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Framing the Woman Artist: Gender and Art in Howells and Sargent

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FRAMING THE WOMAN ARTIST:
GENDER AND ART IN HOWELLS AND SARGENT

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Matthew Cohen
1995
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Author

Approved, August 1995

Richard Lowry

Alan Wallach

Robert Scholnick
DEDICATION

To my grandma and grandpa, Herb and Marian Weston.
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I would like to thank Alan Wallach and Michael Cohen for both their help with this project and their more general instruction about how to look at and write about paintings. I also thank Robert Scholnick for his promptings about Howells and the magazine world and other timely advice. Finally, Rich Lowry deserves my gratitude for both his guidance and his deliberate, meticulous approach to my drafts.
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1 François Boucher, Allegory of Painting, 1765. Oil on canvas, 40 x 51 1/8 in., National Gallery of Art, Washington.

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ABSTRACT

The object of this thesis is to explore the meanings and uses of images of women artists at the end of the nineteenth century. Hoping to fill a gap in the study of this topic, this work examines depictions of women artists by men.

William Dean Howells' writings and the findings of previous scholars are examined to provide context for the way people "read" images of the woman artist in the last century. Howells' biography as well as his prose are examined in an attempt to explain his use of a female artist as a heroine in several texts.

John Singer Sargent's work and in particular his painting The Fountain (oil, 1907) are also discussed. Differences between Sargent's social situation and his concept of art and those of Howells are shown to affect the way the two men employed the image of the woman artist, as well as the way their "readers" might have interpreted them.

The thesis concludes that the image of the woman artist had many uses and meanings, contingent upon the artist's objectives, his or her class position (as conceived in relation to the intended audience), and the already-current uses of the image. Howells' fiction responds directly to earlier magazine story depictions of women artists, using the marriage of a woman painter to advocate middle-class mores. Sargent's awareness of prejudices about both upper-class women and women's ability to produce high art enabled him to poke fun at his artistic friends and paint a popular idyll on the same canvas. The image of the woman artist could serve many masters.
FRAMING THE WOMAN ARTIST
In William Dean Howells' novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), Mr. Wetmore, an art teacher in New York City, speculates on one of his students' chances of success. Assessing Alma Leighton's artistic ability leads him to comment on how women in general encounter the world of art:

Well, the girl has some notion of it; there's no doubt about that. But -- she's a woman. The trouble with all these talented girls is that they're all woman. If they weren't, there wouldn't be much chance for the men, Beaton. But we've got Providence on our own side from the start. I'm able to watch all their inspirations with perfect composure. I know just how soon it's going to end in nervous breakdown. Somebody ought to marry them all and put them out of their misery. (113)¹

The contradictions and assumptions within this statement bear some exploration. When Wetmore says that talented girls are "all woman," he seems to be saying that the most "artistic" women are those most in touch with eternal, womanly virtues. That men and women will express themselves differently in the end (in this case, men in art and women in marriage) is "Providence," divinely ordained, innate in Wetmore's formulation. A girl who is "all woman" will recognize the primacy of marriage and domesticity. This is why Wetmore is so "composed;" his definition of an "artistic" woman is one who cannot ultimately be an artist

-- she will be undermined by her womanly "nature" when nature calls on
her to marry and reproduce. That Wetmore moves so quickly from
"talented girls" to "all woman" is no surprise, then; for the talented girls
in Wetmore's class, learning art is a transition to womanhood, a process of
coming to recognize that their inspiration springs from eternal womanly
sensibilities, ones that cannot be expressed in the art world. The result of
this contradiction, as Wetmore puts it rather callously, is "nervous
breakdown."

This outlook sets up several tensions and incompatibilities. Most
obviously, marriage and art, for women, are incompatible. Slightly less
obviously, women and men sharing in the labor of the art world is
unlikely in Wetmore's vision -- if girl artists turned out to be something
other than all woman, "there wouldn't be much chance for the men."
Assumptions about gender, then, here reassure two male artists (Angus
Beaton and Wetmore) that their work remains at least male (if not
masculine, more on this later). On the other hand, the breakdown
women suffer when trying to enter that work world reinforces Wetmore's
idea of womanhood; a true woman cannot endure the alienation from
domesticity and marriage that art work requires. For Wetmore, this
recursive formula constitutes a gender boundary.

Wetmore is a minor player in Hazard as a whole, but the question
of the woman artist and her desire to create within the discourse of the art
world (the source of her "misery," says Wetmore) is treated extensively in
both visual and literary art of the late nineteenth century. Howells' novel
The Coast of Bohemia (1893) tells the story of a "talented girl" with
aspirations to art, and struggles extensively with these tensions. John
Singer Sargent's painting The Fountain, Villa Torlonia, Frascati, Italy
(1907) depicts a serious-looking woman artist and an aloof male observer; on one level it is a visual allegory of Wetmore's class. I will explore these two works in this thesis. My intention is to show that in late nineteenth-century America, the concept signified by the phrase "woman artist" (taken here to include terms like 'lady artist' and 'female artist') was an ideological battleground.2 The ideologies at war in the discourse of the art world were ones of gender and class, and male and female artists both participated in the struggle, on both sides of the border. Other terms in the art world were also fought over in this way, terms like "bohemian," "realism," or "taste."3 In my view, however, there is an insufficiency in histories of women artists in the United States -- a gap caused by ignoring male artists' roles in constructing spaces for women in art. Favoring the image of the woman artist over the terms and circumstances of the creation of that image is a limiting critical strategy; Howells' and Sargent's women artists clue us in to the negotiations of class and gender with which anyone entering the nineteenth-century art world had to grapple.

That gender conceptions are integral to the discourse of the nineteenth-century art world is clear from the brief analysis of Wetmore's statement given above. Several scholars have focused on depictions of the female artist in literary works contemporary with Hazard. Grace Stewart's A New Mythos and Linda Huf's A Portrait of the Artist As a Young

2Deborah Cherry discusses the terms used to describe women artists and the significance of the terminology in Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists (New York: Routledge, 1993), Chapter Four.

3Albert Parry, Alan Trachtenberg, Amy Kaplan, Peter Gay, Thomas Beer, Alfred Habegger, Lawrence Levine and a host of others have written on these subjects.
Woman looked at women writers' versions of the artist heroine. They see the female artist as artist manqué, frustrated and defeated by the masculine hegemony of the art establishment. Huf writes, in a characteristic passage:

The woman's artist novel calls for the smashing of the man-forged manacles on her sex. While the artist hero battles only the bourgeois and philistine... the artist heroine combats a much more insidious banality. While the artist hero is only up against the banker and broker, the artist heroine is up against the wall. She challenges not only the Babbitt and boor, but also the bigot and bully -- including the bone of her bones and flesh of her flesh, the very men she loves and who purport to love her.4

The impression left on the reader by Huf's analysis is of a hegemonic masculine opposition to women's artistry, particularly in the period I wish to study, roughly the 1860s to the turn of the century. Rhetorical turns like "man-forged manacles" downplay the role of women themselves in fostering negative popular conceptions of women artists. Huf portrays women struggling, going mad, and dying from internal conflicts between representing domestic ideology and fulfilling artistic ambition. David Leverenz characterizes this approach as "the first, separatist phase of feminist scholarship," when "[m]anhood, like Freud's ubiquitous Oedipal father, loomed as the universal oppressor, while womanhood seemed the locus of repression, struggle, and potential breakthrough."5 That womanhood did not guarantee ideological breakthrough is clear from the


example of Rebecca Harding Davis who, for much of the nineteenth century, represented female artistic aspirations as selfish. Her use of male artist characters and her representation of gender issues as inseparable from problems of class and age cannot easily be integrated into studies like those by Huf and Stewart, which heroicize women artists who are "troublemakers," as Huf puts it, rather than homemakers.6

Davis, however, was very popular, publishing constantly (and through the births and illnesses of her children) after the success of *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861).7 Her writings did not determine the meaning of the


7Davis had three children, one of whom, Nora, suffered from a chronic nervous illness and required of her mother a great deal of attention. Jane Atteridge Rose, *Rebecca Harding Davis* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993). In many ways I think Davis qualifies as a "literary domestic," to use Mary Kelley's terms. Her devotion to her family, despite her constant popularity and success, clearly constituted a private domain. As Rose points out, Davis' journals consist mostly of observations on her children's development, with little mention of her interactions with editors, fans, or other elements of her public persona. Fundamentally, Davis' career demonstrates the need to consider the conditions of literary production, rather than simply concentrating on a textual analysis. Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1984).
"woman artist," but they represent one of the many discursive positions from which nineteenth-century artists were attempting to gender their profession. They appealed to both women and men; they must be considered when exploring depictions of women artists. While examining novels of protest is useful, one must recognize the limitations of such an approach, and not claim that they fully represent "the writer as heroine in American literature."8

Some more recent critics call for a broader conceptualization of gendered figures like the 'woman artist' as discursive categories, rather than seeing them as static signs fixed by a hegemonic male order.9 Deborah Cherry, in her study of Victorian women artists, writes that "femininities and identities may be perceived as discursively constituted." Cherry uses Elizabeth Cowie's formulations of "woman as sign" to conclude the following:

As the sign woman is meaningful only in the systems of signification in which it occurs, it can be argued that when this sign is produced and exchanged in patriarchal kinship, 'woman' signifies not a woman nor women. Rather in these instances

8In fact, Huf's subtitle is inaccurate in another way -- several of the heroines she studies are not writers, but painters.

9Pierre Bourdieu anticipated these scholars in a general sense in his essay "The Field of Cultural Production, or: the Economic World Reversed," Poetics 12 (1983): 311-356. At one point he summarizes, "The literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces." (Bordieu 312) My later speculations about how class differences influence the production and reception of certain works is premised on Bordieu's (and like these other critics, Foucault's) emphasis on how class affects expectations and appreciations of art.
woman as sign functions as a signifier of difference and its meanings secure the foundation of patriarchal culture. However the sign woman was not stable; its significations were not prescribed. Woman as sign was struggled over by groups competing for power in late Victorian Britain, groups which produced colliding systems of signification.10

I argue that, though the institutions, groups, and individuals involved were different in America, this contest over meaning also took place in the United States in the late nineteenth century.

David Lubin makes a similar argument for multivalent readings of American art. Lubin writes that "paintings are cultural constructs that are not intrinsically meaningful but rather are invested with meaning ... by historically situated subjects, whether they be producers, consumers, or non-consumers of those paintings."11 When a man or woman makes an art object, then, certain of their interests or objectives, class-based, politically driven or otherwise, will manifest themselves in tension (or even conflict) with other interests. Lubin uses this approach more broadly to interpret texts of all kinds, not simply paintings.12 The emphasis in Lubin's approach is on describing the ideological balancing act inherent in creative works. Arguing against interpretations that serve the baldly political purposes of the interpreter, Lubin emphasizes that, for example, we devalue Lily Martin Spencer's work if we try to see her work as either "feminist" or "symptomatic." Since her works were produced by a human being negotiating ties of community, family, work and religion, they are

10Cherry 12, 108.
likely to show the tensions placed on their author by those different categories of social interest.

Unfortunately, there is a gap between appreciating the complexity behind acts of representation and writing about them coherently. Cherry's and Lubin's studies are useful epistemological models for this thesis, but they are hardly systematic. Historian Joan Scott, however, has identified four historical elements that scholars should examine to make gender a useful category for history study.13 First, the historian must describe "culturally available symbols that evoke multiple (and often contradictory) representations -- Eve and Mary as symbols of woman, for example."14 In the art world of the nineteenth century, women were used to symbolize abstract categories -- but were always depicted as sources of

13Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," American Historical Review 91 (November 1986): 1053-75. Though these more recent scholars' questions have a direct influence on this work, the studies of Griselda Pollock, Linda Nochlin, and Wendy Lesser, among others, underwrite this thesis. In literary studies, Brodhead has most recently advocated an approach similar to Scott's; he reminds us that the "literary programs" authors take on "do not derive from their membership in some generalized social category of humanity. Rather, these understandings of writing -- the fine-art conception, the reportorial-commercial conception, the ethnic-political conception -- were molded through a social organization of the literary field specific to that time and place; and writers enlisted themselves in one or another of these literary divisions through the way they sought to take up a position in that particular literary-social world."

Brodhead 11.

14Scott 1067.
inspiration. The muses are one example. In François Boucher's Allegory of Painting (oil, 1765, fig. 1) a woman sketches out a portrait of a cherub on an oval canvas. Woman here symbolizes painting, and the allegory works in part because the image is thoroughly removed from reality. Until the late nineteenth century, art schools in the English-speaking world did not allow women to draw from life; Boucher's painting is thoroughly symbolic, and was not intended to evoke real women artists. The female nude was a subject painters tackled to prove their mastery; the transcendence of master paintings relied on the seemingly natural positioning of woman as inspiration, man as artist. Women artists in fiction, painting, and performance were sometimes

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15 For a vivid example of this at work in a painting, see Frederick Lord Leighton's Painter's Honeymoon (oil, 1864), which will be referred to again in the third chapter. Maurice Beebe also discusses women as muses in Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce (New York: New York U P, 1964), as do Stewart and Huf.  
16 As Linda Nochlin puts it, writing about Eugène Delacroix's Liberty at the Barricades, "Delacroix's powerful figure of Liberty is, like almost all such feminine embodiments of human virtue — Justice, Truth, Temperance, Victory — an allegory rather than a concrete historical woman, an example of what Simone de Beauvoir has called Woman-as-Other." Nochlin, Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays (New York: Harper & Row, 1988): 23.  
17 In the nineteenth century some paintings dealt explicitly with the fact that women were limited to drawing from casts. The gendered discourse of art had changed; Boucher's allegory was, in a way, speaking an entirely different language than was Octavius Oakley's A Student of Beauty (watercolor, 1861). This painting and the issue of women's training are discussed in Susan P. Casteras, Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh- Dickinson UP, 1987). See also Cherry, 54-55.
depicted as sexually deviant or uncontrollable. The culturally-available symbols of the prostitute actress, the nameless and friendless woman artist, or the bohemian, immoral female newspaper or fiction writer existed as options. Alongside these were the more mainstream, moral symbols of women's "domestic artistry" -- sewing, basket- or clothes-making, and religiously-oriented musical performance. One of the concerns of this thesis will be how Howells and Sargent manipulated these images in their representations of the art world.

Scott also calls for an analysis of the "normative concepts that set forth interpretations of the meaning of the symbols." Here, then, normative ideas such as the notion of "spheres" for human activity come into play. The analysis I have made so far of Wetmore's quote is an example of this; Wetmore bases his interpretation of the woman artist on the concept of woman as domestic, unselfish, and innately moral. Class concepts of the meaning of woman's work also come into play; cosmopolitan women were expected to draw and have an artistic sensibility, but not to work. A woman artist, then, was inherently leisurely. For middle-class social climbers, this notion presented several

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18For positive models, The Woman's Home Companion and other domestic advice manuals popularized these symbols. Newspaper characterizations of women writers and artists like Fanny Fern and Ada Clare, along with pervasive associations of actresses with prostitution are more specific examples of negative examples of women's artistry. See Albert Parry, Garrets and Pretenders: A History of Bohemianism in America (New York: Dover, 1966) and Huf's examples of negative representations of women artists in A Portrait. Other useful background for this entire discussion is Nancy F. Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977).
possibilities. On one hand, taking an art class could increase one's sensibilities, and offer the cultural capital necessary to an improved social life. On the other hand, the middle-class ethos of work and a woman's selfless devotion to family made leisurely artistic endeavor unattractive. Ideals of work, gender, and art, all inflected by class positions and sensibilities, helped audiences interpret books and paintings depicting women artists. The makers of those works shaped their characters and narratives with the precepts of their audiences in mind. As Scott points out, "these normative statements depend on the refusal or repression of alternative possibilities, and, sometimes, overt contests about them take place (at what moments and under what circumstances ought to be a concern of historians)." I argue here for two instances and circumstances in which contests over possibilities for alternative statements are waged (or at least, proposed).

Scott's third component of gender study is analysis of "social institutions and organizations" influencing gender ideology. Institutions are important, but for reasons of space I rely on the work of others to explain the possible significance of the images I discuss to the institutions involved in the discourses of art and gender. For the purposes of this study, however, there are several important factors to keep in mind. America's art institutions lagged behind Europe's regarding the participation and encouragement of female artists. There was no real equivalent in the United States to Britain's Royal Academy, and though there were no female academicians in the nineteenth century, women's paintings were being hung at Academy exhibitions by the 1850s. The

19Scott 1068.
short-lived American Art-Union served a wider, middle-class audience, and lacked the power to elevate a woman artist above critical disdain. As mentioned before, for much of the century, women could not take life drawing classes; Thomas Eakins' co-ed life drawing classes in Philadelphia caused a stir as late as the 1880s. Also, institutions like women's sewing circles helped ratify the normative concept of woman's art as domestic art. Women who would reform the world could easily do so in the context of a sewing circle or church singing group, but if one wanted to take the higher road of Art, one faced resistance from the male-dominated master traditions.

The final category for analysis in Scott's theory is what she calls "subjective identity." Scott writes, "Historians need to examine the ways in which gendered identities are substantively constructed and relate their findings to a range of activities, social organizations, and historically specific cultural representations." Naturally, as she points out, biographical studies are most useful for this endeavor, and in that light I will explore the backgrounds of the artists treated in my study and how their experiences might have shaped their depictions of women artists.


21Mary Ryan discusses the importance of women's reform groups in her chapter entitled, "A Sphere Is Not a Home" in Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981).
Because I am studying 'portraits' of a certain kind, I am most interested in the first two stages of Scott's structure, and how the works I have chosen to examine might challenge their contemporaries' visual codes and assumptions.

Scott concludes, like Lubin and Cherry, that if social categories are in flux, so are actual people. "Like words themselves," Scott writes, "subjective identities are processes of differentiation and distinction, requiring the suppression of ambiguities and opposite elements in order to assure (and create the illusion of) coherence and common understanding." She concludes, then, that

Within [social and institutional] processes and structures, there is room for a concept of human agency as the attempt (at least partially rational) to construct an identity, a life, a set of relationships, a society with certain limits and with language -- conceptual language that at once sets boundaries and contains the possibility for negation, resistance, reinterpretation, the play of metaphoric invention and imagination.²²

I will show, for example, that along with a few women writers in America, William Dean Howells was exploiting the possibilities of conceptual languages -- manipulating the boundaries of class and gender set up by the mostly male art world's conceptual term, 'woman artist.' In the context of a single work, Scott's formulation can serve as a metaphor for what happens when one writes a novel or makes a painting. In creating the "world" of the novel, for example, Howells suppressed and manipulated cultural categories of social differentiation to create a middle-class version of "art." The narrative space created for the reader, then, is not simply one that systematically flatters a particular reader's political sensibilities;

²²Scott 1063, 1067.
rather, the novel intertwines Howells' experiences, aims, and associations with those experiences he anticipates will be common in his audience.

To move from Scott's general outlines to the more specific social context in which the works I study were created and received, it will be useful here to return to the example of Howells' character Wetmore. Wetmore's construction of women's relationship to the art world was not uncommon, and could be found in non-fictional discourse as well. Fanny Fern complained about the following statement by a New York Times writer:

Courtship and marriage, servants and children, these are the great objects of a woman's thoughts, and they necessarily form the staple topics of their writings and their conversation. We have no right to expect anything else in a woman's book.23

Here the journalist allows women's ability to write, but expects no "art," simply the reflection of women's natural domestic concerns. There are further elaborations of this cultural convention. Linda Huf, for example, explains that popular images of women trying to become artists characterized them as selfish. Producing literary or visual art took too much time, time a woman would be better off spending with her children. Many narratives demonstrated that the introspection and study necessary to a career in art led to solipsism -- the antithesis of other-directed true womanhood. Finally, as Mary Kelley has shown, producing successful art meant entering the public stage, an area ideologically and legally defined as male territory. As Kelley and Huf demonstrate, real and fictional "nervous breakdowns" of the kind Wetmore describes happened; they

happened because of the contradictions artistic women confronted when they challenged expectations for proper behavior.

Women were not entirely cut off from socially-ratified "legitimate" forms of self-expression. The phrase "domestic arts" described a range of "appropriate" female artistic productions, from sewing to painting miniatures to parlor musicianship. This activity was conceived of as private and domestic, and hence not incompatible with the larger discourse of the art world. The rising popularity of the novel from the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries put women novelists in the public eye -- ostensibly an unwomanly arena. As Kelley and Cathy Davidson have shown, however, the literary productions of these women appealed predominantly to a female audience by treating primarily domestic spaces and familial expectations. Furthermore, both critics show (as does the Times writer's statement quoted above) that women writers' entry into the public sphere caused them internal conflicts based on gender. The anxiety worked on both sides, however; contemporary reviewers did not consider the literary domestics' works as "art." While women like Catherine Beecher Stowe and Mary Virginia Terhune were stretching contemporary conventions of gender, then, they were not, in the eyes and reviews of male critics, speaking the language of Pope, Milton, or Cervantes.24

24Jane Tompkins has also suggested this, but Brodhead astutely points out that "this hierarchization was produced through a social reformulation of culture in general in America, not by a mere clique." Brodhead 232, n. 11. Tompkins, Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860 (New York: Oxford UP, 1985).
This is not to say that because men controlled the institutions, economics, and theories of art, being an artist conferred undeniable masculinity. Charles Theodore Russell summarized the tension succinctly in 1838 in a letter to his brother: "Man is made for action, and the bustling scenes of moving life, and not the poetry or romance of existence."25 The historic identification of artistry with the dilettantism of an aloof, cosmopolitan intelligence clashed with rising middle-class sensibilities and the widening popular market for art and literature. As Raymond Williams has argued, the Romantic discourse of the temperamental genius may have, in early nineteenth-century England, fit a culture of growing professionalization, but in the fin-de-siècle United States, it clashed with the "man of action" ethos.26 This ethos, the foundation of the culture of gendered spheres, seems to have been born in the urbanization of the 1830s and raised by the Civil War. Many scholars trace the tensions in nineteenth-century American men's writing to the search for a way to be masculine yet literary or artistic. This consideration will be critical in studying Howells, for example. As Michael Davitt Bell has theorized, Howells' ideals of middle-class artistry may well spring not simply from a class-based view of the cosmopolitan art world as corrupt and decadent, but from Howells' inability to reconcile his artistic


sensibilities with his contemporaries' normative concepts of masculinity.27

In short, it is useful to remember that for many people, for much of the nineteenth century, a man of letters was a contradiction in terms. What seems clear, however, is that the power of dominant notions of gendered behavior fluctuated. In literature and in visual art, some women were considered real artists by the end of the century. Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Rosa Bonheur were popular in England and the United States, and Cherry has shown the institutional progress made by the many English female painters working in the latter half of the nineteenth-century. One reason Howells' novels are useful, I argue, is that they represent this flux as the product of conflicting discourses of generational differences, gender and class expectations, and the art world. For example, Wetmore's statement represents a common notion of women's place and possibility in the art world, but the student who inspired his comment ends up disproving that notion. Alma Leighton carries on her artistic vision, doing cover art for the magazine Every Other Week, without letting her inherent womanly need to marry derail her. Though Wetmore's version of woman's place in the art world seems

monolithic, Howells' narrative leads the reader to a different, more
discursively-constructed definition of the woman artist.

One of the discourses shaping Alma's choice of career is class. Alma
is ultimately an artist, but not a high artist; she is an illustrator. For
Howells, resignifying the woman artist is a way to shake up the class
connotations of art. It is important to remember David Leverenz's
warning that "gender pressures help to bury class conflicts."28 Although
he claimed to be a "heretic about woman," my discussion of The Coast of
Bohemia will play out some of Howells' personal concerns and objectives
on the spectrums of both class and gender. This strategy is in keeping with
Scott's emphasis on biography and agency; Howells' version of the
woman artist constitutes a tension among dominant notions of
womanhood, labor, art, class, and Howells' own utopian conceptions of
those categories. Sargent's painting, produced within a different class
sphere, also shows a manipulation of classed notions of gender and art.

For the purposes of this thesis, the most useful difference between
Howells and Sargent is one of class. Sargent is associated with the
Jamesian, European tradition of wealthy Americans abroad.29 Though I
will study a work of his that was displayed in the United States, his
sensibility is distinctly upper-class. The differences, then, between the
ways Howells and Sargent gendered their images will be in part differences
between the concepts of gendered activity dominant in their audiences'

28Leverenz 7.

29Sargent himself, of course, was always a cultural laborer for the elite of Europe; despite
his middle-class origins, his images must be read within the context of the cosmopolites
with whom he worked and traveled.
respective classes. Howells is decidedly American, and as Alan Trachtenberg, Amy Kaplan and others have pointed out, intricately involved in the creation of a middle-class literary world.³⁰

We can see class sensibility emerging under the rubric of gender if we turn once again to Wetmore's pronouncement upon the woman art student. After Wetmore's homily, "Someone should marry them all and put them out of their misery," Mrs. Wetmore speaks up:

"And what will you do with your students who are married already?" his wife said. She felt that she had let him go on long enough.

"Oh, they ought to get divorced."

"You ought to be ashamed to take their money, if that's what you think of them."

"My dear, I have a wife to support." (113)

Again, several notions are in tension here. The established, Romantic notion of the artist as detached, spiritual observer/genius is the model for a truly successful artist -- and the one Wetmore has characterized as incompatible with woman's nature. In this dialogue, though, the debate quickly turns to pecuniary, material concerns. Wetmore turns his wife's criticism back upon her by making her realize that her own material comfort relies upon these girls' false notions of their ability to become artists. Mrs. Wetmore's version of leisurely womanhood is premised, then, on her husband's ability to keep women out of the competitive art market. Wetmore conceals from his students this dependence on art for a living, in part because it is his students' expectations about the art world,

colliding with their learned sensibilities as women, that leads them to their downfall.

A popular guide to fashionable behavior for English women made explicit this gap between the ideal and the real art world:

Would that we could dwell with more satisfaction upon this ideal [artistic] existence, as it affects the morals of the artist's real life! Whatever there may be defective here, however, as regards the true foundation of happiness, is surely not attributable to the art itself; but to the necessity under which too many labour, of courting public favour, and sometimes of sacrificing the dignity of their profession to its pecuniary success.

Here the contradiction is obvious: if art is one's "profession," how can one not dwell on its "pecuniary success"? Also here we see art described as an eternal category, its historical ties to patronage and influence erased. Ostensibly art is a way to private, internal development, but the overtones of the book clearly indicate that the purpose of drawing for girls is to become cosmopolitan and cultured to the public eye. Furthermore, the author immediately emphasizes that the dilemma just posed between real and ideal should never enter the young lady's mind:

Nor is it an object of desirable attainment to women in general, that they should study the art of painting to this extent. Amply sufficient for all their purposes, is the habit of drawing from natural objects with correctness and facility.31

31Sarah Stickney Ellis, The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character and Responsibilities (London: Fisher, Son & Co., ca. 1842): 119. Ellis is clearly referring to the wealthy daughters of England when she says "women in general;" the copy of this book that I read was richly bound, gilt, and decorated with a fore-edge painting.
Wetmore's promising students do not merely accept this limitation; if they did, they would not suffer the nervous breakdown.

Mrs. Wetmore's objection places the reader in an interesting position: what are we to make of this conversation, where are we placed by the narrator? Both Mr. and Mrs. Wetmore have valid points, but how does the reader resolve the moral dilemma presented by their exploitation of gendered ideology? Howells directs our answer in several ways. First of all, by using dialogue, he can show the Wetmores deconstructing their own moral position. It becomes clear to the reader that the ultimate problem lies in the disparity between the concept of artistic practice and its material realities. Alma Leighton is the reader's alternative to the exclusive, exploitative practices of Wetmore, who must teach art as if it were fundamentally impractical and aloof. Alma survives (though not extravagantly) by illustrating; she illustrates, as a character, a different, more democratic discourse of the art world. Howells leads the reader to reconceptualize art as a form of labor, one whose products (in the form here of a bi-weekly magazine) and production (in the form here of Alma and the writers of *Every Other Week*) should be available to all.

In *The Coast of Bohemia*, Howells explores the class dimensions of the art world more in depth. What looking at this brief passage has shown, though, is how Howells constructs a perspective on art discourse for the reader. Howells' characters discuss the politics of gender, but the narrative as a whole strives toward a class-interested aesthetics. At times Howells complicates this matrix further by introducing generational conflict, usually locating a more conservative, masculine, leisure-class view of art production in an older character. The challengers of this stance are usually young women. Howells portrays many women artists in his
works. His novels *The Minister's Charge*, *Hazard*, *Mrs. Farrell*, and *The Coast of Bohemia* all feature women artist characters. In these novels, Howells seems to progress toward a full-blown vision of art as a middle-class occupation that should not be subject to gender divisions.

I will argue that Howells tries to reconfigure the art world's classed and gendered discourse by representing the notion that art and marriage are compatible for women. Howells sees Wetmore's emphasis on marriage as an antidote to women's creativity, as rooted in an immoral, elitist conception of art. Howells' democratic art discourse rejects the gendered division of art labor as the mainstay of "high" art culture. His older, wealthier characters, who represent the discourse in which women could not be artists -- also the discourse in which Howells himself struggled to be a "man" -- are opposed by the young, struggling (but not poor) artists of *Coast*, who marry each other happily.
CHAPTER TWO

By and by some fellow will wake up and see that a first-class story can be written from the antimarriage point of view; and he'll begin with an engaged couple, and devote his novel to disengaging them and rendering them separately happy ever after in the denouement.

--Basil March, from Howells' A Hazard of New Fortunes32

William Dean Howells' The Coast of Bohemia (1893), not surprisingly, ends with a wedding. Somewhat more unusually, the wedded couple is a pair of artists. Cornelia Saunders, a country girl-cum-New York art student, marries Walter Ludlow, a painter of minor repute in the city. The following passage is part of the description of their marriage:

He was strenuous that she should not, in the slightest degree, lapse from her ideal and purpose, or should cease to be an artist in becoming a wife. He contended that there was no real need of that, and though it had happened in most of the many cases where artists had married artists, he held that it had happened through the man's selfishness and thoughtlessness, and not through the conditions. He was resolved that Cornelia should not lose faith in

32 Hazard 416. Howells had, of course, already written this novel, A Modern Instance (1882).
herself from want of his appreciation, or from her own overvaluation of his greater skill and school; and he could prove to any one who listened that she had the rarer gift.³³

On the surface, this arrangement seems to be the very kind Linda Huf calls for, in which the husband supports fully the wife's working habits.³⁴

Coming as this passage does, though, after 300 pages focusing on Cornelia's ideal and purpose, it's difficult to take this effusive declaration from Walter too seriously. The exaggerated fervor with which Howells describes Walter's opinions ("He was strenuous," "He contended," "he held," "He was resolved") is almost comical. Nowhere before this passage has there been any discussion of Cornelia's artistry in relation to the marriage, and Walter's assumption that she would overvalue "his greater skill and school" is amusingly condescending -- the narrator makes clear that Cornelia "did not mean to be treated like a child in everything, even if he was a genius." (210) Of course, Walter is no genius, and the irony of this phrase lets the reader know that Cornelia realizes this. The effect, ultimately, is to show that Cornelia's freedom to pursue artistic work is a precondition of this marriage, not something ordained by Walter.

Throughout Coast, Howells characterizes Walter as insufficiently masculine -- he is a more schooled artist than Cornelia, but he is hardly successful enough to be considered a breadwinner. Using the language of strenuousness and contention to describe Walter's opinions as an artist pokes fun at the problematic status of the painter's masculinity (outlined in Chapter One). He is, early on, a flighty young man, creating interesting


³⁴Huf 157-8.
but not profound paintings on the margins of the New York art world. At the very start of the novel, Howells portrays Walter as a caricature of the late-century, self-consciously cosmopolitan artist. Looking at bad art at a country fair, Walter is pained by the works' hollowness: "He exaggerated the importance of the fact with the sensitiveness of a man to whom aesthetic cultivation was all-important. It appeared to him a far greater evil than it was; it was odious to him, like a vice; it was almost a crime." (9)

On the most obvious level, Howells uses this marriage to complicate the reader's understanding of women's artistic potential. At the very start, Walter observes at the Pymantoning County Agricultural Fair, "even here, in the rustic heart of the continent he had seen costumes which had touch and distinction; and it could not be that the instinct which they sprang from should go for nothing in the arts supposed higher than mantua-making and millinery." (8) Precisely this point is made by the work as a whole; Cornelia's mother is a good dressmaker, and presumably Cornelia has inherited this "artistic" sensibility. As seen in Chapter One, however, among Howells' reading audience, there was a definite distinction of propriety between the acceptable art of millinery and an unwomanly career in painting. In this chapter I will argue that Howells' depiction of Cornelia is part of a larger refiguring of the relationships among art, work, and gender that in the end posits an idealistic vision of a democratic, middle-class America.

For now it might be useful to summarize The Coast of Bohemia, as it is a little-known work. Walter Ludlow, on a working vacation in the New England countryside, meets Pymantoning painter Cornelia Saunders. Cornelia's mother encourages her to go to New York City to study art,
assuring her that Ludlow (whose good character she knows from a mutual friend) will guide Cornelia to the proper school and boarding house. Eventually Cornelia earns enough money by teaching to go, and enrolls in classes at the Art Syndicate. There she meets Charmian Maybough, daughter of a rising society family and part-time bohemian. Charmian, a model of romantic artistic friendship, becomes Cornelia's devotee, despite Cornelia's refusal to be bohemian (Cornelia is eminently pragmatic). Cornelia progresses rapidly as an artist, and Walter begins to take an interest in her. Charmian, naturally, does everything in her power to bring them together. What separates them is Cornelia's foolish, sentimental fear that a past embarrassment in love (a broken engagement to a man she found she didn't like) will repulse Walter. After a series of evasions on the parts of both lovers, they realize how silly they have been and the contract quoted above is made.

In many ways, this is the typical Howells plot; characters overcome sentimental misconstructions of reality and settle down into a thoroughly

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35Howells' Art Syndicate is based on the student-run Art Students League of New York, established in 1875. From the account of Louise Cox, who studied at the League from 1883 to 1887, Howells' descriptions of the conditions of study, the structure of classes, the pressures, and even the costume parties are quite accurate. According to Albert Parry, Howells got much of his information on the League from a female student there, and though the portrait may not be full, it is significant as a rare look inside a nineteenth-century New York art school. Louise Howland King Cox, "Louise Cox at the Art Students League: A Memoir," ed. Richard Murray, Archives of American Art Journal 26 (5) 1986: 12-20. Louise Howland King married her instructor, the painter Kenyon Cox, in 1892, the year before the publication of The Coast of Bohemia.
middle-class, productive married life. Given the gender boundaries set up by the discourse of the art world, however, this particular marriage is somewhat unusual. Marriage and a career in art for women were generally represented as incompatible, as outlined in the first chapter. Certainly it seems that a male artist would not encourage such a union, especially if he were constructing a masculine image of his profession in the face of criticism that art was effeminate. To make sense of Howells' woman artist, we must explore how Howells guides the reader to a position advocating the marriage of womanliness, manliness, and art.

One of the tactics Howells uses to prepare us for the marriage is an old one: art brings the man and woman together. At one point, Walter is commissioned to take a portrait of Charmian Maybough by Charmian's mother. Charmian and Walter invite Cornelia to accompany Walter and paint her own version of Charmian, to accelerate her learning (and to give Walter and Cornelia an opportunity to fall in love). He fails to come up with a satisfactory likeness, in part because of his affection for Cornelia; his sketch ends up more in her likeness than in Charmian's. Desire distorts Walter's artistic vision; he is a true romantic artist, representing his ideal beauty even when commissioned to paint another. Cornelia's picture, on the other hand, is so far above her level of experience that Walter suggests she polish it and submit it to the Academy exhibition. Cornelia's vision is pragmatic and workmanlike, and remains so throughout the narrative. Walter moves from a cosmopolitan, French-inspired sensibility to more immediate subject matter, painting his wife. Marriage is a possibility because art, for both characters, is ultimately a profession rather than an ideal. Gender restraints are subordinated to a class revision of the art world.
This revision relies on how successfully the text hails the reader as middle-class aesthete. One of the tactics Howells employs to this end is that of explicitly demonstrating that gender boundaries and "ideal" aspects of art are discursively constructed -- that is, that we are all responsible in one way or another for their perpetuation. Walter, for example, explains his inability to capture Charmian's likeness to a Mrs. Westley, one of his socialite acquaintances:

"A man's idea of a woman, it's interesting, of course, but it's never quite just; it's never quite true; it can't be. Every woman knows that, but you go on accepting men's notions of women, in literature and in art, as if they were essentially, or anything but superficially, like women. . . . I was always guessing at her; but Miss Saunders seemed to understand her. (233)"

This passage of course raises the issue of Howells' own portraits of women, casting doubt as it does on men's ability to represent women. On the other hand, Walter, aware of the superficiality of men's depictions of women, shows a resistance to the socializing power of those representations. He implicates Mrs. Westley in the creation of flimsy notions of women in this passage, indicating Howells' sensitivity to the power of men's representations over women's perceptions. Mrs. Westley's response is, "It is hard for a woman to believe much in women; we don't expect anything of each other yet." (234) The "yet" in this comment is curious; Mrs. Westley anticipates a change in women's attitudes, but in a detached, "I'm not responsible" kind of way -- the very attitude that Walter seems to indict.

This exchange characterizes the discourse of art as being shaped by gender positions. Mrs. Westley's comment about women believing in women, furthermore, demonstrates the circularity of this dynamic. Her
opinion of women's place in the art world at once perpetuates disbelief in women and is reinforced by lack of evidence -- "we don't expect anything of each other yet." Howells dramatizes the discursive gendering of art in a conversation Walter wanders into while visiting the studio of his (and our) old friend Mr. Wetmore. "They were all talking of the real meaning of the word 'beautiful.'" A Mrs. Rangeley takes up a relativistic position, while "one of the men" maintains a Keatsian position, saying, "Beauty is something as absolute as truth." After some debate between these two, the discussion becomes more general; there is no resolution to the discussion. Wetmore "entered joyously into the tumult which the utterance of the different opinions, prejudices and prepossessions of the company became." (222) Again, a conceptual term is depicted as contested territory by Howells himself -- the meaning of "beauty" (like the meaning of "woman artist") is a mêlée among "opinions, prejudices and prepossessions of the company," men and women, artist and non-artist.

Howells' decision to make a woman artist the center of one of his novels was not made at random. As Amy Kaplan points out, "Rather than as a monolithic and fully formed theory, realism can be examined as

36Coast 221-222. The man is a page later identified as Mr. Agnew, but it is clear that Howells sets up gendered interpretations and appreciations of beauty here. These reflect his contemporaries' general beliefs that women were more emotional and less rational than men. That this particular discussion is not resolved is the stress of my interpretation.

Wetmore occupies the same discursive position in this novel as he does in Hazard, but he is more broadly symbolic of upper-class aesthetics. It seems to me likely that the name of this character was inspired by William Wetmore Story, the American hyper-aesthete who had emigrated to Italy in 1856, and who Howells no doubt met there.
a multifaceted and unfinished debate reenacted in the arena of each novel and essay." Kaplan goes on to describe Howells' war on mass culture: recognizing the socializing power of magazine fiction, Howells and some of his contemporaries set about rewriting some of the precepts of popular fiction. In several passages of Coast, Howells protests too much; the final chapters are particularly heavy-handed in their espousal of the possibilities of artistic marriage and the foolishness of dwelling on youthful mistakes. In a way this loss of artistic control can be helpful; when Howells' rhetoric becomes less novelistic and more political, it is clear that this book is not an autonomous rumination on gender in the art world. Rather, Howells' Coast is a response to images of women artists that were popularized by certain of his contemporaries in the literary world.

Alfred Habegger hints at a connection between Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' 1877 novel The Story of Avis and Howells' writings that I would like to explore more. Noting that Howells selected and published the comments on Phelps' novel (whose heroine is an artiste manqué) in the Atlantic Monthly, Habegger suggests that Howells "may have endorsed Harriet W. Preston's review, which interpreted the novel as saying that 'gifted women must not be fettered by domestic ties.'" Given the harmony between marriage and artistry portrayed in Coast, I argue that by the 1890s, Howells (who at first no doubt sympathized with Phelps' intentions) had become critical of the despair evident in The Story of Avis. Habegger observes that despite its merits, Avis is flawed because "it was not an exploration of the bitter antagonism between men and women; it

37Kaplan 15, Chapter One.
was itself bitterly antagonistic." That is to say, like much of the recent
criticism of the novel, it depicted as possible only one response to the
woman artist's dilemma -- anger. In Coast, Howells, however
problematically, attempts to show the compatibility of domesticity and
female artistry by exploring and trying to reconcile the gender antagonisms
extant within the discourse of art.

Another writer inspiring Howells' response was likely Rebecca
Harding Davis. Jane Atteridge Rose has traced the development of Davis' position on the issue of women's artistry. She observes that Davis'
"many Künstlerromane, written over a period of forty years, show that
domestic ideology exerted its force at every stage of women's lives." As she grew older, Rose points out, Davis portrayed older female characters
who encounter the conflicts between domesticity and artistry in different
ways, but always the socially-ordained sphere wins out. What emerges from this development is Davis' refusal to abandon herself or her

38 Habegger 46.
40 Rose, "The Artist Manqué...", 156. Davis' first book, Life In the Iron Mills, displaced the issue of the frustrated artist onto a working-class male, and arrived at the same tone Phelps would use in The Story of Avis -- despair at an unjust system. As Rose points out in her biography, Davis' style became much more sentimental after her first novel; it may have been the first example of American Realism, but it was her last. Phelps, Rose observes, was influenced heavily by Davis, so the similarity is not coincidental. They had clearly parted ideological ways by the time Avis was published.
characters to artistry, because of the selfishness required of the artist. Her characters' failures to become artists, particularly in later stories like "The Wife's Story" (Atlantic, 1864) and "Anne" (Harper's, 1889) are moral lessons to women about the dangers of selfishness.\footnote{Huf sees "selfishness underlying all" as the basis for much of the antagonism between the art world and women, and perhaps Davis' acceptance and promulgation of that outlook explains why Huf's study does not include any of her many writings about women artists. Huf, Chapter One.}

For Davis, then, art destroys women's primary source of happiness: the spiritual triumph of loss of self epitomized by a well-cared-for family. For Phelps, the family necessarily impedes women's access to the spiritual triumph of artistic representation. Howells Coast, which would have had the same audience as the works of Phelps and Davis mentioned here, is in dialogue with these positions, setting out the possibility that marriage and women's artistry are compatible.\footnote{Historically, of course, Howells no doubt knew of many such unions. Marriages of other artists discussed in this work, Kenyon and Louise Cox and Wilfrid and Jane von Glehn for example, were apparently successful and productive.} There are shifts and sacrifices made on each political axis in this project: middle-class marriage gives up the ideal of gendered division of labor; to make this possible Walter must be slightly less than "masculine," while Cornelia has no aspirations to high art. Marriage takes the capital A out of art in this case, as a prenuptial contract, making it a thoroughly practical matter (both of these young people make their livings in the art world).

The implicit critique of the vision of woman artist as artist manqué, however, implicated Howells deeply in conflicts over the masculinity of
art. As Michael Davitt Bell puts it, "There is little question that the Will Howells who turned to literature in the 1850s was troubled by his ambiguous social and sexual identity." Bell goes on to observe that this sensitivity evolved, with Howells' increasing knowledge of the American audience for fiction, into a more complicated elision of class with gender considerations:

A market consisting of "most Americans," the writer's whole "country" or, perhaps best of all, "unaffected people everywhere" would certainly relieve the writer from financial anxiety. Yet even more important for both Howells and Whitman . . . were the psychological benefits of the pose of "democratic" writer. It gave one a sense of social significance; to use James's phrase, it gave one the largest possible "bough to perch upon." And most important, to associate the writer with what was most "normal" or "ordinary" in his audience was to dissociate him from the socially marginal and sexually ambiguous implications of the "literary" or the "artistic."

One of the keys to carrying out this program in Coast is the social and moral character of Charmian Maybough. To a socially mainstream, middle-class reader, the ideal interpretive position created for us by Howells, Charmian is a sophisticated corruption. She comes from an upper-class social world, one which entertains non-functional notions of art. She embodies, then, the position advocated by Wetmore and implicitly criticized in Howells' narrative. Moreover, her pretendings to bohemianism, characterized in Coast as a lower-class refusal of pragmatism in favor of empty aesthetic goals, make her a doubly objectionable character. Charmian emerges then, as a character to whom

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43 Bell 125.

44 Bell 130.
the interpellated reader can point and say, "She's the reason there have been no great women artists." Charmian, of course, does not get married in the novel.

In contrast, Cornelia, our heroine, emerges as the fully-formed herald of middle-class artistic virtue. What seems clear, though, is that this formulation was not easy for Howells. In his earlier depictions of women artists, Howells was less visionary. Mrs. Farrell (serialized in the Atlantic as Private Theatricals, 1875) featured three women artists. Mrs. Farrell ultimately takes to the stage; she is not, however, an artist heroine -- she merely ends up an artist, and is portrayed as coquettish and superficial (hence the original title). A very minor character, Rachel Woodward, is a country innkeeper's daughter with some skill at painting. Sponsored by a friend, by the end of a story she is studying art in New York City. She is not married, but one of the story's urbane male figures is taking an interest in her. Essentially, Rachel anticipates Alma Leighton and Cornelia, but in a reserved way -- there is no marriage in Mrs. Farrell. The final artist, Mrs. Stevenson, paints cattails at the story's outset, with no high artistic object. A boarder at the Woodward house, she eventually sells one of her pieces. The sale transforms her:

> It sold... for enough money to confirm her in the belief that wifehood was no more the whole of womanhood than husbandhood of manhood, and that to expect her to keep house would be the same as asking every man, no matter what his business might be, to make his own clothes and mend his own shoes."45

45Howells, Mrs. Farrell (New York: Harper & Bros., 1921): 225. Interestingly, the novel was never made into a book during Howells' lifetime. Mrs. Farrell's unpunished selfishness
Despite the seeming power of this declaration, Mrs. Stevenson is not a serious painter, and her marriage is depicted as not much of a distraction to her. Furthermore, she is a peripheral character, and in one of Howells' characteristic sweeping conclusions, this paragraph's potential is vitiated by the narrative attention paid to more significant characters.

The character of Alma Leighton, in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is drawn in more detail. She is another country girl studying in the big city, and she refuses to be charmed by the urbane artist who discovered her. Her independence is refreshing, and she does not rule out the possibility that she will marry, but again we do not see her marry. The strength of *Coast*’s version of female artistry is its full negation of Phelps' and Davis' versions; in *Hazard*, though, neither the male nor the female artist gets married. Alma gives us the key to this when she points out the class difference between the Leightons and the Beatons. Her mother insists that "Mr. Beaton's one of our kind," and Alma retorts, "Thank you. Papa wasn't quite a tombstone-cutter, Mamma." Beaton, in terms of class, is corrupt in a way that mirrors Charmian's corruption; while Charmian represents corrupt, undemocratic high culture masquerading as "starving artist" bohemianism, Beaton is a rural masquerading as a cosmopolite. Beaton is not marriageable, because his vision of art is not practical, not

and the relative independence of the women in the book might have kept it out of binding, though a 1910 article suggests that some of the women on whom the story was modeled may have objected to the final version. "Ricus" (pseudonym), "A Suppressed novel of Mr. Howells," *Bookman* 32 (Oct. 1910): 201-3. The copy of *Mrs. Farrell* that I read had not been checked out since 1965.

46 *Hazard* 97.
middle class; he is a foil for Howells' vision of married respectability. Howells, in all of the artist characters that precede those of Coast, is working toward the proper positions on the continuums of gender and class in which two people involved in the art world could marry.

In their own ways, all of these characters participate to a certain extent in Howells' voicing of alternative possibilities for women artists. While not reconfiguring the sphere of domesticity to include a studio, they do counter some of the cultural symbols (by representing women outside of the domestic arts) and assumptions (women have the stamina to do art in Howells, they are presented as rational creatures who can produce without husbands) of America in the 1870s and 1880s. There are many critics, however, who insist that these women are hollow creations entrenched in the masculinist system and ultimately only reinforcing male notions of female limitations. Mary Schriber sees Howells creating a "proper woman," who conforms to some eternal ideal, within all of his female characters. Of the battle over the "proper woman" in Howells she writes:

This combat in the fiction of Howells uncovers a difference between the male and the female imagination at work on the characterization of heroines. Howells would require of his heroines a more steady, serious, and responsible humanity, much as the women who created "woman's fiction" required their heroines to eschew emotion and to take responsibility for themselves and their lives. While female writers, however, wrote without chivalric compulsions, showing no need to cajole and patronize and protect their female characters, Howells seems never to forget, as he creates his heroines, that he is male.

Schriber, who never seems to forget that she is female, goes on to describe Howells' paternal ideal of the woman who can challenge patriarchal
2. John Singer Sargent, The Fountain, Villa Torlonia, Frascati, Italy. 1907. Oil on canvas, 28 1/2 x 22 in., The Art Institute of Chicago.
limitations, but who always knows that a woman has certain responsibilities. She refers to this as the "insidious incursion of gender into the production of texts."47

Sarah Daugherty also complains of Howells' male presence. She leans much of her analysis of Howells' early novels on *Mrs. Farrell*, saying that the book has been sadly neglected by feminist writers and that it is "interesting because Howells departed, if only temporarily, from 'the fiction of masculine control.'"48 Daugherty defends Howells against some of the complaints recorded by critics, but seems to be asking that Howells have some kind of objectivity toward the condition of women. Daugherty sees life in Howells' early heroines, but asserts that he "missed some opportunities for the ethical and social criticism that he himself advocated."49 Amy Kaplan explains convincingly that this lapse is a product of the middle-class ethos Howells was trying to establish:

47Mary Suzanne Schriber, *Gender and the Writer's Imagination: From Cooper to Wharton* (Lexington: U P of Kentucky, 1987): 89-90. The remark about male and female imaginations is disturbingly ahistorical — it presumes the same unchanging, determining structures she accuses Howells of perpetuating. Had I the same "male imagination" as Howells, this essay would have been much easier to write.


49Daugherty 16. There are a few minor moments when Howells seems to lose sight of his own purpose in *Coast*. At one point the narrator says of Charmian's hyper-bohemian studio, "There never was a girl's studio that was more like a man's studio, an actual studio." (202) Schriber's description of this kind of statement as condescending, though, oversimplifies. One might point out that Howells also condescends to his male characters
Like his genteel predecessors, Howells saw himself as the guardian of tradition, upholding and nurturing the values shared by his readers. Yet in the role of educator and enlightened guide, he also tried to expand the horizons of his cultivated readers to more democratic vistas.

Kaplan's use of the word "vistas" here is key, implying as it does a distance between observer and object. Kaplan emphasizes Howells' democratic utopianism -- which Bell points out served his own interest in the matter, easing problems of gender and profession in the art world. Howells' Cornelia tested Victorian definitions of womanhood, succeeded in romance, directly confronted poverty and saw artistry as a profession. This left the reader in a higher, ironic reading position, despite the narrative time spent on upper-class affairs. The shortcomings of Daugherty's and Schriber's approaches now become clear; understanding how the reader is positioned within the novel is essential. The middle-classed reader, in Howells' interpellation, will praise Cornelia's pragmatism and advocate an art world free of the dilettante prescriptions of the upper-class discourse of leisure. His objective is to transform the popular ethos of the Romantic artist into one celebrating middle-class professionalism.

Habegger's take on Howells' women is cogent and useful as well. Habegger says female characters in Howells represent possibilities for or products of society, and that they are meant to demonstrate the evil effects -- he can be downright motherly at times. I am thinking in particular of "Editha," in which the mothers of the main characters are basically the only sympathetic figures in the story.

50Kaplan 18.
of 'sentimental' socialization. Like Bell, he emphasizes Howells' own struggles with nineteenth-century social constructions of masculinity and the effects of those struggles on the gender geography of his fiction. For Howells, the artistic marriage was one premised on adjustments to the class dimensions of the art world, one in which he himself participated. The woman artist for Howells best fulfilled the democratic vision by being marriageable -- by seeing artistry as a profession, rather than as a mark of upper-classness.

When asked in an 1898 interview, "What place are women to take in the literary field?" Howells answered:

I'm a heretic about woman. People talk about her limitations. I don't see but what her limitations are the same as a man's, so far as literature is concerned. She may not look at life from a man's point of view, but that's no reason she doesn't see it as clearly . . . . Who is the greatest English novelist of the century? I say George Eliot. She was a greater mind than Dickens or Thackeray or any of the others. As for my favorite novelist, that's Jane Austen.51

Howells' attitude toward women is a tricky beast to tie down. Howells' comment here that both men and women have "limitations. . . so far as literature is concerned" is important. This implies that the limitations placed on an artist are external, and if Habegger, Leverenz and Bell are right, Howells appreciated the intimidation of gender ideology as it affected both men and women. It is unlikely, however, that Howells could have advocated anything resembling a modern feminist position in his fiction. For one thing, he recognized the inextricability of gender from other discourses. For another, however much Howells may have

preached to the public, being a democratic visionary also meant that he had to serve the public. It seems the public wanted manly men and womanly women -- which meant marriage.

Historically, this raises a simple question. If Howells was so good at catering to the public and serving up a new middle-class art discourse, why did so few people read The Coast of Bohemia? It could simply be argued that the novel was not popular because middle-class readers valued the upper-class connotations of leisurely art highly. This is possible, but there is a more likely explanation. The notion of bohemianism, as Albert Parry has shown, was gaining currency with the middle class in the early 1890s. Popular magazines, small middle-class artistic circles, and novels were all, in Parry's view, sanitizing the French aesthetic rejection of the material. The character of Charmian in Coast of Bohemia is a satire of this fascination, representing bohemianism as solipsistic and superficial. In this case, Howells missed the mark; George DuMaurier's novel Trilby came out the next year (1894) and was a quick bestseller. DuMaurier's novel makes a case for bohemianism as an ideal middle-class aesthetic; Trilby was sentimental, and ultimately a celebration of an image of studio life so acceptable to the middle class, that as Parry notes, "the Mercantile Library of New York was compelled to put one hundred copies of Trilby in circulation, so heavy was the demand." This lack of sensitivity to the public sentiment on Howells' part, I think, illustrates a point that Bell makes. He observes that Howells "often, if fleetingly, acknowledges the requirements of 'art' in even 'realistic' fiction." In this case Howells'

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52Parry 103.
53Bell 118.
greater access to the realities of the bohemian world and his ability to perceive its reliance on leisure-class ideals may have insulated him from the ways in which his middle-class readers, dispersed all over the country, were using the idea of bohemianism.

Nevertheless, Howells' attempt to defeat the seemingly hegemonic notion of women artists as selfish, perverted and unmarriageable is significant. Howells, whatever his stance on women and their ideal behavior, in some instances (Alma Leighton, Cornelia Saunders and Walter Ludlow) complicates the culturally-available symbols of gendered artistry by insisting that class expectations matter. Implicitly, he offers a challenge to the normative concepts informing and interpreting the woman artist, as I have discussed, changing the meanings of women artist characters in his fiction, if not women artists in fact. It may be that Howells' position within the publishing institution is what makes his characterizations most useful; he knew he would reach a large audience with his fictional female artists, and he used his own power to help several female artists into the publishing world. While this might be taken as both literally and figuratively patronizing, Howells' image of the 'woman artist' could not be mistaken for the 'typical' male's.
CHAPTER THREE

It may be said that not only does the painter have to live by his pictures, but in many cases the critic has to as well, and it is therefore in the latter gentleman's interest to foster the idea that pictures are indispensable things.

-- Henry James

In this quote, taken from a review of paintings at the National Academy of Design's annual exhibition, James characteristically offers us truth and irony: a "gentleman" of course should not have to foster interest, nor perhaps should Henry James have to earn money by writing reviews. Fundamentally, though, James in this review discusses the fact that at his time, "we have invented, side-by-side, the arts of picturesque writing and of erudite painting." In the spirit of the time, then, I will shift my attention to painting; indeed, to the painter who is perhaps most associated with James.

John Singer Sargent's The Fountain (oil, 1907, fig. 2) depicts a woman painting by a fountain while a man looks on. The form of the

54James, "On Some Exhibitions of 1875," quoted in McCoubrey, 163.

55James, quoted in McCoubrey, 164.

56The painting's full title is The Fountain, Villa Torlonia, Frascati, Italy. It was displayed originally at The New English Art Club in 1907, then at the Art Institute of
woman, wearing a white overshirt and dress, anchors the center of the canvas, and she seems to be the subject (or perhaps the object) of the painting, despite its title. Three colors, green, white and brown, dominate the picture. The setting feels intimate; there is only a dab of white in the upper right of the canvas to suggest sky, while dark green trees drape the top half of the work. There are only two strong planes in the painting, the trees and railing in the background forming one and the couple, easel, and balustrade in the foreground forming another. The middle ground, wherein the painting's titular subject lies, is suggested only by the spray of the fountain and a series of triangles of color -- from left to right, a dark brown one between the man's face and the easel, a small blue one between the man's arm and the palette, another dark blue one between the woman's back and the balustrade, and finally a dark blue-green one framed by the pillar of the balustrade in the foreground. That it is a sunny day is suggested by highlights on the man's shirt and head, on the woman's frock and hat, and by the luminosity of the fountain. Broadly painted in an impressionistic style, the painting could be taken as informal portrait or, based on its title, as a light exercise in landscape or local color painting. A close look at the painting's composition and subject, however, hints that the work may do more than present the sunny outing of an evidently cultured couple.

Compositionally, the painting is unbalanced. Crowded into the left-hand side of the work are the easel, the onlooking man, the fountain, and the woman's legs and right arm. The right-hand third of the painting is

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pure landscape, with trees in the background and pool in the middle-and-foreground. The heavy cornerstone of the railing, on which sits the painter, is the only balancing feature of this half of the canvas.

If one looks closer at the painting's organization, other curiosities and collisions emerge. The male onlooker is obscured by the woman's right hand and arm, and by the easel. In fact, his body is truncated; his lower legs are beyond the scope of the canvas. This alone is not all that unusual, as he is apparently not the focus of the work, but given the already unbalanced composition it seems strange. Compositional lines formed by the angle of the man's body and by the easel cross in the area of the man's groin.

Strange too is the positioning of the fountain, which seems to be springing from the man's forehead. If, for example, the fountain itself had been depicted to the viewer's right of the woman, a neat triangle of elements would be formed, with the fountainhead and man's head as base and the woman artist's head and hat as its apex. Furthermore, the compositional line created by the easel, man, and fountain spray would not lead the eye vertically off the canvas. A triangle is formed by the woman's head, her arm, the man's lower body, the bottom of the canvas, and up again through the concrete post and her back. The man's head and the canvas he contemplates, which draw attention to the left, disrupt this triangulation.

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Sargent's reputation as a master of implication by composition is well-known, and would be enough to call The Fountain's spatial arrangements into question — that is, it seems unlikely that this clumping of elements results from whim. Nevertheless, there is also historical evidence of his design.
As it stands, the arrangement pulls attention from the painting's center, and focuses it on the man's face. Framed by fountain, easel, arm, and the leftward glance of the woman painting, the man's face seems to float in midair. He is brightly lit, and his three-quarters portrait gives the viewer more information than the woman's face, painted in full profile. The composition leads the eye to contemplate his face, and so my attention will shift to it as well.

It is always difficult to put painted attitude into words, but the relaxation of the head (and indeed the man's whole body), half-shut eyelids and raised eyebrows indicate a detached, almost aloof contemplation of the woman's painting. The mouth could be smiling, but overall the expression seems to be something between condescension and boredom. The look is self-assured, but relaxed, not overly serious, in contrast to the concentration and good posture displayed by the woman. There seems to be a tension in this painting, which the composition and the portraits of the couple create in tandem.

A possible general statement of the subtext of *The Fountain* is that this couple regards the woman's painting with differing degrees of seriousness. The man expresses condescension, if not contempt, while the woman ignores him, overlooks him (literally, her glance passes over his head), and seriously engages in her task. The man's expression provides us our only access to the woman's painting; apart from his gaze and reaction, since the canvas is turned away from the viewer, we have no way to judge her work. The fountain, ostensibly a place of peace and contemplation, provides a background for tension between man and woman. By placing the fountain behind the man's forehead, and making
a woman artist his subject, Sargent creates tension within an ostensibly peaceful painting.58

Sargent was known for depictions of life in Italy, for paintings celebrating the dolce far niente of upper-class tourists. Here, however, he seems to be provoking, toying with the gender debate over the cultural symbol of the artist at work. At this remove in time, it is difficult to tell whether these compositional clues were picked up by Sargent's contemporaries. It may help to bring in some historical information by which to measure the analysis so far and to help uncover some of the painting's implications. The woman portrayed is Jane Emmet von Glehn, a portraitist, and the man is her husband of three years, Wilfrid von Glehn, also a painter.59 The couple and Sargent met up in Italy for a

58This reading is in direct contradiction to most of those offered by Sargent scholars to date. Patricia Hills, for example, describes the visual effects of Sargent's travel works this way: "These pictures are the fêtes galantes of the era. [. . .] We have no clues of time passing. Instead, we have the sweet life, the dolce far niente, where emotions are restrained and unengaged. The bright sunlight creates a sensuousness of surface, and the ensuing spectacle deflects any concern for what might be a deeper, intrinsic meaning." Hills 203.

59Wilfrid also painted pictures of Jane throughout their long marriage, but I have not been able to find one depicting her in the act of painting. The artist at work must not have been one of Wilfrid's strong subjects; he did no portraits of Sargent at work either, during their 20-year companionship.

Wilfrid was one of many upper-class English men at this time who married well-off American women. (Oscar Wilde pokes fun at the phenomenon in The Picture of Dorian Gray, which came out the year of the von Glehns' marriage, 1904.) Jane came from a very artistic family; her sisters Lydia Emmet and Rosina Sherwood helped found William
painting trip, part of which was spent in the Villa Torlonia, in September of 1907. Von Glehn wrote to her sister Lydia about this painting, and the letter is worth quoting at length:

Sargent is doing a most amusing and killingly funny picture in oils of me perched on a balustrade painting. It is the very "spit" of me. He has stuck Wilfrid in looking at my sketch with rather a contemptuous expression as much to say "Can you do plain sewing any better than that?" He made Wilfrid put on this expression to avoid the danger of the picture looking like an "idyl on a P. & O. steamer" as he expressed it . . . . I look rather like a pierrot, but have rather a worried expression as every painter should have who isn't a perfect fool, says Sargent. Wilfrid is in short sleeves, very idle and good for nothing, and our heads come against the great "panache" of the fountain . . . . Poor Wilfrid can't pose for more than a few minutes at a time as the position is torture after a while.60

This description suggests many avenues for exploration, but first, it demonstrates that we are on the right track so far. Sargent "stuck Wilfrid in" to the painting, and made him pose in an unnatural position on purpose; this was no haphazard placement. Von Glehn also points out the position of "our heads" vis a vis the fountain in the background; again, Sargent seems to have purposefully arranged this. He also "made Wilfrid put on this expression," avoiding the vapidly idyllic and creating, along with the composition, a more complex psychological atmosphere.

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Merritt Chase's Summer School on Long Island, her cousin Ellen Emmet Rand was an established portrait painter, and we are all aware of her cousin Henry James' literary perpetrations. Laura Wortley, introduction to Wilfrid-Gabriel de Glehn (1870-1951): Paintings and Watercolors (New York: Hirschl & Adler Galleries, Inc., 1989).

60Jane von Glehn to Lydia Emmet, October 6, 1907, quoted in Hills, 191.
There are many ways to describe that atmosphere; I will suggest two closely related possibilities. The first is premised on the issue of gender, raised not only by the representation of a woman painting (relatively unusual in major works of art at the time, although one of Sargent's frequent subjects), but by von Glehn's interpretation of her husband's glance, "As much to say, 'Can you do plain sewing any better than that?'" This comment is sarcastic; von Glehn's support of his wife's endeavors makes it unlikely that he shared many artists' disdain for women painters. Jane von Glehn's mention of the domestic art of sewing raises the issue, however, of the tension that might have been felt by viewers unfamiliar with the painting's subjects. On the other hand, Wilfrid's lack of concern may affirm a reading of this couple in the context of the cosmopolitan art ideology. This painting, like Howells' The Coast of Bohemia, represents an artistic marriage. It can be read as a Wettorian marriage: the woman of leisure paints as a way of demonstrating her class, and the man looks on, relaxed ("composed"), knowing her act is no threat to the masculine domain of art. In any case, what is clear is that how we read the man's "position" is critical to our understanding of the painting. During the painting's creation, Wilfrid was "tortured," Jane tells us. One wonders if the torture was mental as well as physical. That is, for Wilfrid, to whom art was considerably more than leisure, it might have been uncomfortable to be forced into a position that indicated an ideology of art with which he didn't sympathize, regardless of his class status.

Wilfrid's position in the painting highlights one of the points made in the last chapter: the meaning of the woman artist is conferred in relation to a class-based interpretation of art. Sargent puts Wilfrid in a position to poke fun at this "unusual" couple, who defy classed
expectations of their behavior as male and female artists. This position at the same time makes possible a reading that both relies on and reinforces the upper-class associations of artistic endeavor. Just as Howells' novel relies for its success on our position (assuming that we as readers seek a middle-class discourse of art), so Sargent's painting carries different messages when viewed from different positions.

As Jane von Glehn seems to read it, the painting is a kind of "in joke" on its subjects. Lazy Wilfrid, content and contemptuous as the male (acceptable) artist, the fountainhead of genius, looks on as his overly-serious female companion attempts aestheticism. The secondary spray from the fountain falls on her -- she must work hard to be an artist, while it comes "naturally" to her husband. Those who are "in," who have access to this reading, are the trio in the Villa garden and their close friends. Read from the perspective of an outsider, one who doesn't know that the two are married and that they are both successful artists, the painting becomes less amusing and more provocative.

Another way of exploring the tension in this painting stems from the tools just such a casual viewer might employ to decipher the images. I have discussed the attitudes of the two figures, but the fountain itself, particularly in a painting about painting, has a certain iconographical value. Maurice Beebe has explored the tradition of representing artistry in writing, and his insights may hint at possible meanings in Sargent's painting. Beebe sees two dominant archetypes for artistic experience, the Ivory Tower and the Sacred Fount. He explains that as referents to particular ways of viewing the artist's way of life, both notions were in place in Anglo-American cultural dialogue long before this painting was made.
"The Sacred Fount tradition is rooted in the concept of art as experience," Beebe writes. The artist of this mind must experience life fully, roll up his sleeves and muck about, or else sacrifice that true connection with the effluvia of the muses. The man's rolled-up sleeves, relaxed attitude, and fountained forehead all elicit his association with this tradition of artistic behavior and inspiration.

"The Ivory Tower tradition, on the other hand, exalts art above life and insists that the artist can make use of life only if he stands aloof." Beebe describes the Ivory Tower tradition as associating the artist with God, looking down on the world and "claiming that a 'well-made' work of art is superior to the real world." Here the woman's position, on high, ignoring the lazy, good-for-nothing onlooker, relates her to this vision of artistry. Visually, her erect posture and brilliantly white vestment suggest a kind of "ivory tower" as well.

I promised that these two interpretations were closely related. Beebe points out that "in the portrait-of-the-artist novel the Sacred Fount theme is most often expressed in terms of the artist's relationship to women." The experience of love is a critical one for the fulfillment of the developing artist. "Although he may be destroyed by the search for such

61 Beebe 16.

62 Beebe 13, 14.

63 Of course, as many students of the nineteenth century have observed, women were considered by cultural discourse the repositories of heavenly virtue, and men the more secular beings. This painting also participates in this dialogue to a certain extent, contrasting Jane von Glehn's neat frock and proper posture with Wilfrid's lackadaisical self-presentation.
fulfillment, he must go through Woman in order to create -- just as man can father children only through women -- and his artistic power is dependent on the Sacred Fount." In playing out visually the tension between artistic tradition (the male dominance of art but recognized dependence on women for validity) and woman's intrusion into that tradition, Sargent evokes these icons of artistic experience.

Beebe's insistence on the availability of these two constructs in cultural discourse is of course problematical, as his study deals primarily with literature. His book also, however, deals primarily with men -- and if he is right in emphasizing the importance of the symbols of tower and fount, then Sargent's painting can be seen as undermining even the assumptions composing Beebe's epistemology -- as Huf puts it, his assumption "that male experience is universal experience and male art universal art."65

Beebe's turns of phrase here are unnerving, particularly because they remain only suggestive. He does not engage in a full exploration of either the notion of phallus as artistic center or the sexually-charged nature of his icons, though the last clause suggests this. Sargent's positioning of Jane's painting, which seems to issue more or less from Wilfrid's crotch, suggests that perhaps the perennial bachelor was poking fun at more than the von Glehn's artistic relationship. If we take this analogy further, the stroke of Jane's brush/hand on the canvas/Wilfrid's penis leads to the spray emerging from his head. All this may very well be part of the "joke." Naturally, Jane von Glehn would not have mentioned this in her letter. I myself have done my best not to describe Wilfrid's expression as "cocky."

Huf 4.
This painting, though, should also be appreciated in the context of contemporary representations of the relationship between women and art. Earlier I referred to Frederick Lord Leighton's Painter's Honeymoon (oil, ca. 1864, fig. 3), in which woman is portrayed as helper and inspiration to the male artist. There is also a sexual tension in this painting that pushes the woman's role further away from the aesthetic sensibility. If this is a honeymoon, it is a working honeymoon for the artist. The woman's strained pose (she pushes herself almost into the man's way), her contact with the artist, and the title of the painting may suggest her desire for intimacy. The inclusion of the tree bearing fruit, behind her head, suggests almost literally what is in "the back of her mind." What separates her from this goal is literally the drawing-board, and figuratively the man's devotion to his art. While the man draws with his right hand, on the corner of the board farthest from the woman, his left arm and hand prevent the woman's encroachment. The artist holds his new wife's left hand, whose fingers are disengaged, while his left arm prevents her right arm from advancing -- either on him or on the drawing board. The man too, then, is implicated in this circle of desire. His body is visually split by the drawing board. The higher faculties he uses to work are above board, as it were, while his lower body, the locus of desire, is isolated, suppressed, though pressed upon. The painting could almost be taken as an allegory


67There is a sympathy of color here, as well -- the woman's dress shares the greens and yellows and oranges of the plant.
of male attempts to control artistry (depicted in this case as both self-control and control of women's artistry) in the nineteenth century.

Other representations show similar, if less thorough, placements of the woman in relation to art. Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot's *The Artist's Studio* (oil, ca. 1855-60, fig. 4) is particularly disturbing. In this painting a young woman sits facing a painting on an easel. Her left hand touches the bottom corner of the painting, while from her lowered right hand dangles a lute. Perhaps this might be taken as a moment of transformation, in which the young woman lays down the female-accessible lower art of performing popular music and decides to aspire to the higher art of painting. Even so, this transformation is effected within a male space (the male artist's studio and *The Artist's Studio*) and under the influence of male artistry. Furthermore, there is a final disturbing element to the painting -- the presence of a small dog. Man's best friend here raises one paw to touch the woman's skirt, while looking up at her, at the same moment the woman paws the artist's work. What the painting ends up seeming to represent is a pair of *chiens* loyally worshipping their masters.68

Linda Nochlin's essay "Women, Art, and Power" explores other images of women in art by men and some of the ways women artists went

68 A similar work with very different possibilities is Degas' *Mary Cassatt at the Louvre*, 1880s, which Wendy Lesser discusses. Degas, she says, "presents us with a viewer of paintings who is female -- and who is, moreover, an artist herself. In other words (the print seems to say), the person who paints pictures and the person who looks at them can both be female." Lesser, *His Other Half: Men Looking at Women Through Art* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991): 58.
about countering them. Sargent's paintings of women engaging with the art world must be taken in the context Nochlin describes, and within the visual tradition of the two paintings I have briefly explored. The Fountain was also likely read simply as a portrait of a young woman of the leisure class exercising her artistic faculties in the manner prescribed by Mrs. Ellis. To those unfamiliar with the individuals involved but acquainted with Sargent's reputation as the portraitist laureate of cosmopolitania, the painting may have held no tensions whatever.

Several interpretive positions are possible, taking into account dominant, class-based notions of womanhood and the images of women and art available in the high art of Sargent's time.

A glance at Sargent's other "artist paintings" highlights both Sargent's departure from these images and the exceptional curiosity of The Fountain. Sargent did, as far as I can tell, nine artist-at-work-outdoors paintings which portray women, either as painters or as bystanders. This subject was popular with French-school Impressionists at the time; Sargent himself painted outdoors with Monet and represented him at his easel in 1887. In the earliest of these paintings, women sit by reading or otherwise distracted, as in Claude Monet Painting at the Edge of a Wood (oil, 1887, fig. 5), Dennis Miller Bunker Painting at Calcot (oil, 1888), and Paul Helleu Sketching with His Wife (oil, 1889, fig. 6). In the later paintings, women take a more active role in the artistic process. The Fountain was painted in 1907, and a year later Sargent painted his sister

69 Nochlin, Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays, 1-36.
painting with Eliza Wedgwood in Majorca. In Simplon Pass: The Lesson (watercolor, 1911, fig. 7), an older woman sketches while two young women watch. Another watercolor, In the Generalife (watercolor, 1912), depicts an older woman painter at work while a young and an old woman look on. In The Master and His Pupils (oil, 1914), a man paints while what appear to be three young women look on intently. In The Sketchers (oil, 1914), Sargent once again portrays Jane and Wilfrid von Glehn. This time, Jane's painting is not even on the canvas, though we can see two legs of her easel. Wilfrid is painting here, too, but both are intent on their work. The significance of Sargent's adoption of the more involved female figure over the passive one is hard to judge, but it indicates at least a thematic concern with the woman artist; that is, the figure is not so significant as to be political, but it is not merely an aesthetic touch, either, I think. The Fountain stands out, however, for the implications of its composition -- not one of these other works is as problematical compositionally, and only Simplon Pass: The Lesson differs thematically. Paintings of women teaching women art are rare, but The Lesson, a watercolor from late in Sargent's career, was probably not seen (or meant to be seen) by very many people.

I offer here only an interpretation, and hardly an exhaustive one at that. Simply portraying a woman artist at the turn of the century brought

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71 The sketcher is probably Emily Sargent. In a 1911 photo she wears an outfit identical to that in the watercolor, and she is shown in the 1908 painting with a pen or brush in her mouth, as in the later work. The two young women are the same women depicted in Sargent's watercolor Reading (1911), Sargent's cousins. Stanley Olson, John Singer Sargent: His Portrait (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986): plates XXX, XXXI.
with it a whole panoply of issues. Sargent has been described as an eschewer of ideas or issues in painting. "His Baedeker education had made him disinclined to peer below the surface of things. His mind did not turn on introspection." However it was intended, The Fountain definitely peers "below the surface of things," particularly the contested ground of the artist's gender. The von Glehns, as artists, cosmopolitans, and here models, no doubt received the painting quite differently than did many of the onlookers at the New English Art Club. In avoiding the "idyll" (or attempting to, at any rate) Sargent created a painting that was "meant to be read and interpreted" rather than taken at face value as a record of a Mediterranean afternoon. The significance of Sargent's ironic portrayal is difficult to gauge. Moving in upper-class circles, and primarily painting for that class, Sargent had more leeway to 'gender-bend;' that is, a representation of a female artist (and one of good family at that) would not be taken by a wealthy, cosmopolitan audience as an assault on the values of aristocratic society, as long the subject's artistry could be interpreted as leisure activity. What this painting shows, then, is that the class dynamics of this painting do not inhere in its subject. For the "joke" to work, Jane and Wilfrid must recognize that in some contexts, their relationship might be seen as a tremendous anomaly. Jane, a highly-trained artist from a family of professional artists, in the joke is represented as a professional (serious, concentrated, productive) artist. Wilfrid is depicted as lazy, unproductive, yet condescending. The sexual subtext of the composition provides an ironic link between these

72 Olson, "On the Question of Sargent's Nationality," in Hills, John Singer Sargent, 23.

73 The phrase is Nochlin's, 88.
hyperbolic representations of different class origins. Jane's Americanness and Wilfrid's Englishness also play into this construction. Sargent's painting shows the relationship that the von Glehns should stand in if abstract notions of class behavior and artistic discourse held sway. In this version the painting is, in Jane's words, "killingly funny." To an outside audience, as I have suggested, it was probably merely "amusing;" Jane paints because that is a mark of her class, as much as is her presence in an Italian villa or on a Sargent canvas.

Sargent, then, plays with classed interpretations, and gender expectations within those class outlooks. The Fountain is an example of how, as Cherry puts it, "visual images became key sites for a specular management of sexual difference concerned with the visible articulations of class and culture." Sargent, from his professional middle-class background and experience as a portraitist, knew the liminal class status of the professional artist. He was acquainted with both the investment his middle-class father had made in an identity based in a work ethos and the elite families who were actively engaged in not seeming professionalized, who had less invested in fixed gender or sexual roles. Patricia Hills speculates that what Sargent himself at this time "wanted to see was not reality, but the holiday, aestheticized world of the late nineteenth and the

74Cherry 78.

early twentieth centuries." In *The Fountain* he seems to have been able to serve both masters.

Perhaps a middle-class male museum patron in Chicago in 1812 would see no irony in Sargent's idyll, and instead sympathize with Wilfrid von Glehn's expression, seeing in it a mirror of his own contempt for female artists. Perhaps that patron's wife might see the painting differently, perhaps not. In any event, I think this painting raises the same issue David Lubin sees in Sargent's *The Boit Children* (1882-83):

Rather than saying disparagingly of the painting that, "typically male," it reifies and objectifies, fixing its sights, and thus the spectator, on female sexuality, could we suggest instead that, atypically of male-generated art, it strives to show reality from a female position, a woman's perspective...? The notion is certainly debatable, but the debate is worth undertaking, for it touches so directly and importantly upon critical questions of how character representation can sometimes unbalance "the order of things," decentering absolute fixedness not by replacing it with a new, equally fixed or rigid presence, but rather by allowing it to remain, in male eyes at least, as empty, lacking, phallically incomplete.

As it happens, the horizontal, vertical and diagonal axes of *The Fountain*, like those of *The Boit Children*, converge at the woman painter's groin, which is covered by her palette. The painting, while featuring a female subject, centers on her palette, not on her sexuality (though the two are implicitly closely associated). Masculine criticism and attitude are literally marginalized in the composition. There is no explicit program in the picture as a whole; it may be ironic, but if so its criticism of masculine preconceptions of artistry is done with humor rather than demagoguery.

76Hills 203.

Like Lubin, I see Sargent more engaged in the contest over gendered images and conceptions than his critical characterization (and sometimes self-characterization) as a disinterested outsider would lead one to believe.
CONCLUSION

Every critic declares not only his judgement of the work but also his claim to the right to talk about it and judge it. In short, he takes part in a struggle for the monopoly of legitimate discourse about the work of art, and consequently in the production of the value of the work of art.

-- Pierre Bordieu

I have tried to argue that in some ways, William Dean Howells and John Singer Sargent took positions as "critics," to use Bordieu's word, when crafting their versions of women artists. For these men as for all artists, as Richard Brodhead has observed, making art meant adopting a particular stance on what exactly an artist was and did. The authors' class backgrounds, the social setting in or for which they created, and the material circumstances of that production and exhibition all inflected their narratives, visual or literary. The Coast of Bohemia and The Fountain help us explore an intricate culture, and specifically, the significance of class and gender as constitutive and interacting elements of nineteenth-century America's discourse on art.

For Howells, discussing the woman artist was eventually a way to address several of his own concerns at once. Having established himself with a readership and a narrative strategy with middle-class interests, Howells took an opportunity in The Coast of Bohemia to play out some of

78 Bordieu 317.
his ruminations on art, class, and gender. A scene between Alma
Leighton and Angus Beaton in Hazard of New Fortunes sets up the
problem nicely. Alma, who is sketching a portrait of Beaton at the time,
criticizes Kingsley's dictum, "Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be
clever":

"I always thought that was the most patronizing thing ever
addressed to a human girl. . . . I should like to have it applied to the
other 'sect' awhile. As if any girl that was a girl would be good if
she had the remotest chance of being clever!"
"Then you wouldn't wish me to be good?"
"Not if you were a girl." (335)

Here we have the other side of Wetmore's argument. Alma does not
move quickly from girlish aspiration to womanish domesticity; she
implies that girls don't have "the remotest chance of being clever." She
sees that men are not innately clever -- they form a "sect," not a sex, with
controlled access to "cleverness." When Beaton responds to her
suggestion that he apply the dictum to his own behavior, "Then you
wouldn't wish me to be good?," she insists on the reality, not the fantasy.
For Beaton to be "good" in the current state of affairs, he would of
necessity be a girl.

This passage has a larger significance for the work Howells' novel is
doing. The dichotomy set up between "goodness" (being true to one's
womanly, nurturing self) and "cleverness" (here discussed as intellectual
and artistic achievement) summarizes the problem of art for Howells.
"Cleverness" as it is conceived of by the leisure-class art world, is inimical
to goodness. The problem of the gendering of art for Howells raises the
broader question of the function of artistic ideology in social life. For
Howells' middle-class audience, the unpragmatic, fanciful life of the artist
was an effeminate one. As Michael Davitt Bell observes, Howells attempted to combat the emasculation of his profession by characterizing it as productive, geared toward a positive social goal -- the dominance of a middle-class moral world view. In *The Coast of Bohemia*, Howells cements this claim by inverting the popular contradiction and marrying two artists.

For Sargent, the situation was vastly different. Though of middle-class origins, Sargent was pushed into high European culture by both his mother and his own ambition to master painting. His works are as implicated as Howells's in cementing social boundaries; Sargent was patronized for his ability to evoke stylish conservatism in portraits of Europe's (and Boston's) elite. I argue that *The Fountain*, a small, uncommissioned work, was meant to be read differently from different perspectives. For the three people involved and their acquaintances, the painting was "killingly funny;" a private(s) joke about the intersection of art, gender and sex. For the passing audience at the Art Institute of Chicago, no doubt familiar with Sargent's other works, it was an example of the use of art by leisurely upper-class women. Some of the sexual undertones may have remained; it might have been seen as an inversion of the undertones of Leighton's *Painter's Honeymoon*, with a woman artist wrapped up in her work while the man has other things on his mind. In any case, the meaning of the painting and its imaging of the woman artist were a product of Sargent's ability to weave perhaps discordant discourses of class and gender into an arrangement of possibilities, rather than fixities.

Previous scholarship on the image of the woman artist has focused on the politics of gender. Certainly contests surrounding the legitimacy of
female artistry were staged in literature and in visual and performing arts, by both males and females. Frequently, though, the figure appears in works with other objectives than what we would now call women's empowerment. William Dean Howells' and John Singer Sargent's roles in that discussion, I argue, cannot be characterized as "typically masculine." While they obviously cannot be considered feminist, I think it is more productive to think of their images as possibilities or suggestions, rather than looking for polished reconceptualizations of women's roles in society. Howells' and Sargent's women serve the purpose of identifying a broad social space for their readers. For Howells, Cornelia's marriage was significant because it claimed a space in the discourse of art for middle-class values and expectations. For Sargent, the perception of women's art as a leisurely, upper-class activity for women allowed him to make a private joke about the assumptions of the art world regarding women's capacity to create Art. The implications of these works find greatest weight in their threat to male power over artistic production. Howells and Sargent were both secure in their professions by the time the works treated in this study were received by the public. Sargent's woman artist, as I speculated, can be (and has been) read more conservatively than I have, but again, merely representing a serious woman artist to an American audience was a relative rarity among male painters. Howells' *Coast*, on the other hand, cannot be read conservatively from the perspective of the masculinist art world (which, in the character of Wetmore, was represented in Howells' own works as old-fashioned and closed-minded).

Joan Scott's observation that an appearance of permanence is essential to binarized gendered images highlights my claim about Howells
and Sargent. "To vindicate political power," Scott writes, "the [gendered] reference must seem sure and fixed, outside human construction, part of the natural or divine order. In that way, the binary opposition and the social process of gender relationships both become part of the meaning of power itself; to question or alter any aspect threatens the entire system."79

The fictions of Rebecca Harding Davis and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps told women that perhaps there was something wrong with the system, but provided no alternative imagery -- they cast the married woman as a hypocrite, and the woman who becomes an artist is unhappy or is destroyed. In Davis' case, women are better off choosing domesticity over artistry (and, indeed, once married, they should not regret the decision, as the heroine of "Anne" does). The Story of Avis, apart from the success of its author as a female artist, offers only despair for the reader; it criticizes but does not unset the fundamental schema that marriage and art are incompatible for "true" women. These characterizations make the "reference seem sure and fixed, outside human construction;" whatever the eviscerating effects of class in Sargent or essentialism in Howells, their images do depart from Stewart's "eternal masculine."

Obviously much more could be done to explore this subject. Photographs of women artists need to be examined, as well as dramatic representations and other paintings and books than the few discussed here. Wendy Lesser has looked at Henry James from this perspective, focusing on one of his few American novels, The Bostonians. Olive Chancellor comes as close to being an artist as any female character in James' long fiction, and Lesser finds that "James comes right out and

79Scott 1078.
praises Olive in terms that truly reflect a 'Jamesian aesthetic.'" Her reading of Basil Ransom, an aspiring writer, is similar to my reading of Walter Ludlow:

It is hard to take Basil seriously as a writer. If the possession of "doctrines" alone were not enough to warrant his exclusion from the Jamesian "aesthetic," we would still have his naive careerism; he is ready, for instance, to marry on the strength of one accepted but not yet published article.

The male artist is not downright comical, but he is hardly the ideal male representative of artistic power. James depicts Olive as having sensibility and ability, like Cornelia. James' own investment in the cosmopolitan discourse of leisurely art complicates his representations. Images like these, produced by some of the most-read authors of the century, demand a more careful assessment of the way men represent gender's role in the world of artistic production.

James is a likely character with whom to conclude; his signifiers are so fluid that one can make an argument for almost any attitude in his works. As Fanny Assingham says in The Golden Bowl, "One can never be

80 Lesser 112-13. I am sure Lesser's use of the phrase "comes out" here is unintentional; discussion of James' ambiguous sexuality plays no part in her interpretation. The absence of female artists in James is a little suspicious. Mary Schriber observes of serious woman artist characters that, "in fact, James's fiction generally is notable for the absence of such figures. For instance, in his short fiction James created comic, shamefully popular women writers. . . . In all his short stories, he portrays only one respectable woman artist, Mrs. Harvey of 'Broken Wings.'" Schriber 152.

81 Lesser 110.
ideally sure of anything. There are always possibilities."\textsuperscript{82} Howells and Sargent, like James, depended on those possibilities, those ambiguities, when putting forth new visions of women's relationship to art. Howells' subtly traditional women, artists but somehow essentially women, can reconcile marriage and artistic endeavor. Sargent's \textit{plein air} painting women are a novelty, but seem somehow decorative -- they do not jar masculine ideology too much, though perhaps they give it a shove. My feeling is that ultimately, the images I have examined leave, in Stephen Crane's words, "small shoutings in the brain," not revolutionary, but revisionary spaces for the woman artist. One of Howells' descriptions of Alma Leighton summarizes nicely the way I have argued we should approach images like the woman artist:

Like everyone else, she was not merely a prevailing mood, as people are apt to be in books, but was an irregularly spheroidal character, with surfaces that caught the different lights of circumstance and reflected them. (95)

\textsuperscript{82}Lesser 120. Lesser uses this quote to encourage less pedantic critical readings of James.


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