths of association in the form of the semi-present memory of Erastus, \textit{Magic Glasses} seems in dialogue with contemporaneous explorations of visual perception by physiologists and psychologists such as James. Like an intimate talisman, the painting calls upon a union of emotion and ocular imagery that was central to painted eye miniatures of an earlier era. In an anonymous miniature from around 1800, for example, the eye looks calmly out and reveals little about the face from which it has been detached (fig. 3.12). This isolated appreciation of a single eye served in the remembrance of a loved one, and such objects stemmed from a miniature tradition of rendering part of the body as a substitute for the whole.\textsuperscript{74} The phenomenon of the miniature was in league with the magnifying glass: both open onto issues of scale and close contemplation, and the tool was used in the painstaking painting process.\textsuperscript{75} Moreover, as the art historian Hanneke Grootenboer elucidates, “[t]he beholder’s attention functions […] like a magnifying glass through which the miniature’s embedded ‘life’ is enlarged while the surrounding exterior world is canceled out.” In this imaginative expansion of the visual field, the eye “miniature is capable of turning the space around it into a universe, albeit an intensely private one.”\textsuperscript{76} For Susan Stewart, miniature objects generally present “a secret life” and share in “the daydream of the microscope: the daydream of life inside life, of significance infinitely within significance.”\textsuperscript{77} This comparison to the eye miniature raises additional implications for \textit{Magic Glasses} as an intimate material reminder and suggests how it is imparted with the effect of being seen by the imagined gaze of the loved one.\textsuperscript{78}
For the eye portrait functioned as a channel through which the gaze of the loved one could be imagined as resting upon the beholder.\textsuperscript{79} Like an eye miniature, the oculus in \textit{Magic Glasses} exercises a kind of vision as well. This notion of a physical object as psychologized or embedded with mentalistic attributes dovetails with James’s distinctive brand of panpsychism—essentially the claim that, at bottom, “things and thoughts” are composed of the same ontological stuff—which, at times, seems to impute an inner consciousness to every element in the material world.\textsuperscript{80}

The white ivory on which the miniature was painted reinforced its bonds to innocence and spirituality, and in its adaptive way the marble tabletop in \textit{Magic Glasses} offers a natural equivalent as well as incorporates an affective dimension of bereavement.\textsuperscript{81} The marbles of western New England were known to, as one source boasted in 1885, “surpass those of any other region in the United States.”\textsuperscript{82} In all likelihood the marble in the painting was quite local, and it may have been sourced from the Sutherland Falls quarry in Vermont—some 100 miles due north of Ashfield—that produced a so-called “mourning vein” variety of marble. The irregular pattern of “deep blue” and “nearly black” zigzags running through its whitish ground has the appearance of these “mourning marbles.”\textsuperscript{83} As an analogous displacement, the fern motif etched in the glass recalls the Massachusetts-centric funereal practice of making skeletonized leaves, sometimes called “phantom leaves” or “phantom bouquets” (fig. 3.13).\textsuperscript{84} This wreath-like assemblage around a photograph of Lincoln was one of many quasi-still life arrangements created for a Boston-based photographer.\textsuperscript{85} By soaking fresh leaves, rubbing them to reveal the underlying “skeleton,” and then bleaching them to the
appearance of brittle bones, this practice was strangely appropriate to the context of memorial rites.

The painting’s connection to the social rituals and material culture of mourning is recast in another way in the painting. Reflected in the lens is an autumnal landscape with a leafless tree in the foreground. Its skeletal branches are silhouetted against the white clouds so as to read like the veins in an eye when bloodshot—vessels radiating away from the iris in the white sclera. Beneath the central tree are stacks of wood. The thoroughly New England character of such a woodpile was articulated by Henry David Thoreau in *Walden* (1854), observing how wood is “precious” and “has a value more permanent and universal than that of gold.” He writes of its importance: “After all our discoveries and inventions no man will go by a pile of wood [...]. Every man looks at his wood-pile with a kind of affection. I love to have mine before my window.”

Personal attachment and forfeiture combine in the image of the woodpile in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *A Blithedale Romance* (1852). An abandoned woodpile evokes feelings of loss in Miles Coverdale, the poet who narrates the story:

In my haste, I stumbled over a heap of logs and sticks that had been cut for firewood, a great while ago, by some former possessor of the soil, and piled up square, in order to be carted or sledded away to the farm-house. But, being forgotten, they had lain there, perhaps fifty years, and possibly much longer; until, by the accumulation of moss, and the leaves falling over them and decaying there, from autumn to autumn, a green mound was formed, in which the softened outline of the wood-pile was still perceptible. In a fitful mood that then swayed my mind, I found something strangely affecting in this simple circumstance. I imagined the long-dead woodman, and his long-dead wife and children, coming out their chill graves, and essaying to make the figure with this heap of mossy fuel!

This passage is the most extended of Hawthorne’s uses of “decaying wood” as a symbol of death. Miles’s brooding over the woodpile conjures the woodman’s ghostly family,
who are all but a memory, now part of the earth, serving as a “chill[y]” synecdoche of all human endeavors. Mortal remains and landscape collapse in the image of the “simple” woodpile, a marker of their “graves.” Elmer’s strewn, disused woodpile—both, in a sense, dear and safeguarded “before [the] window” and a New England ruin, like Hawthorne’s—similarly reminds that nature’s cycles are indifferent to man’s doings, that death awaits. The contrast Thoreau makes between “discoveries and inventions” and the woodpile also underscores the related coupling in Magic Glasses—its peculiar still-life alliance between inventive puzzle and existential finitude.

Rooted in the same meditative complexion as these local Massachusetts writers, Magic Glasses, at once modest and monumental, subtly poses and invites the unraveling of difficult and affecting questions of bodily materiality and associative memory in paint. Like his New England literary forbearers, Elmer shared an underlying interest in re-imagining the cultural conventions regarding loss and mourning. Informed by calamity, Magic Glasses seems to ponder similar questions in an age of accelerated scientific discovery and the erosion of religious certainty. Recalibrating still life traditions to contemplate spiritual and scientific inadequacies anew through the mechanics of vision and material embodiment, the painting distinctively puzzles how both spiritual and scientific ways of knowing can reduce and amplify the world.
See, for example, Ingvar Bergstrom, *Dutch Still-Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century* (1947), trans. Christina Hedstrom and Gerald Taylor (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), 40-41: specifically links “progress in the natural sciences” and the accompanying invention of devices such as the microscope and magnifying glass to the “scientific naturalism” of Netherlandish still-life painting. For other related comparisons, see Betsy B. Jones, *Edwin Romanzo Elmer, 1850–1923* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Smith College Museum of Art, 1983), 72–73.


Already a fixture in the process of miniature painting, for example, the magnifying glass found a rising role in the connoisseur’s scrutiny of works of art with its aspirations toward a science of attribution. See Carlo Ginzburg and Anna Davin, “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,” *History Workshop* 9 (Spring 1980): 5–36.


See Jones, *Edwin Romanzo Elmer*, 20–21, on Edwin and Samuel Elmer’s whipsnap business. Reportedly among Elmer’s inventions was also a small, walking mechanical
figure of Benjamin Butler (1818–1893), a politician who represented Massachusetts in the U.S. House of Representatives and later served as governor of the state. See “Ashfield Artist’s County Scenes, Portraits Shown in Shelburne Falls Store,” Greenfield Recorder-Gazette (November 12, 1946), 6.

9 Elmer began to sign his pictures in this period, and he exhibits for the first time publicly in May 1890 (a portrait of the Shelburne Falls postmaster, in the post office). See Jones, 21, 58.

10 Jones, Edwin Romanzo Elmer, 77.


See also, for instance, the advertisement for the Mystic Picture Puzzle Company of West Medford, Massachusetts, in *Masters in Art* 9 (August 1908): 339.

The American psychologist Joseph Jastrow, noted for his work on optical illusions such as the well-known rabbit–duck image, commented in 1888: “After viewing an object through a magnifying-glass, we detect details with the naked eye which escaped our vision before.” See Joseph Jastrow, “The Psychology of Deception,” *The Popular Science Monthly* 34 (December 1, 1888): 150.


22 See Jones, Edwin Romanzo Elmer, 21.

23 Although Effie’s death is repeatedly given as January 3, 1890 in the literature on the artist, there is evidence to suggest it may have been January 3, 1889.

24 Phoebe Lloyd, “Death and American Painting: Charles Willson Peale to Albert Pinkham Ryder” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1980), 249: The Mourning Picture is an attempt, as Lloyd sees it, “to mitigate death’s finality.”

25 For an example of the former, see Charles Willson Peale’s Rachel Weeping (1772–76; Philadelphia Museum of Art). For the later, see Unidentified family, Richfield, Pennsylvania, ca. 1890s, albumen print on cardboard mount, in Jay Ruby, Secure the Shadow: Photography and Death in America (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 40–41.

26 See, for example, Erika Langmuir, Imagining Childhood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 82.

27 1842, 1843, two in 1845, 1846. See Jones, Edwin Romanzo Elmer, 159.

28 E. R. Ellis, Biographical Sketches of Richard Ellis, the First Settler of Ashfield, Mass., and His Descendants (Detroit: WM Graham Printing Co., 1888), 96. This source puts Erastus Elmer at 90 years of age (375, 400).

29 Greenfield Gazette and Franklin Herald (July 14, 1829), 3. See also Greenfield Gazette and Franklin Herald (July 21, 1829).

30 “New England News,” Boston Daily Advertiser (November 19, 1868), 2. For a later recounting of this incident, see Frederick G. Howes, History of the Town of Ashfield, Franklin County, Massachusetts from its Settlement in 1742 to 1910 (Ashfield: Town of Ashfield, 1910), 248. In the context of “vagrant religious fanatics called Tremblers” (i.e. Shakers): “Mr. [Erastus] Elmer said they were presided over by a woman… [s]ome thought she was a witch” (371).

31 “Another Horror!” Cleveland Plain Dealer (Dec. 21, 1859) [reprinted as “Suicide of a Second-Adventist,” Detroit Free Press (December 25, 1859), 1]. See also “The Bank Street Suicide,” Cleveland Plain Dealer (Dec. 22, 1859). Clarissa Elmer, the artist’s sister and the eldest child in his family, also died that year, though it is unclear how.

New England Unitarianism was heavily influenced by Transcendentalism.


Maud Valona Elmer, “Edwin Romanzo Elmer as I Knew Him,” The Massachusetts Review 6 (Autumn 1964–Winter 1965): 129: On this occasion, recalled his niece Maud, “Edwin, as usual, controlled his own grief and was a tower of strength.” See also Jones, 28. In 1909, another niece Ethel “blew the top of her head off” with a shotgun, though she “had apparently been in good spirits and […] talking to her husband five minutes before.” See “Strange Suicide at Ashfield: Mrs. James Howe Shoots Top of Head Off,” Greenfield Recorder (Sept. 1, 1909), 1.


For a discussion of this change of position, see Alessia Ricciardi, The Ends of Mourning: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Film (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 32–39.


Maud Valona Elmer, “Edwin Romanzo Elmer as I Knew Him,” The Massachusetts Review 6 (Autumn 1964–Winter 1965): 137: “He saw an opportunity to make enlarged crayon portraits for those who had lost dear ones. This gave him the work he loved.” Jones, Edwin Romanzo Elmer, 24: notes a “distinctly funereal character” to these images. Elmer received a commission to paint the deceased benefactor of the library in 1900. See Jones, Edwin Romanzo Elmer, 27.


Ibid., 137.


See Swan M. Burnett, How We See (Washington, DC: Judd & Detweiler, 1882).

James, Principles of Psychology, 590. James similarly refers to “the time-honored riddle […] of how, with an upside-down picture on the retina, we can see things right-side up.” (479).

George Wilson, “The Eye,” The Advanced Reader (New York: T. Nelson and Sons, 1865), 53. This work appeared in slightly revised forms numerous times over the next decades, including, for instance, “The Human Eye,” Ohio Educational Monthly 43 (1894): 300–306. See also Arabella Buckely, Through Magic Glasses (London: Edward
Stanford, 1890), 31–32: “Close behind the iris again is the natural ‘magic glass’ of our eye [...] which has two rounded or convex surfaces like an ordinary magnifying glass.” Uses “magic glasses” to mean “optical instruments” throughout (v).

56 Ibid., 51.


59 See ibid., 50, for example.

60 Ibid., 50, 55.


63 Ibid., 240, 241.

64 The human body is compared to “fragile glass” in “The Frailty of Life,” Messenger 45 (September 20, 1876): 4. Glass is used to signal ill omen and calamity in the Book of Revelation: “And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who had overcome the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing on the sea of glass, having harps of God” (15:2).


66 See Maud Elmer, “Edwin Romanzo Elmer as I Knew Him,” 123. Though several trades apparently occupied him, previously he worked mainly as a farmer. Erastus may have also worked as a lens grinder. “Lens,” The American Amateur Photographer 6 (September 1894): 437: describes in detail the production of lenses, the way the lens grinder brings the lens “up to the exquisite degree of polish seen in the best lenses, to effect which a great deal of care and skill are required.” Ashfield was the birthplace of Alvan Clark (1804–1887), an astronomer and occasional portrait painter, whose firm in Cambridgeport specialized in optics and became famous for crafting lenses for refracting telescopes. Alfred Corn, “Homemade Visions,” Art & Antiques (May 1985): 81: his father’s disfigurement “must have resonated with psychological meaning for his reflective son. All things visual must have taken on special cogency for him.”
This prevented him from voting, among other restrictions. See Jones, Edwin Romanzo Elmer, 33, n.11.

Wilhelm Lohmann, Disturbances of the Visual Functions, trans. Agnus Macnab (Philadelphia: P. Blakiston’s Son & Co., 1914), 146: monocularity seeing is “a poor makeshift for binocular estimation of depth”—this fact being the most important “[o]f all ‘psychic’ factors which must be taken into account.”


Rachel Ziady DeLue observes, “ophthalmology at the turn of the twentieth century characterized an operation that involved the intervention of other mental processes such as memory and emotion,” in “Diagnosing Pictures: Sadakichi Hartmann and the Science of Seeing, circa 1900,” American Art 21 (Summer 2007): 55. In the 1890s, as DeLue and others have shown, physical maladies of the eyes were held to be responsible for the appearances of canvases by artists such as the Impressionists. Abnormal vision or optical ailments were understood as contributing factors in the resulting bombardment of colors in their paintings, for instance (49). See also William Walker Atkinson, Memory Culture: The Science of Observing, Remembering and Recalling (Chicago: The Psychic Research Company, 1903).


Ibid., 506, 522.

Ibid., 505.


Magnifying glasses and microscopes have historically been used by artists to see and depict miniature worlds. The magnifying glass especially was “a tool of the most meticulous painters since the fifteenth century.” See Mariët Westermann, A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic, 1585–1718 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 86.


Grootenboer, *Treasuring the Gaze*, 44.


Ibid., 41. For the “mourning marbles,” see “The Vermont Marble Industry,” *Stone* 18 (January 1899): 38; and “The Marbles of Vermont,” *The Manufacturer and Builder* 22 (December 1, 1890): 273.


*Skeleton Leaves (Lincoln portrait surrounded by “phantom leaves”)* (1865; Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, Rare Books Department Photography Archives), a stereograph card by John P. Soule, who produced many such images.

The dual meaning of the term urn—both a rounded glass, such as what may be a sugar bowl in the painting, and a vessel for storing ashes—also supports this overlay. The funerary urn and sugar bowl come together in a discussion of the “modern necrological art” of the graveyard in “Modern Conventionalism,” *Stone* 2 (September 1889): 81: the urn “does not represent any thing that exists unless it be a modern sugar bowl,” and “is only an enlarged caricature of the sugar bowl.” The terms are also related in the discussion of “tomb design” in Edwin Atlee Barber, “American through the Spectacles of the Old English Potter,” *The New England Magazine* 11 (September 1894): 81.

88 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), in *Collected Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 816. Marble—that most permanent of artistic materials—is also used by Hawthorne to suggest impermanence in the novel. Miles observes Zenobia, who commits suicide at the end: “She was the marble image of a death-like agony” and “rigid,” from the onset of rigor mortis. Here, deathly corporeality undermines the marble ideal.


91 See, for example, Desiree Henderson, *Grief and Genre in American Literature, 1790–1870* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 151.
CHAPTER FOUR
Irving Ramsay Wiles: Drawing in the Dark

In Irving Ramsay Wiles’s *Russian Tea*, from 1896, three young women and a girl assemble to ready the refreshments of afternoon tea (fig. 4.1). Narrow glass tumblers and silver spoons, a saucer with lemon and a ceramic teapot lay before them. The candlelight, safeguarding against the descending darkness, generates a warm glow that the large brass samovar at the center of the table reflects as it captures their collective attention. With table set and places taken, the figures seem to pause—the standing woman appears to delicately affix the last of the paper candle shades. Between stages, between actions, between preparation and performance, the figures await the simmer of the water and the steeping of the tea—they are on the cusp of the imminent ritual.

Wiles’s picture is one among countless depictions of upper-middle class women taking tea or otherwise at leisure in American painting around the turn of the twentieth century.\(^1\) Indeed Wiles, upon his 1884 return home to New York from studying at the Académie Julian and in the atelier of Carolus-Duran in Paris, developed a reputation for his representations of fashionable women in, as one critic put it in 1890, “pretty languor.”\(^2\) This sentiment grew ever more cheery, wholesome, and nationalistic by 1904, when critics praised Wiles for resolutely “devot[ing] himself to the portrayal of American womanhood.”\(^3\) His depiction of the popular English-born American actress Julia Marlowe catapulted Wiles into the ranks of the country’s foremost portraitists at the turn of the century and into the running as an heir to the celebrated expatriate John Singer Sargent, who forsook portrait painting in 1907 (fig. 4.2).\(^4\) This account of Wiles—also encompassing the painting in question—has essentially persisted.\(^5\)
And yet there are, as this chapter details, more subtle and complicated layers to Wiles’s work, particularly during the 1890s, layers that become evident through an exploration of *Russian Tea*, his most populated scene and only one of tea taking. Wiles pursued a parallel career as an illustrator, producing line and wash drawings regularly for literary monthlies like *The Century Illustrated Magazine*, until the middle of the decade, when his aspirations as a portrait painter increasingly found support from commissioners. Executed in the midst of his professional transition, *Russian Tea* encodes the troubled status of Wiles, the artist-illustrator, moving between mediums. The painting also plays on crossing over, on existing between worlds in a different sense.

As an image of fire and darkness, the painting sets the stage for something more primordial—to combine the ostensibly civilized tea service with a more portentous or sacral force. For all its apparent frivolity, there is more than a shadow of solemnity over the occasion. With its trance-like stillness and figures on the verge of an abyss, the picture might have something to say about the “spiritual void” at the center of the afternoon tea, as one writer remarked in 1895. By considering the stranger connotations of tea, Wiles’s treatment of macabre themes and espousal of superstitious rhetoric, as well as the role of illustration in the painting’s construction, the painting’s liminal position comes more clearly into focus. Mediums, in various senses, become entangled in this work. *Russian Tea*’s claims lie in the way it straddles boundaries between the material here-and-now and a shadowy otherworld, in the way it wrestles with art’s attempts to represent or access mysterious and unknown realms, and in the way it intersects with the notion of the artist as a kind of medium. *Russian Tea* ultimately takes
on a peculiarly dark cast, raising questions about the realm of the imagination and about how to delimit the so-called visionary in art. It thereby opens onto links between Spiritualist séances and the development of the new medium of motion pictures in the 1890s.⁸

“An occult quality in tea”

A reliable part of the five o’clock tea ceremony was the parlor game of “reading” tea leaves, the superstition of, as one writer described in 1894, “believing destiny lies hidden in the innocent dregs of a teacup.”⁹ In William McGregor Paxton’s slightly later rendition of the subject, for example, two women convene in a well-appointed interior flooded with natural light (fig. 4.3). Paxton establishes the surroundings of a locatable room, grounded in recognizable space. The explicitness of the picture’s tea subject matter and the clarity of its objects are both emphasized through the sharpness of Paxton’s technique. His smooth finish and high degree of “ambient lucidity,” to quote an art historian on the artist’s handling, produce a crystalline effect—and breathing room—markedly different from the nebulous conditions of Wiles’s Russian Tea.¹⁰ In contrast to Tea Leaves’s more open spatial arrangement and slicker, tighter finish, Wiles’s picture communicates indeterminacy, as if it is as much or more about clandestine contact and whispers in the dark. From the sketchiness of its paint application to the way the foreground figure blocks the viewer’s access—she obscures roughly half the tabletop—Russian Tea relays an investment in ambiguity, even secrecy.
Whereas Paxton neutralizes the mysterious aspects of ascertaining fate from tea as the harmless diversion of routine, Wiles seems to excavate the strangeness of tea’s conjunction with such esoteric ventures. The subdued palette and twilight setting—redolent of his namesake Washington Irving’s “witching hour,” the time of ghosts and spirits—play into the work’s eeriness. While the candlelight helps to demarcate the figures’ space, it also accentuates this shadowy quality—the sense that only blackness extends beyond them. A hush of expectation pervades the scene, as the figures gather with an active purpose and focused concentration that belies the polite indifference of Paxton’s duo. Wiles’s picture feels more attuned to the notion that, as an 1896 article remarked, “tea in America is always a little of an exotic.” Like William Verplanck Birney’s The Ghost Story, Wiles’s Russian Tea locates this sense of something out of the ordinary in a domestic depiction of women situated in a half-circle around a table (fig. 4.4).

So possessed by the tale, the young storyteller in Birney’s painting upsets the bowl of apples in her lap and threatens her companion with upraised knife and claw-like hand. Forecasts of potential violence are channeled into the cowering central figure’s unseen right arm and the disfigured blood-red fruit. The storyteller is positioned at the threshold between her audience on the left and what might be understood as a visualization of the story she weaves on the right. That is, the maternal figure just beyond the central space also does double duty in a second scene that functions as part of a continuous narrative. Wrapped in billowy vapors, she is the eponymous apparitional stand-in, a veritable witch at her cauldron. Her dual identity is enforced by the way the
teller of the ghost story and the “ghost” of that story rhyme with one another. The position of their arms is nearly identical, they both clutch wood handled objects in their right hands with outward-facing palms, wear bulbous dark blue skirts, and are umbilically joined by the lines of the wood chair. As mother-cum-ghost, the painting suggests that ghostliness is not something separate from but inherent to the domestic sphere and its seemingly unremarkable environment. It is something that can be subtly revealed by peeling back layers of the everyday world—like the skin on the apples or the upturned tablecloth. A ghost that is both there and not there, that hides in plain sight.

If the idea of spectral forms lurking within or nearby gets worked out through a play of expressive gestures that are perhaps excessive in Birney’s picture, Wiles’s *Russian Tea* quiets them down, seeming to absorb latent danger into the veneer of domestic tranquility and ceremony. The pictorial space in *The Ghost Story* is treated as theater, detached from and unrelated to the viewer, who is kept at a safe distance. Unlike that heightened drama, Wiles’s picture takes a more immersive tack through its indistinctness. We are not so much witnessing the recitation of a ghost story as we are, in a certain sense, in the privileged space in which one unfolds or might unfold. Like Birney’s *Ghost Story*, *Russssian Tea* is an image of home and hearth, of mixing and preparing, of flame and heat. But the ghostliness that bubbles over, literally and figuratively, in the Birney, is kept at a slower boil, a lower rumble in the Wiles. The tea samovar water remains just below the boiling point, the roiling regulated, held back—an apt analogy for keeping ghostliness at bay.
An 1896 article on tea customs in *Harper’s Bazaar* helps us to see the picture’s underlying haunted dynamics. “There seems to be an occult quality in tea,” it begins, then proceeds to characterize the hostess’s duties in terms bordering on sorcery: “she lights her little lamp, lifts the cover from the biscuit-jar, a witch never more bewitching than when she makes her brew.”14 This notion of the tea-brewing lady as a modern “witch,” concocting a magical potion or curse, becomes particularly significant in relation to the exotic character of the samovar, the central object in *Russian Tea*. In a poem—also from the same year as Wiles’s painting—the seemingly benign activity is infused with a predatory air: “I watch her, in her pretty gown, / Bend smiling o’er the samovar; […] But what a blissful spell she weaves— / The little witch who brews me tea!”15 Another poem with a sinister edge, “The Five O’Clock” from 1899, illuminates the inbuilt supernatural possibilities of the samovar as a fixture of tea ceremonies: “Witches, in your cauldrons / Your magic liquor brew,— / You may call the things samovars, / But still enchantresses are you.”16 This sort of language—of spells, witches, and the supernatural generally—accented discussions of tea and its samovar accoutrement during the decade, and while some of this is certainly lighthearted razzing, there is also an unsettling tinge to it. These expressions inform Wiles’s picture, which, with its multi-generational quartet, reads as a kind of cryptic induction ceremony.17

To also consider *Russian Tea*’s brass samovar, which literary means “self boiler,” as a sort of cauldron is less of a stretch than it may at first seem. More than just a metal container, a cauldron also connotes encirclement, implying the organization of the figures in the painting.18 Like a witch’s cauldron, the samovar had magical connotations all its
own. As with an incense burner or a mosque lamp in an Orientalist scene, the samovar was associated with things foreign, mysterious, other, and even otherworldly for an American audience. One period writer found the samovar’s aesthetic component irrevocably imprinted with traces of horror or violence. The samovar originates in a “far-off land” where “blood curdling plots” are hatched around it. He asks, “what does my samovar think of this American five-o’clock tea talk as contrasted with blood-curdling oaths in language of all consonants?”

The samovar was sometimes regarded as a surrogate Aladdin’s lamp, an object that visually enthralled and beguiled as much as it could be used to produce surprising concoctions, to satiate nectarous desires.

Two photographs of Wiles’s New York studio situate him in the discourse of the samovar as a mystical or fantastic object. The pride of place given to the samovar in these photographs is not simply reducible to the fact that Wiles was known for hosting so-called “studio teas,” social gatherings in artists’ studios oriented around the consumption of tea. Rather, in *A Corner of Mr. Wiles’s Studio*, for instance, the samovar is featured as the important centerpiece of an altar-like shrine that is presented as a stand-in for the artist, whose likeness is noticeably absent from the article (fig. 4.5). As a quasi-votive offering, the samovar exerts a kind of gravitational force, functioning as the chief structuring point for the drawings, watercolors, and small sculptures above it. It is almost as if the works of art displayed there emit from the samovar, as if they appear when its rising vapors clear, as if the object takes part in the capacity for artistic projection.
*Mr. Irving R. Wiles in his Studio* reinforces this connection by presenting the artist in the company of—and even in conversation with—the samovar (fig. 4.6). With the finished painting and samovar flanking either side of him, together they read like two halves of a whole, with the artist as a conduit who takes strength from the samovar’s powers. Wiles is identified visually with the samovar: he is not just in close proximity to it, but he rests at the same level as it, his arms rhyme with its paired spouts, and both he and it appear as dark masses against floral-patterned backdrops. When viewing these two photographs as a pair, it is almost as if Wiles, genie-like, plays out his own vanishing or appearing act by virtue of the samovar, as if that magical object plops him into his studio out of thin air. Now you don’t see him, now you do. But, of course, the samovar is just another studio treasure.

Yet Wiles, that same year, 1905, recounted in print how he had previously ascribed a different studio object superstitious properties. After borrowing peacock feathers to use as a painting prop, his associates, with “superstitious foibles of various sorts,” warned him that they might invite evil spirits. “I do not think I am a superstitious man,” Wiles hedged, “but these words ‘bad luck’ persistently hurled at my inoffensive head began to worry me. The painting went wrong from the start.” Wiles—“enraged”—detailed the ensuing calamity with the painting he was working on and, blaming disastrous events on the studio object, resolved to violently destroy the feathers. “I burned them with something of the savage fury of a Hotentot at the execution of his enemy,” he recalled, equating his final action with the so-called primitive and arcane
violence of an African tribesman. “I am no longer the victim of superstition,” he assured the reader.23

The samovar in Russian Tea seems to possess some of the strange power that Wiles was known to associate with special, exotic objects. It harnesses the generative properties suggested by the photographs to operate as more than simply a metal object that catches and throws light. It is not just the social center but also acts as a kind of whirlpool or vortex—the churn of colors on its central cylinder produces an especially mesmeric attraction. The light is picked up on the heavy impasto of the samovar, creating a kaleidoscopic sheen that evokes period notions of it as a wondrous device that transports. An 1895 source, for example, notes how the samovar elicits “a change as if wrought by magic. […] The whole atmosphere of the room changes. It is like being transported to a more tropic clime.” Its surface stimulates a fictive space to such a great degree that guests are apt to have “fallen under the spell of the samovar.”24 As a portable hot-water urn, the notion of transit was fundamental to the samovar’s usage.25 In Russian Tea, it becomes a shorthand signifier for geographical distance collapsed, connoting passage between worlds and achieving strangeness partly by stressing its foreignness.26 The foreground figure’s extreme lean not only highlights the samovar’s centrality, drawing our attention to it, but also stresses a circular dynamism or spinning sensation of the group, furthering the association between the samovar and metaphoric movement. The other transfixed figures participate in this imaginative, conjuring glow as the picture traffics in the samovar’s characterization as an apparatus of projective fantasy space, of creative reserve.
An article about looking to Russian during the winter months magnifies tea’s particular relationship to unusual convictions. It observes: “We [Americans] are thought to share with Russia the not too flattering credit of being the richest field for the ‘sprouting of abnormal beliefs in the direction of psychology and spiritualism,’ etc. Mesmerism, clairvoyance […] are said to have a large following in both countries.”

Noting how “[i]magination loves to work in the dark,” the author then pits tea against this “fanatical adherence to strange beliefs.” The practice of Russian tea—with its samovar—is specifically posited as the countervailing force against “degradation,” as the “redeem[ing]” opposite of the “fanatical, dangerous, unbalanced sensibilities and dreams.” It is “one of the most advanced signs of her [Russia’s] luxury and civilization,” he writes.27 Through its dialogue with the occult connotations of tea and the samovar as transportive, Wiles’s painting holds this meeting of “strange beliefs” and “civilization” in tension.

**Ghostly Absence**

The supernatural undertones of *Russian Tea* mark the apogee of Wiles’s involvement in broader period concerns with the validity of superstitions and their place in contemporary society. His work in the commercial press overlapped with questions about whether supposed supernatural occurrences were the archaic product of an ignorant and bygone age or whether they were acceptable subjects for scientific investigations. In 1892, for instance, Wiles illustrated an article in *Harper’s* that deemed the idea of a fountain of youth as the domain of a backward, remote, and primitive culture. Lumping it together
with other antiquated ways of thinking and dismissing it absolutely, the writer declared: “Our scientific period has a proper contempt for all such superstitions.” Another article featuring Wiles’s work, “The Secrets of Snake-Charming,” from 1893, announces similar contempt for snake charming and related “magical” practices: “Now adays we do not hear witchcraft given as the explanation, for the day of magic is passed.” These disavowals and emphatic deferrals onto the past, however, touch upon a nerve about the precarious state of such views.

In their blunt rejection, the two articles voice something of an acknowledgement about the lasting efficacy of supernatural and superstitious ideas in the late nineteenth century. In hurrying past irrational conclusions, these writers uncomfortably attempt to skirt the issue. By stressing the occult’s irrelevance, that is, they also draw attention to its contemporaneity. Increasingly it was in such periodicals and in the medium of illustration where, for Wiles, these disputes were played out. By the 1890s, he had largely shifted away from working on travel articles, as usually one of several illustrators, to often being the sole illustrator of short potboilers and longer serialized fiction. In his periodical and “book work,” Wiles excelled especially at wash drawings, and it was here that the issue of how to represent haunted occurrences in the everyday first took shape.

In Robert Grant’s short story “The Bachelor’s Christmas,” for example, from an 1893 issue of Scribner’s, the protagonist Tom, a well-to-do bachelor entering middle age, is haunted by visions of a past love, by the belated potentialities of a wedded life. Although the recipient of Tom’s affections becomes obvious to the reader, for much of the story she is rendered more as a nonexistent but pervasive force, an anonymous
placeholder, or a spirit than as a known, individualized woman. Three of Wiles’s six illustrations present Tom staring longingly at an empty space, such as an unoccupied chair, seemingly awaiting her appearance or attempting to summon her out of the air.

Wiles’s illustration with the caption “The wreaths of holly were the nearest semblance to faces, and they seemed almost to grin at him,” for instance, shows Tom when he “glanced over his shoulder as though in hope of catching a face at the window” after delivering an invitation to her house (fig. 4.7). Wiles’s illustration renders a phantom female presence as an absence. It rests on Tom’s imaginative projection, as the wreaths virtually metamorphose in his mind. Tom, finally, “passed his hand across his eyes as though he were sweeping away an unprofitable vision.” She haunts his footsteps here in the form of the watchful wreaths, which later recur to Tom, again mutating into “a face which had haunted him day in and day out.”

This effort to capture something so elusive, something almost more felt than seen, aligns Wiles with period discussions about the problem of how to visualize a phantom presence, of how to picture something barely glimpsed or invisible. The question of depicting the undepictable ghost is addressed, for example, in “Art and the Supernatural” (1881), wherein the author asserts that ghosts simply “are not paintable.” She writes:

[A] Spirit, when presented to the eye painted on canvas fails in its mission to awe the spectator; that, in fact, the Supernatural could be only pressed into Art through a special exercise of the mind, by certain ideas being presented, and visions, therefore, suggested by those ideas in the spectator’s mind; and he would conjure up the necessary ghost.

Suggestion and inference best outright portrayal. “When the popular idea of a ghost has even been represented by an artist, the attempt fails,” she concludes. Another article,
“Ghosts in Art” (1904), notes that “there is a great deal of ghost belief yet left in the world” and catalogues recent European and American painting examples in which “the modern apparitions are described.” But the author likewise acknowledges “the difficulty of representing a ghost,” with its “seemingly palpable yet at the same time insubstantial” quality. Having reservations about description, failure is, again, the order of the day: “it is doubtful whether any artist has succeeded in reproducing [a chilling] effect.” Over two decades apart, both writers arrive at similar conclusions about the inadequacy of painting’s strategies at summoning ghostliness. Both regard painting a ghost as a tricky, if not impossible, proposition. Inherent breakdowns meet attempts to render the immaterial material; to attempt to “reproduce” is to shut down or limit imagination. As James Jeffrey Roche’s 1897 poem “The Absent Ghost” similarly declares, the “Spectre dear whom all men fear” is the “Ghost that does not walk,” the ghost “whose step, unheard,” the ghost that “no eye would fain behold.” Or, as the best film directors of the next century knew, the scariest ghost is the ghost we do not see.

Just as Wiles was engaging with the complications surrounding the depiction of ghosts through reckoning with a presence that is elsewhere—seeming to meld with inanimate objects in The Wreaths—writers like Henry James and William Dean Howells were substantially revising what a ghost story could be. This was less because of the supernatural elements themselves than because of the effects they have on their characters. Howells, in particular, is an appropriate companion to Wiles. From his exploration of psychic terrain in the novel of The Shadow of a Dream, from Harper’s in 1890, to the publication of three short supernatural stories collected under the title
*Questionable Shapes* in 1903, Howells—the arch theorist of literary realism—turned repeatedly to supernatural subjects in this decade.³⁵ “His Apparition”—a “ghost story without a ghost,” as one scholar has put it—opens just after the narrator has seen the titular apparition, but Howells withholds the details of the spectral occurrence, making ghostliness a psychological feature of the characters.³⁶ “Any man can reveal a ghost to people only partially evolved from the superstitious primitive intelligence,” commended one reviewer in 1903, “but it is another more difficult undertaking to project an impression of the supernatural into the minds of such sophisticated types as are set forth in these stories.”³⁷

Wiles’s work appeared in the same publications as Howells’s stories during the decade, and the artist had a lengthy collaboration with the author the same year he executed *Russian Tea*, illustrating *An Open-Eyed Conspiracy: An Idyl of Saratoga* for serialization in *The Century Illustrated Magazine* from July to October of 1896.³⁸ The story features Howells’s recurring character Basil March, the protagonist of *The Undiscovered Country* (1880), his first and perhaps best-known treatment of occult subject matter. Just as Howells’s supernatural fiction troubled the relationship between observable phenomena and ghostliness, between the realistic and the fantastic story, Wiles pictorial attempts—*Russian Tea* chief among them—participate in this “difficult undertaking” and contribute to this stylistic move that seeks to “project an impression” through “a special exercise of the mind,” as he was, at times, working through how to represent ghostly absence in visual terms.
Wiles’s involvement with such stories positions him in close relation to another key Howellsian formulation. Howell’s frequently organized his narratives around seemingly benign domestic surfaces and social rituals that are unexpectedly interrupted. The literary critic George C. Carrington characterized the abrupt puncture of ordinary routines and customs by disquieting forces as the defining Howells archetype: “In the Howells novel, an apparently stable and often agreeable situation changes, suddenly and pointlessly, into a welter of confusion, terror, or even death, and then returns to the initial state of placidity.” The constant in Howells is “the deceptively pleasant surface, [and] the demonic energy breaking through.” For Carrington, the “bipartite structure of rigid, brittle surface and unknown interior,” of “generally smooth surface covering mysteries and horrors” is the fundamental concern of his work.

Howellsian eruption and elusive ghostliness serve as the dominant scaffolding for comprehending two notable compositions by Wiles in these years. The blanched flesh and contorted pose in *The Green Cushion* push the figure toward something cadaverous or gruesome—she is literally green around the gills (fig. 4.8). Several critics voiced their discomfort, even squeamishness at her state. Royal Cortissoz, writing in *Harper’s Weekly*, was taken aback by the watercolor, which he deemed “an aggressive work” of “muddy and morbid” flesh tones. A second critic agreed, finding the figure’s “trying position” and “cold and harsh color” to “distress the beholder.” But somehow opting for a “more graceful pose” would be tantamount to “suppressing essential truths,” he admitted. “It would have been easy” to have painted the usual “pleasing picture,” he remarked, indicating how Wiles’s picture constituted another variety. Other writers also noticed
the woman’s wan features, one calling them “crude,” another “raw,” terms similarly veering toward the abject and putrescent.44

In *The Green Cushion*, reviewers saw Wiles’s murky paint handling in terms of the ghastly or grim. Subverting the use of the cushion as a supportive, uplifting motif in Andrea Solario’s *Madonna of the Green Cushion* (1507–10; Louvre Museum), he transforms it into a portentous, oppressive object through his jagged, slashing application.45 The figure’s head is half-buried in the sofa, as the cushion weighs her down. The cascading ribbons of her dress highlight a sense of physical deterioration or psychic unraveling—at any rate, a tempestuousness that is heightened by the bird-like blue blots on the adjacent pillow, as if signaling mental flight attempting to escape enclosure. These critics’ efforts to articulate the troubling note in *The Green Cushion* turn the picture toward “the eruption of ineffable horror into the pastoral calm of everyday existence,” to borrow a phrase from Carrington on Howells.46

The struggle between reigning in the macabre and the macabre spilling over is more pronounced in a response to Wiles’s painting *A Yellow Rose* (fig. 4.9). When parodied by artist Joseph Jones, Jr., using the punning pseudonym “Deserving Wiles,” at the exhibition of the Society of American Fakirs in the spring of 1900, the haughty young woman adjusting a flower in her hair was replaced with a haggard woman (fig. 4.10). She exclaims from the rat atop of the mirror as well as from the sight of her own aged appearance. Playing on this doubleness, Jones’s adopted alias collapses the distinction between Wiles and his female character: “wiles” meaning deceit or deviousness, suggesting a kind of femme fatale in this case. Jones’s version, *A Yell Arose*, indicates
how something vaguely menacing could imbue Wiles’ work in these years.\textsuperscript{47} It is not so much an image of comeuppance, of an after to Wiles’ before, as it is a transformation that discloses this doubleness, the grotesque, unseen core of his figure.

“A Fake,” explained the \textit{New-York Tribune}’s reaction to the exhibition, “is an exaggeration of some striking feature in the original picture.”\textsuperscript{48} And, on a basic level, \textit{A Yell Arose} distorts or amplifies the way, as one critic wrote of \textit{A Yellow Rose}, “[h]er head is thrown back, exposing a nostril with awkward effect.”\textsuperscript{49} It also responds to a deeper, however slippery, preoccupation of Wiles’ painting: the outwardly genteel or civilized masking the inwardly hideous or disturbing. While the humorous context of the exhibition made the means of delivering the message more acceptable, of normalizing a shocking event, the unsettling undercurrent was nevertheless asserted.\textsuperscript{50} The sonic dimension of the title—like a shriek piercing a silent night—encapsulates how darkness resounded as potentially frightening, how a flower—like the garlands of \textit{The Wreaths}—morphs into an expression of disquietude.\textsuperscript{51} Even when Wiles downplayed the more palpably sinister aspects—like those of \textit{The Green Cushion}—distressing aspects could be dislodged.\textsuperscript{52} \textit{A Yell Arose} pushes these hints to an extreme jolt. It is one artist’s particular accounting for the vague stirring of something not quite right that could bubble up from Wiles’ work in these years. Produced on the heels of \textit{The Green Cushion, Russian Tea} tempers and redirects these discordant tendencies, more fully synthesizing this haunted theme that joins ghostly absence and “explosive intrusion.”\textsuperscript{53}
Spiritualism

The transmission of thoughts, words, and sounds into the darkness and the darkness issuing an audible or tangible reply formed the basis of Spiritualism, whose adherents claimed that the living could communicate with the dead. In the wake of Darwinian erosion of the foundations of traditional beliefs, many Americans turned toward the Spiritualist movement to rouse their shaken faith in immortality. Its heterogeneous practitioners—some religious, others iconoclastic—aimed at contacting and interacting with the departed. Mediums, often professing to channel relatives long deceased, bridged this divide. Spiritualist mediation originated in a hoax perpetrated by two young sisters, Margaret and Catherine Fox, in Hydesville, New York, in 1848. The Fox sisters surreptitiously produced a series of knocking sounds on the walls as evidence of a murdered houseguest. Their clapping hands provoked a thumping response from the invisible visitor. When the sisters duplicated their actions in nearby Rochester, earning the appellation “Rochester Rappings,” the phenomenon was widely publicized and spread in the following decades despite concomitant controversy.  

Whatever Wiles’s direct knowledge of Spiritualism—he was born in Utica, an upstate New York town only about 100 miles from Hydesville, and Wiles reportedly studied music in Rochester—comments he made about his approach to painting paralleled Spiritualism’s attempts to access an invisible realm beyond ordinary experience. Wiles described a form of imaginative conjuration reminiscent of Spiritualist acts to call forth the dead. In giving advice about painting, he encouraged vivid recreation that brought the past into the present. “Try to imagine,” he instructed,
“how the subject of a portrait, by Franz Hals, say, would look to you if alive and before you, what difficulties you would have in painting him, and see how Hals did it.”

In this reverse process, Wiles advocates that artists conceive the circumstances out of which the painting came. The work of art is not enough for study; envisioning how it came about in its original moment is necessary. In this mediation, the work initiates a mental vision of the portrait subject, not just how he or she is depicted on canvas. The artist should act as if the figure were in his present, effectively bringing a long dead sitter into being, making them come “alive,” face to face. Wiles’s statement—interested in capturing a living mind behind physical facts—thus oddly recalls how, according to Spiritualism, personages from distant eras would linger around the living or speak at a Spiritualist séance—often a teetotal gathering that took the guise of “a tea.”

Calling back the dead to communicate might have been a specially compelling possibility for Wiles during the later part of 1896, when Russian Tea was most likely undertaken. The failing health of his mother Rachel culminated in her untimely death in December, almost certainly suspending a cloud over these months, if not the entire year, for Wiles. His father Lemuel reported her unpredictable condition and passing in a letter:

She had not been well during the early part of the summer, while at Silver Lake; but for the last few months had improved greatly; so much so that we felt assured in venturing to return to the city [New York]. We had been here over [a] few weeks, and she seemed to be steadily improving. On Thursday last, however she became suddenly ill, and I was sent for at the studio. When I reached her side she was nearly unconscious, and could not speak one word.

The devastating loss has “cast a shadow across my pathway, and almost darkened my soul,” lamented Lemuel. Although similar reflections from the younger Wiles do not survive, news of his mother’s death would also have simultaneously interrupted him in
his studio, which adjoined his father’s at the time.\textsuperscript{59} Indeed their lives were so intertwined that his mother reportedly died at the home of her son and the couple seems to have been staying there.\textsuperscript{60} Wiles was quite close to his parents, both artists. As their only son, he followed in their footsteps. And they were not infrequent sitters or models for Wiles in these relatively early stages of his career.\textsuperscript{61} They sometimes appeared in his work in “veiled” ways that “you will not be able to recognize,” as family correspondence from 1891 acknowledged.\textsuperscript{62} A related sense of familial memory and generational passing is apparent in \textit{Russian Tea} with Wiles’s only daughter, eight-year-old Gladys, serving for the model of the girl at far right—the ancestral proxy, the young woman as stand-in for the old woman, not actually but in spirit.\textsuperscript{63} Though not appearing in the picture, his mother’s absence looms over its creation.

Visible hands frequently played a role in both the activities of the participants and the ghostly “respondents” from Spiritualism’s inception. Numerous descriptions of séances note the common reliance on hands as effectively epitomizing the manifestations of spirits. One emblematic account, for instance, tells how “hands of disembodied spirits appeared at the side of a table or touched the knees of those sitting at it.”\textsuperscript{64} In addition to such things as the sounds of rapping hands and hands caressing sitters, many Spiritualist methods for contacting the dead at séances relied heavily upon the actions of hands, sometimes in drawing or writing capacities.\textsuperscript{65} These techniques included, in a variety of forms, spirit slate writing, automatic or spirit drawings, and palm reading. Similarly, table-turning and table-lifting, begin when, as one writer put it, “[e]ach member of the circle places his hands gently on the table-top.”\textsuperscript{66} The table is seen to float, clinging to the
hands, via an encounter with the spirit realm. “Hands,” Aura Satz summarizes, “whether those disembodied, disassociated from the visible living bodies in the room, or those that served as passive transmission entities, could be said to be the true agents of spiritualism.”

The extent to which hands were a defining feature of Spiritualism is clear from the cover of the book *Revelations of a Spirit Medium, or Spiritualistic Mysteries Exposed* (1891), which emphasizes both their summoning and interfering capacities (fig. 4.11). Written by an anonymous medium, the book was published during an upsurge in exposés aimed at uncovering fraudulence in Spiritualism. The discarnate hands converge on the four seated figures, whose faces register surprise and alarm as hands ruffle and cajole them. Two passages in *Russian Tea* offer appendages that intrude unexpectedly on the circle of figures. While Wiles’s style can certainly be gauged in light of the American adoption of Impressionist aesthetics—loose brushwork, an overall state of unfinish, depiction of modern pastimes, and so on—it’s specific resonance here is in terms of boundary breaking and mystical access. The outline of what appears to be the initial right arm position of the faceless woman in the immediate foreground becomes the tablecloth (fig. 4.12). The viewer’s eye oscillates between the tablecloth as a tablecloth (with her arm bent upward at the elbow and largely hidden) and the tablecloth as her arm lengthened downward. The tablecloth has a slightly darker tint color here, almost allowing both possibilities to exist simultaneously: the area as shadow on fabric and as dangling, interrupting extremity.
Another quadrant of the picture further demonstrates its preoccupation with inexplicable hands, dissolving into and materializing out of the armature of the scene as if supernaturally. Between the samovar and the standing figure on the left side of the composition a hand reaches toward the tabletop (fig. 4.13). It is too close to her body, too awkwardly positioned, and too distant from her seated companion to belong to either woman. The digit nearest the samovar reads as an extended thumb and the main fleshiness as the back of a wrist, suggesting that the errant hand is, even more incongruously, a right hand. Instead of the hands in *Russian Tea* being stable and fixed to bodies, they do not quite cohere but seemingly morph from objects or emerge out of thin air. The angled mirror also insinuates occult manifestations. It appears to hover, as if unattached from any wall surface, and repudiates figural reflection, evoking the empty mirrors of “mirror gazing,” which attempted to achieve an impression of a spirit upon the surface of the mirror, or the practice of scrying, a related form of divination in mirrors. The misplaced hands are all the more intriguing in light of comments Wiles made about his approach to painting people. The bodily areas first mentioned for emphasis are the sitter’s hands. “The pose of the hands is important, and should be characteristic,” he advised. Stressing attention to hands was not unusual for a portraitist, but nonetheless it conveys something other than mere sloppy placement here. As in *Revelations of a Spirit Medium*, encroaching, fading hands become part of the way the picture encodes the channeling of the room’s ghostly energies. *Russian Tea* converges with Spiritualism by privileging tactility, as the painting is also concerned with, in the words of Aura Satz describing Spiritualist practices, the “haptic choreography of nimble fingers.”
Illustration and Darkness

Hands and mediation are intertwined in another sense in the picture and for Wiles professionally in the mid 1890s. Just as his most explicit treatment of haunted subjects was in the field of illustration, its role in *Russian Tea*—the painting’s illustrative foundation—also illuminates its investment in something akin to mystical access. First, *Russian Tea*’s relationship to *Seated Lady* helps reveal how it vacillates between painting and illustration (fig. 4.14). In this contemporaneous pencil study, the nearest woman in *Russian Tea* is isolated, reclining with crossed legs extending toward the metal samovar in the upper right corner. She has the same pinned up hair, the same long sloping neck and low-cut dress, and the same downward tilted gaze. She also slumps, if in bit of a different position, and holds open bound pages in her lap, between her and the samovar. The direct view over her right shoulder in *Seated Lady* is replaced by her prominent lean in *Russian Tea*, effectively thwarting the viewer’s ability to behold whatever is in front of her. This dramatic alteration of angle, from privileged to frustrated entry, highlights a sense of concealment but suggests that the possibility of the page, while disguised, is still close at hand. *Russian Tea* thereby links two kinds of leaves: it substitutes the leaves of the book or periodical for leaves of tea. This shift in perspective does not completely omit the page, which lingers in the picture, referring to the medium of Wiles’s illustrations, to the site of their reproduction. Illustration thus becomes a self-reflexive remainder in the painting.

*Russian Tea*’s nebulous pictorial space also has its origins in his illustrations. The way the composition is defined by a lighter aureole and shadowy outer area recalls the
overlapping light and dark washes that constitute the fluid, mutating boundaries in illustrations such as *The Wreaths* or *Reading the Shadow*, from the January 1897 issue of *The Century* (fig. 4.15). Figures and things dissolve in gradations at the margins instead of fully terminating in a coherent manner or even adhering to a rectangular format. On the right side of the painting, for example, the young girl’s dress is pulled into the tablecloth where her legs become blurred and obscured by it. The dress of the foreground figure, positioned with her back to the viewer, also merges with the tablecloth at the lower left, as if to dissipate before the lower edge of the picture plane. These hazy passages are not just the result of Wiles’s interest in lighting effects or painterly brushwork but have their roots in his handling of illustrations. There is little characterization to these figures but, instead, a posed quality, a repertoire adapted from illustration. The foreground figure purposefully is denied any individualization, and the other figures approach interchangeable, stock types. This figural elusiveness, blending between figures and objects, and refutation of the clear unity of space reveals formally how in *Russian Tea* different media rub up against one another. Illustration invades our sense of the painting as just a painting.

*Russian Tea*’s reliance on aspects of illustration suggests an alignment with mediation in other ways, since Wiles’s wash drawings were frequently reproduced as engravings. Mediation, that is to say, attended the creation of his published illustrations. The wood engraver was regarded as a sort of intercessor or intervening agency in the reproduction process. As one artist described this collaborative method of illustration during the period: “the sensitive art of the engraver joins hands with the art of the
draftsmen. The series of energetic, choppy strokes that comprise the background in *Russian Tea* evoke the engraver’s incised, staccato lines in *The Wreaths* as well as in countless other illustrations drawn by Wiles and then engraved. *The Century*’s reputation in particular largely derived from the quality of its engravings, and its art editor initially recruited Wiles into illustration. The publication continued to be where his work most often appeared and is widely regarded as the last holdout of the medium in the face of the rising tide of a new type of illustrated monthly magazine in the 1890s. These lavishly illustrated, topical, and inexpensive periodicals challenged the exclusivity and cost of literary monthlies thanks to the non-mediated reproduction techniques of the halftone process. Wiles’s departure from illustration coincided with the ascendancy of the halftone.

*Russian Tea* joins Spiritualist mediation, where hands provided key access points to hidden cosmic forces, with mediated illustration practices at precisely the moment of this monumental shift. With the rise of the halftone and the diminishing role of the wood engraver, the very notion of what constituted the medium of illustration was in flux in the mid 1890s. According to Neil Harris, the mixture of reproductive techniques in periodicals made for “true multimedia experiences” that served as a “visual reorientation that had few earlier precedents.” What kind of work an illustration could or could not do was a contentious issue in art circles. For example, in 1894, Julian Hawthorne held that illustration was ruled by “the faculty of selection,” how it crucially depended on the knowledge of what to leave out. As the domain of inference, there was an intensely spiritual or mystical dimension to illustration. “The artist in black in white,” declared
Hawthorne, “makes us contributors to and associates in his work; the more he dares to leave out, the more we are stimulated to supply; and that which we supply is purely of the spirit.” Through this process the illustrator “gives us wings on which we may rise to heights limited only by our own insight and enlightenment.” In this way Hawthorne mobilized illustration into countering purely material conceptions of the world:

We hear the age called material; but it is an age of spirit wrestling with matter—something trying to ignore matter, and see in its appearances only spirit in disguise. And these refined and pregnant drawings in pen and ink, or with the etching-point, are the very spirit of pictorial art; the spirit implying and suggesting the body, yet not hampered with it. There is a profound significance in this, the mystic wisdom of reticence.83

Hawthorne’s view of illustration, however, was shortly subsumed by growing complaints about overabundant, excessive illustration thanks in large part to the new dominance of the halftone, which rendered illustrations duller in tone and less crisp in line. *Russian Tea* exploits this connection to illustration’s suggestive qualities of the engraver era, seeking to harness its relationship between body and spirit and transform Hawthorne’s “mystic wisdom of reticence” into paint. In its connection of art and the otherworldly and in its singular debt to the type of illustration that grants something to the imagination, the painting seems informed by this changing and precarious periodical media landscape.

The language of crossing boundaries, of existing between worlds, permeates discussions of Wiles’s work in the years leading up to the execution of *Russian Tea*. Wiles, as one commentator observed in 1889, “continue[s] to jog on, jog on […] but seems disposed to mount the stile and over into another field. […] Mr. Wiles could do something, and be something, if he would.”84 Also noticing how Wiles appeared to be transiting or straddling different realms, another reviewer remarked the following year:
“we hope that the artist will not stop too long in this Noman’s land of odds-and-ends.”

Such comments give voice to the perception that his artistic persona existed at the threshold between media, that he often seemed to occupy an indefinable place between opposing sides. In 1892, as part of a fictional exchange between two exhibition visitors, one article captures this sense of Wiles in limbo, his shiftiness when it comes to recognized categories: “Wiles—I didn’t know he was an illustrator; thought he was a painter.”

Certainly these statements evince Wiles’s versatility in different media—with oil, watercolor, illustration, and so forth. But they also point to his unsettled position professionally and a struggle for supremacy that is ingrained in Russian Tea. Wiles, adept at “mingling and blending,” builds this in-betweenness into the painting. Russian Tea incorporates qualities that belong to illustration, Wiles exists rhetoricly between painting and illustration, and ultimately this convergence of mediums is predicated on crossing over a mystical divide. In other words, the collision between painting and illustration in the picture intersects with its underlying concern for the collision between living presence and ghostly absence.

For Wiles’s own statements on navigating the terrain between illustration and painting are laced with a remarkable insistence on darkness, both its possibilities and pitfalls. In 1894, he observed: “I have divided my time between painting and illustrating. So far as I can see, my book work has not hurt my painting, and there are so many instances in which admirable painters also turn out a great deal of illustration as to make any such fear groundless.” He goes on: “If a man stuck all the time to black and white, I can realize that he might end up losing his feeling for color; he would turn always to the
somber pigments on his palette and become afraid of the brilliant ones.” Wiles fills his brief defense of illustration with a layer of metaphorical darkness through his use of the words “hurt” and “fear” and “afraid,” even as he does his best to put a genial spin on his endeavor. His remarks broach a dangerous edge to illustration, as if it is a realm you can fall into or succumb to if you are not careful. There is a “fear” of giving into the “somber pigments,” of giving oneself over to the darkness. This sense of plumbing shady depths, of “los[s],” of an almost anguished or nightmarish quality is furthered by the equation he makes when he writes, “Fortunately for me I like illustrating. To men who hate it—and I know some who do—it must be purgatory.”

This spiritual inflection to illustration reappears in a few years later in a discussion about wash that even more forcefully collapses the distinction between literal and metaphorical playing around in the dark. “The free expression of ideals is […] hampered by the fear of ‘spoiling’ the purity of the wash, a ‘muddy’ result being pronounced with horror—a cardinal sin. No less an authority than the gifted artist, Irving R. Wiles, advises a student not to fear producing a muddy result if valuable knowledge may be gained by the experiment. Out of darkness into light on a higher plane is reasonably sure to follow.” Wiles, presented as a specialist on the slippage between dark washes and dark horrors—like a Virgil of the illustration underworld—was uniquely attuned to the spiritual resonance of wash drawing’s shadowy prospects—both its material murkiness and its metaphysical “dread.”

This exploration of darkness in illustration becomes literalized during his gradual shift away from it as a professional pursuit in the mid-to-late 1890s. Drawing becomes
instead foregrounded in terms of actual darkness for Wiles. It becomes a nighttime activity, as a 1902 profile of the artist relates: “Daylight finds him in his studio, nightfall in his charming home, where the [paint] brush is exchanged for the pencil or the pen. The walls of his apartment are covered with pencil and pen-and-ink sketches from the hand which never tires.” Wiles is “an indefatigable worker,” whose “hand” performs in a nearly involuntary manner. The article suggests the uncontained activity of drawing for Wiles, even though he “has been obliged to abandon illustrating, except in occasional instances.” In 1896, unrelenting hands in the dark become part of the subject of Russian Tea, precisely at the moment of his transition away from commercial illustration, toward drawing as a mostly private, nocturnal pursuit. Evoking the relation between hand and artistic identity, the painting indexes the hand’s capacity both to represent and to conjure, as if Wiles, groping in the dark in this drawing room, is asking where his own hand is to rest, what sort of artist he is to be.

Grappling with darkness in illustration offered Wiles creative freedom as a space of exploration. Illustration in this period is often regarded as limiting artistic latitude, as fundamentally about compromise, as pursued only out of financial necessity. While aspects of these clichés at times applied to Wiles—money is cited as motive for his initial foray, for example—his involvement is more complicated and two-fold identity not so easily separated. Wiles’s illustrations sometimes took liberties with textual materials, he experimented in the medium, and saw it as a source of artistic replenishment. He insisted, for instance, “that he would always do some illustration if for no other reason than that the change offers rest and refreshment.” His illustrations, moreover, are not always
tethered to the literal mechanics of the words they accompany but often have open-ended or divergent aspects. Wiles’s images, that is, are not merely subservient to text but at times push against or expand upon it. Thus the fusion of literal and metaphorical darkness in illustration suggests a place of imaginative experimentation, a testing ground. In probing illustration’s darkness, Wiles comes upon a mystical darkness, a liberation or deliverance from constraint. This formulation echoes Henry James’s characterization of darkness as the locus of artistic creation in his short story “The Middle Years”—a story that appeared less than fifty pages from the reproduction of a standalone drawing by Wiles in the May 1893 issue of Scribner’s Magazine. “We work in the dark,” writes James, “we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.” The passage in the story is often associated with James’s ideals about the unknowable place where the production of art happens and how the activity of the imagination is a mysterious, even mystical process. It is not the Enlightenment’s darkness of ignorance but the artistically generative darkness of the unconscious—darkness as a condition of insight. Wiles’s Russian Tea seeks to come to terms with a similar sense of aesthetic possibility in darkness and enacts the way, as James wrote, imagination “has a life of its own.” Allowing room for the imagination is perhaps the painting’s key concern.

“The imagination has leave to roam”

This depiction of women ostensibly only at tea struck a chord with Theodore Dreiser, capturing his attention as a young art critic in New York. In his 1898 profile of the artist,
he begins by remarking on Wiles’s shift from an illustrator to “a painter […] who] is greatly to the fore just at present.” Dreiser expresses admiration for the artist’s “style that is not so much pleasing for what it accurately puts in as for what it leaves out. His art has originality, in that the situations presented are new.” Lingering on *Russian Tea* as if it serves as the prime example of Wiles’s gift for painterly absence, Dreiser endorses it for not “craving after purpose,” for not being overly rooted in “all details” of “every-day life,” yet tapping into an ineffable something “caught from out a prosaic enough reality.” “Everything is not accurately painted in,” he observes, “and the imagination has leave to roam and decide for itself what the additional conditions must be. As the imagination always delights to do this, the picture has a fascination from this side.”

Dreiser, a writer keenly aware of the rhythms of language and the multiple meanings of words, perhaps plays on the double sense of “leaves” in the painting, where tea and imagination seem to touch. In its efforts to not only show but also to conceal, to revel in indeterminacy, *Russian Tea* prompts imaginative flight, stimulates a kind of mental vision for Dreiser.

While his comments are oriented toward communicating the painting’s “grace and beauty,” Dreiser’s response may also be shaped by his interest in Spiritualism. More precisely, the writer’s great investment in Spiritualism was but one aspect of an ongoing attempt to bridge science and mysticism in his conception of the world. Dreiser had “a deeply superstitious side to his personality,” as Louis Zanine has traced. He maintained a lifelong interest in reconciling “occult experiences and supernatural suspicions” with a mechanistic worldview founded in modern science with which his fiction is more
commonly associated. Not only were Dreiser’s early family experiences punctuated by allegedly occult events, but he repeatedly wrote about Spiritualism and interviewed some of its popular practitioners as a reporter in the 1890s. Throughout the remainder of his life he visited fortunetellers, attended séances, and consulted Ouija boards, for example, in attempts to access the “unknowable.”

The tensions within Dreiser’s own life and work seem to come to bear on his “fascination” with Russian Tea, which, as I have been arguing, registers similar frictions. Indeed literary naturalism is often understood as the attempt to apply an “objective” scientific method to fiction. Grounded in a materialist conception of human life, it tended to eschew spiritual, supernatural, or metaphysical questions and explanations. The case of Dreiser, however, suggests how the unobservable, the impenetrable, and the “unknowable” trouble the notion of an all-encompassing empirical reality. The American critic John Charles Van Dyke had, in 1889, supplied a mentally transportive, even spiritual, valiance to paintings that were “indefinite in treatment.” Decrying realism as the product of the positivistic age, Van Dyke advocated painting endowed with the “suggestion” of something “that may stir the mind of the beholder.” Painting should seek to wrest us out of the facts of material existence:

That art which leaves us where it found us fulfills no serious mission on earth. A picture may not be able to exalt us to great heights of splendor, […] but unless some thought in it strikes into fire new thoughts in us, unless it touches some responsive chord in our nature, unless it somehow stimulates us with new life and pleasure the painter’s […] efforts have been expended in vain.

Dreiser adopts similar language in his discussion of Russian Tea, which merges aesthetic transcendence with a quasi-mystical receptivity. Tellingly, Dreiser, “in his invocations of
mysterious forces,” as Christophe Den Tandt puts it, “suggests that the presumably empty shell of the Unknowable does accommodate cosmic forces whose influence can be sensed, if not described.”

Russian Tea seems to enlist a similar furtively “sensed” intimation, serving as a battleground or contradictory space for such forces, and Dreiser’s transfixed reaction to the painting supports this reading.

With his embrace of Wiles’s painting, however, it is almost as if Dreiser affirms rather than derides the underlying concerns of “the drama of the broken teacup,” as Frank Norris would famously dismiss Howellsian realism in 1901—a realism Norris considered too bound to a safe, tame bourgeois milieu. In pondering what more Wiles’s own “teacups” might portend, it is almost as if Dreiser also glimpses something simmering beneath the surface of Howells’ deceptively simple low suspense, some fissures pointing to a darker critique of the psychic, social, and political consequences of Gilded Age transformation, as later assessments of Howells would have it. Russian Tea is as much about how its own mode of inference comes to mean as it is about the activity depicted. It would rather, in Dresier’s words, “attract the eye by a subtle suggestion […] than […] because of a deed being enacted.” Even more, as Dreiser helps us to see, the painting invites a certain kind of reading.

Shadow Play

Spiritualism hardly had a monopoly on attempts to traffic in immaterial realms in the later decades of the nineteenth century. For it was also new forms of technology that were seen to annihilate not only distance and time but also death—the phonograph made the dead speak and film made the dead move. These emerging mediums were ubiquitously
gauged as both rational technological spectacles and as irrational supernatural
manifestations. As Simon During and others have argued, late-nineteenth century
illusion shows and then moving pictures “drew energy from their relations to […]
popular science and spiritualism.” Cinema’s beginnings have been traced to this
conjunction of (occult) Spiritualist performance and (secular) magic theater. Georges
Méliès was, after all, a stage magician when he made his first film in 1896 while Thomas
Edison had already been dubbed the Wizard of Menlo Park. In the mid 1890s, motion
pictures underwent a major transition from individualized viewing devices—such as
Edison’s kinetoscope of 1894—to projecting machines, notably the Lumières’
cinematograph (1895) and Edison’s vitascope, which had its first theatrical exhibition in
New York in April 1896.

Russian Tea, with its intermedial foundations, seems to also have in mind these
new motion picture technologies—an even more consequential media upheaval. The
creation of Wiles’s painting did not simply coincide with this revolution in the history of
representation. As a fixture in New York, Wiles would have been well aware of these
developments, not the least from the popular publications that employed him. In 1894, for
instance, his drawings were featured in a Century Illustrated Magazine article that
immediately preceded a lavish account of Edison’s invention of the kineto-phonograph,
which, as its name implies, combined kinetoscope and phonograph. Wiles’s Russian
Tea, like the cinematic medium itself, was constituted from a constellation of media. And the painting is specially attuned to, like cinema, imaginative conveyance. To
transport the viewer instantaneously, to make something appear out of thin air, to cut apart and rearrange the body—these are the painting’s aims, too.

This connection is partly underscored by *Russian Tea’s* approximation of the viewing conditions of early cinema. Its enveloping twilight is not just like the darkened rooms that mediums insisted upon but is also like preparations for a film screening, which, in turn, “suggest a striking analogy with a spiritualist séance,” as Matthew Solomon observes. For example, in first encountering moving pictures in 1896, a journalist was struck by the occult eeriness of the experience: “anxious like spiritualists around a turning table, […] they squeeze into the little room where the cinematograph gives its séances. Shhh! The incantation begins. The mysterious device takes off with the click-clacking of a sewing machine gone wild, and the image comes alive.”¹¹³ That Spiritualist séances sometimes featured the projection of spirit photographs through a magic lantern makes these overlapping arenas all the more significant for *Russian Tea*. When first exhibited in 1897, two critics detected a sonic element to the painting; one called it “a blare of strong color” and another found aspects of it to be “inharmonious”; both terms imply the cacophony, dissonance, or jarring quality more characteristic of aurality and they reverberate with the whirling sounds—the “click-clacking”—of the new device’s mechanism turning over.¹¹⁴ Maybe the picture also reverberates with this conflation of new moving picture environment in the guise of Spiritualist séance.

The foreground figure leans to the right as if to welcome an unseen stranger to the table, as if to make room for ghostly visitation. This empty space is accompanied by a table setting; though there are only four figures, there are five drinking glasses. The
figures cluster around the samovar as if it is one of these new devices—say, the
kinetoscope, which marked, notes film historian David Robinson, “the most significant
single step toward cinematography as we know it today.” It is not just that the picture’s
samovar recalls the kinetoscope visually, as prominent cylindrical apertures top sloping
upper contours to echo one another (figs. 4.16 and 4.17). It is more that both were
understood to have mystical, transportive associations. Marveling at the “seemingly
supernatural effects” of an early kinetograph, an 1891 article, for example, likens its
properties to the “magic perspective glasses and enchanted carpets” of the Arabian
Nights—identifying the device, like the samovar also was in these years, with fanciful
magical objects.

To see the picture’s samovar as evocative of the filmic apparatus on some level,
consider also motion picture projection, just beginning to displace single-viewer devices
like the kinetoscope. In 1896, viewers marveled at the vitascope, for instance, as an
apparatus that “by means of electrical power and light, magnifies and throw upon a
screen images.” One critic, in a related fashion, focused on the spread of light in
Russian Tea, calling it “a picture flooded with warm light.” Like the brilliant and
unknowable light of religious paintings, the “lighted candles […] send a glow on the
faces of the group,” he emphasized—anticipating the way light projected on a film screen
is reflected back over the faces of the audience. Given the samovar’s generative
associations, the quivering background of Russian Tea—the glimmer of light on the
wall—begins to approximate cinematic projection. Its pulsating strokes are like dark
shadows that chase each other by flickering light. Early motion pictures were called “the
flickers,” owing to the way they are constituted by light playing cross a flat surface.\textsuperscript{119} The overall thinness of the paint application in \textit{Russian Tea} is, too, reminiscent of this thinness of cinematic projection. The mirror seems to await the projecting image that the samovar promises; it is a quasi-screen, weighed like a proscenium arch in the theater. Refuting figural reflection, the mirror, tilting forward, seems to be more expectant of projection.

Wiles was especially occupied with the way projected light and the shadows could be cast at this very moment. His illustration \textit{Reading the Shadow} alludes to these cinematic moving shadows as well as to the origins of drawing—Pliny’s tracing of the outline of a shadow (see fig. 4.15). In it, the activity of seeing something immaterial, of trying to decipher shadowy shapes becomes the subject. The illustration seems to take up the sense of seeing what is not quite there in \textit{Russian Tea}. It puts forward the variability of “reading” images—something Dreiser likewise calls attention to. A book lies open on the table, as the image juxtaposes reading from the page and reading shadows. The activity of reading then is positioned as more elastic, as challenging the authority of the page, as problematizing the primacy and legibility of the text. The seated man’s body position conspicuously recalls the foreground figure in \textit{Russian Tea} with their similarly lopsided shoulders. Even as the shadow has a looming, doppelganger-like effect, appearing more laterally than perspectivally, Wiles reorients the convention of exaggerated shadows in illustration as a way of heightening a suspenseful moment to draw attention to elusive shadows, to ambiguity, to that which cannot be pinned down.\textsuperscript{120}
In light of these cinematic approximations, it is notable that Wiles’s first major portrait commission—the work he aspired to and that would soon unseat illustration altogether—was of the famous stage actress Julia Marlowe (see fig. 4.2). The portrait shows how Wiles’s engagement with the world changed, how the possibility offered by Russian Tea was undercut or revoked from his art. The portrait refashioned the trajectory of Wiles’s career, as art historians have noted. But his newfound success as a portraitist had other unappreciated implications. For in moving from illustrating periodicals to depicting socially prominent and politically powerful people—he paints President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906, for example—he enters into a more rarified milieu cut off from everyday life, removed from the commotion and turbulence of a rapidly changing world. Miss Julia Marlowe, then, represents his upwardly mobile repackaging, a retreat toward greater cachet, a shift away from any attempt to grapple with unsettling matters or to weigh the darker seeds buried in American society.

The portrait typifies Wiles’s painterly idiom after 1900. In contrast to Russian Tea, it is more concerned with texture and pattern, with rich fabrics—the attention to the sumptuous rug, sofa, pillows, evening dress, and curtain, for example. It demonstrates technical virtuosity: his bravura brushwork, painterly flourishes, thicker application, and alla prima directness that circumvents drawing. And yet its calculated placement—her hands, her lean, her head tilted to convey the proper balance between rectitude and comeliness—communicates this as official portraiture. The gauzy softness of the lighting leaves no mistake that this is foremost about outward appearance: porcelain skin and opulent surroundings. Wiles becomes a painter focused on sheen, glamour, and celebrity.
He becomes a painter of the world of the flesh, of surface. Such full-length, society portraits, though viewed as increasingly outmoded in artistic circles, continued to serve as sanctioned validation for those patrons from a wealthy and socially privileged milieu.\textsuperscript{124}

If \textit{Russian Tea} claims a stake as modern for what it implies rather than proclaims, then \textit{Julia Marlowe} seems to shun the modern. Even her profession as an actress of the stage distances her from changing times, from the hubbub of modernity.\textsuperscript{125} In the early decades of the twentieth century Marlowe was regarded as the “quintessence of Victorian womanhood” and an adherent to the personality school of acting, in which the performer put her own personality on display rather than transforming into the dramatic character—a fading nineteenth century American tradition in acting.\textsuperscript{126} In finding refuge in grand manner portraiture, Wiles seems to long for the kind of old-fashioned patronage system of his middle-namesake Allan Ramsay, portrait painter to King George III.\textsuperscript{127}

Wiles, in 1905, calls Marlowe “witching.”\textsuperscript{128} If here a trace may linger, it is only a distant echo of something abutting magic or mysticism or the possibilities they signify. When Wiles describes her as “witching,” the term seems turned safely consumable, properly domesticated—wiles and witching are already becoming platitudes drained of mystery, just tropes pointing to physical charm, elegance, beauty. That inexpressible something, by then, is lost. Wiles, in the end, exchanged the unstable excavation of noumenal unknownness for the security of the known phenomenal world. In admitting the cultural pressures of illustration and film, \textit{Russian Tea} considers the experience it offers by meditating on medium circa 1896, when its creator was negotiating different realms of image making.\textsuperscript{129} It suggests some incantatory power that was buoyed by its
convergence of painting, illustration, cinema, and mystical promise, something that, however inchoate and unfulfilled by Wiles’s surrender to tradition, escapes nullification. The literal about-face of the foreground figures—from one painting to the other—suggests the earlier work’s greater participatory rumination than it may have first appeared. By turning away, *Russian Tea* takes in.


6 For instance, Wiles “became a regular contributor to nearly all the publications of the day” wrote Arthur Hoeber in “A Century of American Illustration: VII.—Serious Book Work,” *The Bookman* 8 (January 1899): 438; Joseph Pennell called him one of the notable “younger men” of the profession whose work was “direct and brilliant” in *Modern Illustration* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1895), 128; and Wiles is admired for the “robust sentiment” of his “brush and line narratives” in Perriton Maxwell, “The Illustrations of the Quarter,” *Quarterly Illustrator* 1 (July–September 1893): 190.

8 Lorinda Munson Bryant calls Wiles possessed “with a prophet’s insight” in *American Pictures and Their Painters* (New York: John Lane Company, 1917), 261. Artist Elisabeth Finley Thomas, in her recollection of Wiles circa 1900, compares him to the “mystic” artist Elliot Daingerfield in *Ladies, Lovers and Other People* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1935), 137, 141. And a 1910 profile of Wiles goes to great lengths to stress his artistic “imagination” but simultaneously to distance him from “symbolism” and “eccentricity,” even as the former capacity is premised on the latter terms. The anonymous author seems to want to have it both ways. In an effort to recoup “imagination” from “symbolism” and “eccentricity,” the conception of “imagination” is so bound up in these other designations that the author cannot quite figure out how to talk about it as something distinct from them. Wiles “stirs the imagination,” but resists “the temptation today to bewilder […] a befogged effort at symbolism.” Alluding to artists like Albert Pinkham Ryder, he writes: “We have let ourselves believe that imagination must be a vague and ponderous thing rather than a vital quality which shall help a man to see all of life vividly […]”; whereas the real mystery of the imagination is that it has the power to stimulate vision.” The author tries to make the case that “imagination” resides not just in the “the tangled and the formless” but in “the subtler qualities of imagination,” with which he aligns Wiles. See “Irving R. Wiles: Distinctive American Portrait Painter,” *The Craftsman* 17 (June 1910): 347–53. The terms “imaginative” and “eccentric” were often interchangeable for period writers on Ryder. For the designation of Ryder as “eccentric,” see, for example, Dorothy Weir Young, *The Life and Letters of J. Alden Weir* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 221.


18 For instance, the German word “Kessel” means both cauldron and an encircled area or semi-circular ring.


22 Wiles’s studio, full of “reliquaries from various pilgrimages” is referred to quasi-spiritually as a “sanctuary” and “shrine” and the artist as a “prophet” in Ethel Gillespie, “Irving Wiles: Painter of Youth and Beauty,” The Mentor 16 (December 1928): 44.


26 The connection between the samovar and transportation is also suggested by the fact that Wiles contributed illustrations to travel articles focused on Russia specifically and eastern Europe and the upper Middle East generally, several of which refer to the object. For these, see Thomas Gaskell Allen, Jr. and William Lewis Sachtleben, “Across Asia on a Bicycle. III.—Through Persia to Samarcand,” Century Illustrated Magazine 48 (July 1894): 399; and “Across Asia on a Bicycle. IV—The Journey from Samarkand to Kuldja” Century Illustrated Magazine 48 (August 1894): 522. S. G. W. Benjamin mentions the samovar in a setting of “extraordinary mystery,” in which “spectre-like”

27 “Fashionable Winter Amusements in New York,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 16 (February 24, 1883): 115. For a related example of this esoteric cross-over between the United States and Russian, consider the Russian émigré Helena Blavatsky, a founder of the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875, who was sometimes known as the “Russian witch.” See “Helena Petrovna Blavatsky,” *The Theosophical Forum* 5 (April 1900): 222.


29 G. R. O’Reilly, “The Secrets of Snake-Charming,” *St. Nicholas* 20 (May 1893): 538–44. Similarly, John Dutton Wright writes that “we have reached a stage in the world’s history when we can lay aside the tools of savagery,” in “Speech and Speech-Reading for the Deaf,” *The Century* 53 (January 1897): 333–34.


35 Questions about the afterlife stirred Howells greatly following the untimely death of his daughter in 1889, and, as George Carrington observes, his “fictional world darkens.” George C. Carrington, Jr., *The Immense Complex Drama: The World and Art of the Howells Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1966), 36. For this shift in

36 For the quote see Charles Feigenoff, “‘His Apparition’: The Howells No One Believes In,” American Literary Realism 13 (Spring 1980): 85.


38 Howells’s farcical one-act play Five O’Clock Tea, first published in 1887, also reappeared in 1894 as part of Harper’s “Black & White Series.” Gently satirizing the manners of the rendezvous at the five o’clock tea, it opens with the hostess, Mrs. Somers, primping in the mirror and Mr. Campbell, the first guest, adjusting the gas lamp to effect the quality of light in the room. Howells is also mentioned in the paragraph preceding a discussion of Wiles’s illustration work in Mrs. Kendall White, “Where Graceful Girls Abound,” The Cosmopolitan 16 (December 1893): iii.

39 The instances of haunting in “The Bachelor’s Christmas” culminate in a domestic gathering, a large Christmas day dinner. Likewise Frank Pope Humphrey’s “He Would A-Wooing Go” (1895), which Wiles illustrated, builds up to a formal meal that serves as the seemingly serene counterpoint to the haunted trauma of the climax when nighttime terrors provoke fears of a marauder and speculation about a ghost. Frank Pope Humphrey, “He Would A-Wooing Go,” Century Illustrated Magazine 49 (February 1895): 599–606. A. Alvarez, Night: Night Life, Night Language, Sleep, and Dreams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 193: In the late-Victorian ghost story, the nightmare “erupts among the overstuffed furniture of decent, middle-class homes where decent, unsuspecting people lead their ordinary lives.”


41 Ibid., 66.


Carrington, The Immense Complex Drama, 222.


Ambrose Bierce’s sardonic two-part definition of a “witch” approximates the duality of A Yell Arose and A Yellow Rose: “(1) any ugly and repulsive old woman, in a wicked league with the devil; (2) a beautiful and attractive young woman, in wickedness a league beyond the devil.” See Ambrose Bierce, The Unabridged Devil’s Dictionary (originally published as The Cynic’s Word Book in 1906), ed. David E. Schultz and S. J. Joshi (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002). Wiles served as judge of a Fakir competition in 1899, suggesting complicity with this view of his work.

The yellow rose in the painting is understood as a symbol of jealousy in Todd D. Smith et al., American Art from the Dicke Collection (Dayton: Dayton Art Institute, 1997), 144.


Carrington, The Immense Complex Drama, 67.


Irving R. Wiles, “Portrait Painting,” *Palette and Bench* 1 (January 1909): 85. “One should think of his canvas as though he were able to move the figure and drapery upon it as he could a living sitter,” wrote Wiles. Another discussion of Wiles’s portraits gives rise to the remark that “When I look at portraits like these I think it is we who are the ghosts and they the living things.” See William B. McCormick, “Portraits of Irving R. Wiles,” *International Studio* 77 (June 1923): 262.

On teas as favorable for Spiritualist séances, see “Teas and Teaspoons,” *Punch, or the London Charivari* 65 (September 27, 1873): 128; “‘Mediums’ in Prussia,” *Punch, or the London Charivari* 71 (December 2, 1876): 245; and “Secret of Spiritualistic Séances Divulged,” *The Spiritual Magazine* (July 1, 1868): 323.

Lemuel Wiles to Elizabeth Payne, December 21, 1896, Perry Public Library, Perry, New York.


See, for instance, his *Artist’s Father and Mother* (1889; Corcoran Gallery of Art), which Wiles highly valued, exhibited widely at high profile exhibitions—Chicago (1893)

62 Lemuel Wiles Papers, letter in 1891 folder, Perry Public Library, Perry, New York. The letter refers to Irving’s *Cohanim Blessing the People* in Richard Wheatley, “The Jews in New York,” *Century Illustrated Magazine* 43 (January 1892): 325. Wheatley writes: “Jewish congregations are as diversified as those of the Congregationalists. Visionaries, enthusiasts, fanatics even, relics of the bad times in which diabolism rioted, and in which cabala and mysticism won many and close disciples, are common among the Jews as among the Christians” (333). This article and its companion tie Wiles to depictions of family member in connection with spiritual events as well as point up his experience with ritual and worship generally. See also its companion Richard Wheatley, “The Jews in New York.—II,” *Century Illustrated Magazine* 43 (February 1892): 512–32.


During the 1890s, a host of publications appeared that aimed to explain or endorse the merits of Spiritualism, expose or discredit its claims, or sometimes do both. See A Medium, Revelation of a Spirit Medium; or Spiritualistic Mysteries Exposed (St. Paul, Minnesota: Farrington & Co. 1891); Thomson Jay Hudson, The Law of Psychic Phenomena (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1892); Alfred Russel Wallace, Miracles and Modern Spiritualism (London: George Redway, 1896); Henry Ridgley Evans, The Spirit World Unmasked: Illustrated Investigations in the Phenomena of Spiritualism and Theosophy (Chicago: Laird & Lee, 1897); William E. Robinson, Spirit Slate Writing and Kindred Phenomena (New York: Munn & Company, 1898); William Britten, Art Magic; or Mundane, Sub-Mundane and Super-Mundane Spiritism (Chicago: Progressive Thinker Publishing House, 1898); Frank Podmore, Modern Spiritualism: A History and Criticism (London: Methuen & Co., 1902); John Godrey Raupert, The Dangers of Spiritualism (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1906); and James Robertson, Spiritualism: The Open Door to the Unseen Universe (London: L. N. Fowler & Co., 1908).


Although the edge of the lampshade is reflected in the mirror, the woman beneath it, positioned between shade and mirror, is not duplicated in it. The mirror awkwardly omits her, despite the downward slant that would seem to align her in its path of reflection.


The importance Wiles’s placed on hands accords with the general emphasis on getting them right in portrait painting. For example, J. Beavington Atkinson concluded that “in portraiture the hands are only second in importance to the face” in “National Portraits,” Contemporary Review 9 (September–December 1868): 202. For the problem of hands in portrait painting as continuing in photographic portraiture at this time, see Frank M. Sutcliffe, “The Hands in Portraiture,” Anthony’s Photographic Bulletin 31 (February


75 For this drawing’s connection to *Russian Tea*, see Reynolds, *Irving R. Wiles*, 89.

76 An earlier instance of a related conflation is the double meaning of the title of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, in which two different sorts of leaves, botanical specimens and the pages of the book, come together. For this idea, see, for example, David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 241.

77 The posture of the woman in the immediate foreground also closely recalls the countless reading women in Wiles’s oeuvre with similarly akimbo arm positions and often depicted seated and facing away. Thus Wiles’s numerous paintings of women reading seemed concerned with his illustrative practice because they focus so directly on the pages where his work would have appeared. Among these paintings are *On the Veranda* (1887; Terra Foundation), *A Summer’s Afternoon* (1887; Tweed Museum of Art), *The Sonata* (1889; De Young Museum), *A Lady Reading* (1889; Lyman Allyn Art Museum), *Lady in Black* (1890; Private Collection), *Woman Reading on a Bench* (ca. 1895; Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum), *In the Garden* (ca. 1897; Private Collection), and *The Reader* (ca. 1900; Private Collection). For portrayals of reading women, see Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 357–58. Banta also notes the complications of detecting valuable meditation versus dangerous reverie in images of women in repose, 358–60. For female readership of magazines and advertising directed toward women, see Ellen Gruber Garvey, *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 171–78.

78 Fleming speculates that the painting “may have actually been painted as an illustration,” in *Irving Ramsay Wiles, N.A., 1861–1948*, 65.


Julian Hawthorne, “A Magician of Line,” The Quarterly Illustrator 2 (July–September 1894): 233, 233–34, and 232. Hawthorne seems to graft a long-established view of drawing onto illustration for the purposes of his moment. For instance, Diderot writes how “indeterminate” sketches “allow more liberty to our imagination, which sees in them whatever it likes.” Drawing’s metaphoric associations with spirit and psychic space partly result from its perceived capacity to visualize spontaneity, initial ideas, and coming into being. For the importance of ambiguity in drawing, see, for example, Deanna Petherbridge, The Primacy of Drawing: Histories and Theories of Practice (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 27.


“Painters in Pastel, the Fourth Exhibition,” The Studio 5 (May 17, 1890): 238.

F. H. Smith, American Illustrators, Part 5 (1892), 60.


89 Ibid., 387.


91 Irving R. Wiles, “A Word on Water-Color,” The Limner 1 (February 1895): 7. This “dread” is not just a fear of something, but also a feeling that has no object, the sense that Martin Heidegger describes as a “drawing away of everything,” as nothingness, in “What is Metaphysics?” in Basic Writings, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 89–110.


93 Hall, “Irving Ramsey Wiles,” 82.

94 Wiles writes of being “unnerved” by the challenges of an early portrait commission, which “confronted me like an ominous storm-cloud on the horizon” as well as of being seized a “paroxysm of despair” with another. See Irving R. Wiles, “Anecdotes of Portraiture,” Broadway Magazine 14 (July 1905): 18, 22.


96 “Books Illustrators. VII. Irving R. Wiles,” The Book Buyer 11 (1894): 387. For an example of the opposite attitude, see Elizabeth de Veer and Richard J. Boyle, Sunlight and Shadow: The Life and Art of Willard L. Metcalf (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), 208, 210. For the periodical medium itself as transportive, as collapsing physical distance in connection with Wiles, see “Take the Hint,” What a Cake of Soap Will Do (Cincinnati: Proctor & Gamble Company, ca. 1890), [26]. Wiles’s illustration in this promotional brochure for Ivory Soap accompanies text finding “some monthly magazine / Or paper that is daily whirled / To every quarter of the world.”

97 For “inconsistencies” between the text and Wiles’s illustrations, see “The Scrap Basket,” The Writer 7 (November 1894): 170. For Wiles as a new breed of illustrator and “manipulator of the brush,” see Ernest Knaufft, “Art Chat,” The Theatre 5 (February 16,


102 Dreiser’s newspaper articles on Spiritualism include, for instance, “Theosophy and Spiritualism,” St. Louis Globe-Democrat (January 20, 1893), 12; “Guided By Spirits,” St. Louis Globe-Democrat (January 24, 1893), 12; “An Hypnotic Seance,” St. Louis Globe-Democrat (March 17, 1893), 4; “Miss Fay’s Seance,” St. Louis Globe-Democrat (February 21, 1893), 4; “A Spiritualist Fraud,” St. Louis Republic (September 11, 1893), 3; “Educating a Ghost,” Pittsburg Dispatch (May 18, 1894), 7; and “At the Sign of the Lead Pencil: In the Matter of Spiritualism,” Bohemian Magazine 17 (October 1909), 424–25.

103 See Zanine, Mechanism and Mysticism, 115–45, esp. 118.


110 The first theatrical exhibition of Edison’s Vitascope was at Koster and Bial’s Music Hall on West 34th Street (between 6th and 7th Avenues). See, for example, David Robinson, *From Peep Show to Palace: The Birth of American Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 62–63. Wiles’s resided at 106 West 55th Street (also between 6th and 7th Avenues).


112 See Solomon, *Disappearing Tricks*.

114 “The Society of American Artists,” New York Times—Saturday Review of Books and Art (March 27, 1897), 15; and Sophia Antoinette Walker, “The Society Exhibit,” The Independent (April 22, 1897): 7. For other discussions of color in the painting, see A. H. Griffith, “American Pictures at the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition at Omaha, Nebraska,” Brush and Pencil 3 (October 1898): 43; and “Clever Pictures,” New York Herald (March 28, 1897), section 5, 5. One painting by Wiles is labeled a “song without words” in Margaret Hall, “Irving Ramsey Wiles: The Artist, The Man,” The Art Interchange 49 (October 1902): 80; and Wiles’s paintings are “[l]ike the overtones in music” in William B. McCormick, “Portraits of Irving R. Wiles,” International Studio 77 (June 1923): 261. See also Wiles’s many musical subjects such as At the Piano (1888; unlocated); The Sonata (1889; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco); Ignacy Jan Paderewski in William Mason, “Paderewski: A Critical Study,” Century Illustrated Magazine 43 (March 1892): 720; and Maria Sazonoff (1925; Mount Holyoke College Art Museum). As Aura Satz and others have detailed, in Spiritualist séances haptic and sonic signals were the primary methods for communicating with spirit powers. See Aura Satz, “Music of Its Own Accord,” Leonardo Music Journal 20 (2010): 73–78. The acoustic effects “consist first, of the production of sounds by knocking. […] The voices of spirits are also heard clairaudiently and externally, sometimes uttering words only, at others, long addresses.” See William Britten, Art Magic; or Mundane, Sub-Mundane and Super-Mundane Spiritism (Chicago: Progressive Thinker Publishing House, 1898), 354.


118 “Pictures at Exposition in Omaha,” Brush and Pencil (October 1898): 43.

119 The essence of cinema is perhaps the coexistence of living and dead shadows. Film directors would shortly be known as “shadow-masters.” For more on the analogy between shadows and the cinematic image, see Victor I. Stoichita, A Short History of the Shadow (New York: Reaktion Books, 1997), 152.

120 For a more characteristic use of the shadow, see Gilbert Gaul’s illustration “The Procession of Two” in Frank Pope Humphrey, “He Would A-Wooing Go,” Century Illustrated Magazine 49 (February 1895): 599.

In 1920, for example, Wiles earned almost $50,000, putting his income in the top the top two percent of Americans, and led an “increasingly opulent and extravagant lifestyle.” See Fleming, *Irving Ramsay Wiles, N.A., 1861–1948*, 45, 49.

For his conviction that “one should draw with paint,” see Irving R. Wiles, “Portrait Painting,” *Palette and Bench* 1 (January 1909): 85.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, portrait painting of this kind was all but exhausted. Wiles’s ascendancy to it coincided with, as Barbara Dayer Gallati writes, “enormous changes in cultural and social terrains in which portraiture had flourished.” For more on society portraiture as “belated and anemic” after about 1900, see Gallati, “Identity and Aesthetics in American Portraits of the Gilded Age,” in Gallati et al., *High Society: American Portraits of the Gilded Age* (Munich: Bucerius Kunst Forum and Hirmer Verlag, 2008), 25–26. For Wiles as belated, see Gary Reynolds, “A Last Hurrah: Portraits by Wiles,” *American Heritage* 39 (September/October 1988): 86–93.

Wiles painted other portraits of stage actresses in this period, such as Mildred Morris (ca. 1901; New-York Historical Society) and Portrait of an Actress (Mrs. Anne H. Gilbert) (1903; Butler Institute of Art). He is called “the actors’ painter” in “Irving R. Wiles: Distinctive American Portrait Painter,” *The Craftsman* 18 (June 1910): 347.


For the connection to Allan Ramsay (1713–84) and the “correct” spelling of Wiles’s middle name, see Fleming, *Irving Ramsay Wiles, N.A., 1861–1948*, 70. See also the questionnaire that Wiles completed in Frank Weitenkampf Letters (reel N3, frame 1267), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.


Technological and scientific advances as well as the periodical press are cited as principal aspects of “modern civilization” that placed unparalleled pressure on Americans in George Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1881).
In a chapter entitled “The Dynamo and the Virgin” (1900) from his intellectual autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), the historian Henry Adams reports on his experience at the Paris World’s Fair of 1900. Adams found X-rays, electricity, and the new machines showcased at the exposition “occult, supersensual, irrational; they were a revelation of mysterious energy like that of the Cross, they were what, in terms of medieval science, were called immediate modes of divine substance.”¹

The electrical dynamo especially “became a symbol of infinity” for Adams, an “occult mechanism” whose “force was wholly new” and “anarchical.”² He dwells, however, less on the individual technologies themselves than on the unfamiliar, invisible powers they channel and unleash. Adams, somewhat disoriented, marvels at “the sudden irruption of forces totally new.”³ To be in their presence was to be in, writes Adams, “a new universe which had no common scale of measurement with the old.”⁴

The latest developments in mechanical invention at the Gallery of Machines baffled ordinary understanding—the comprehension of scientific mysteries proved inaccessible to Adams. The technologies he encountered monopolize the power once reserved for religious awe, and Adams’s essay imaginatively clothes these new forces—electrical currents, the atom—in the language of the mystical. Transcendent thresholds, such as the Cross, serve as his points of comparison. But Adams’s reliance upon this spiritual ground—upon the “supersensual,” that which, in other words, exists beyond the range of the senses—is not merely a reversion to outdated values nor should it be
minimized to assertions about Adams’s lack of technical expertise. His essay perceptively
delves into how to make meaning of a tremendous historical shift.

Adams strives to come to grips with the imperceptible, even the
incomprehensible, and to express a particular sense of reality, to articulate a wave of
wonder—a searing, almost epiphantic moment. His figurative prose gives shape to his
search for understanding of this invisible, supersensual world, from which no perceptible
residue remains. Although we cannot, of course, see the forces that are beyond our vision,
Adams instead brings the reader into contact with its impact on the imagination. Adams’s chapter, then, is an apposite summation here not simply for its nimble blending
of science and supernaturalism at the turn of the twentieth century but because it opens
onto questions around the place and the problem of how to render such experiences—
mystical perturbations, for instance—which each of the artists in the preceding chapters
likewise explored in their own distinct ways.

Motivating the specific paintings of Alexander, Chase, Elmer, and Wiles was not
only the multifaceted overlap between these spheres in the late nineteenth century but
also the dilemma of imagining the immediacy of moments that confound commonplace
explanation. Like Adams’s essay, their works raise and investigate the issue of the
representability of the supersensual, or, put differently, the materialization of the non-
material. How does the imagination work in relation to the known and unknown when it
comes into contact with new scientific horizons? How does the imagination produce and
plot new artistic frameworks for what is to be represented or to stay unrepresented? Each
artist in this study defined his own vision of what a reinvention of enchanted space
entailed, and each picture focalizes a reconsideration of what it means to wade beneath sensible appearances, to feel an elusive emanation that grabs, unsettles, and reorients him. These works’ novelty and significance lie in the endeavor of recreating in paint this experience of a faint yet intense disturbance.

Such stirrings have herein been treated under the heading of “superstition,” a convenient, albeit problematic, umbrella term employed to encompass a variety of numinous possibilities removed from strict institutional coordinates or dogmas. Reviewing “the passage from one century to another,” the Century Magazine in early 1901 asserted “that superstition had very sensibly diminished throughout the civilized world during the last one hundred years. In fact, that would seem to have been the function of the nineteenth century, namely, to smash superstition.” In spite of that, it maintained, “superstition lingers in the most enlightened minds.” This article captures the widening cultural effort to stamp out superstition that was part of the rise of a new, unbridled faith in science as well as the recognition of its enduring hold as a ruling habit of mind. Concomitantly, William James and other opponents of scientism—the doctrine that science is the definitive and exclusive basis for saying or expressing everything worth saying or expressing—cautioned that science did not, nor could it ever, satisfactorily explain all aspects of human experience.

Whither scientism’s subordination of art today? We know well the devotion to science that guides the relentless push for everything to be to controlled and measured; and the tendency to reduce humanistic and philosophical problems to scientific ones. At the popular level, ours is a society with a virtually unerring confidence in the promises of
statistics and computation—the apostles of data and the evangelists for technology are like the new faithful, the worshipful, the superstitious. What becomes of the vividness and complexity of human life—and of the meaning and significance of art—when science is the ultimate arbiter? Without advocating anti-scientific or pseudo-scientific positions we can still recognize different orders of knowledge and the limitations of science to capture lived experience. For there are kinds of understanding—no less valuable—that cannot be calculated or verified in the same way as those of science. These are serious and important questions, and, not wishing to rashly overreach, I can do no more than gesture to them here. Suffice it to say, the roots of today’s pitched debate date to the nineteenth century, and as the cultural hegemony of science grows, so does that urgency. The works of art in this study return us to that earlier era and to the spaces between seemingly irreconcilable modes of understanding, inviting us think about ways of balancing these different exigencies.

2 Ibid., 380, 381.

3 Ibid., 382.

4 Ibid., 381.


7 James, speaking in 1896, expressed dissatisfaction with scientific positivism’s failure to acknowledge that human phenomena are essentially different from physical phenomena: “Science has come to be identified with a certain fixed general belief, the belief that the deeper order of nature is mechanical exclusively, and that non-mechanical categories are irrational ways of conceiving and explaining even such a thing as human life.” See William James, “Address of the President before the Society of Psychical Research (1896),” in *Essays in Psychical Research*, eds., Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 134. See also, for example, Rom Harré, “Positivist Thought in the Nineteenth Century,” *The Cambridge History of Philosophy, 1870–1945*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11–26; and Richard G. Olson, *Science and Scientism in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).


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FIGURES

1.1
Nocturne—After Chase
229,391. GEARING FOR CHURN-POWERS. JOHN H. ELMER,
Ashfield, and EDWIN R. ELMER, Buckland, Mass. Filed Apr.
18, 1879.

Claim.—The wheel D, cogged on both sides of its rim, and
having a central aperture curved at d and angular at d'', as and
for the purpose specified.