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Publication Date

2020

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Playing Along: Music and Women's Education in the Nineteenth Century

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Art History

by

Brooke Denny

Thesis Committee:

Professor Cécile Whiting, Chair

Professor James D. Herbert

Associate Professor Roland Betancourt

2020

DEDICATION

To my family who fostered my love for art and cultivated my pursuit for knowledge.

To my friends who believed in me and cheered me on along the way.

To the Art History Undergraduate Association who let a graduate student stick around for one more year.

Thank you for all of your support and encouragement.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my committee chair, Professor Cécile Whiting who has inspired me throughout my time at UC Irvine as both a teacher and an advisor. Without her guidance and persistent help this thesis would not have been possible.

I would like to thank my committee members, Professor James D. Herbert and Professor Roland Betancourt, who have taught me to look beyond the frame and explore new ways of thinking about art.

I thank the Art History Department and the Art History Undergraduate Association for their encouragement and dedication to helping students succeed. I also thank Virginia H. Laddey and the Friends of Art History for their financial support through the Virginia H. Laddey Endowed Fellowship.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Playing Along: Music and Women's Education in the Nineteenth Century

by

Brooke Denny

Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professor Cécile Whiting, Chair

The course of women's education in the United States changed drastically during the nineteenth century, shifting from "French" finishing schools which treated education as an accomplishment to the first women's colleges which sought to compete with longstanding academic institutions reserved for men. One facet of education that shows this transformation is music, which began the century as an ornament to a woman's education but came to be regarded as a scientific and academic study by the end of the century. The visual arts show this change through the depiction of educated women with instruments. The portrait of *Adèle Sigoigne* by Thomas Sully from 1829 and Thomas Dewing's *Lady with a Lute* from 1886 both feature women with instruments from opposite ends of the century and reveal the evolution in musical education for women from accomplishment to academic discipline. Through the analysis of these works, conclusions can be drawn about nineteenth century sensibilities regarding education, music, and femininity.

To be a properly educated middle or upper-middle class, white woman in the nineteenth century, one had to know a little about a lot. Education has always had a purpose, and at the beginning of the century women's education was meant to prepare young ladies for a purpose—marriage. Women from the upper classes were especially expected to be proficient in both the academic and ornamental branches of education. They needed instruction in multiple languages, history, and the classics, the basics of science and philosophy, alongside accomplishments like drawing, painting, sewing, and music. This specialized education sought to cultivate the perfectly refined gentlewoman prepared for her role as a wife and keeper of the household. In contrast, the end of the century saw the rise of the first women's colleges, allowing women to turn their accomplishments into real educational opportunities. As new prospects brought opportunities outside of the home, they often led women to colleges, seeking to turn their educational interests into degrees and potentially jobs other than wife and mother. One facet of schooling that remained part of female education throughout this century long transformation from accomplishment to education is music. Musical education began as one of the many creative activities in which refined women were expected to have proficiency. Most women could play a little piano or sing a few popular songs if called upon at a party, but few devoted much time to studying it; after all women couldn't become musicians. By the end of the century, however, music was an established part of most women's colleges' course offerings, allowing women to study music in depth as a science rather than a party trick.

The importance of musical accomplishment and its shift to a serious focus of study can be seen in the visual arts. Throughout the nineteenth century artists often depicted women with musical instruments and other props relating to their education. As a wealthy woman's education was meant to show her wealth and status, so too did a wealthy woman's portrait strive to portray

the status afforded to her through a good education. Two paintings featuring women with musical instruments from different ends of the century illustrate this trend. The portrait of *Adèle Sigoigne* by Thomas Sully from 1829 and Thomas Dewing's *Lady with a Lute* from 1886 make manifest the shift from women's musical education as a mere ornamental accomplishment at the beginning of the century to a fully developed curriculum by the end, revealing the way that women's education as a whole evolved over the course of the century.

Thomas Sully's portrait of Mademoiselle Adèle Sigoigne displays a young woman at the height of fashion in the early nineteenth century. Adèle Sigoigne posed for the portrait in 1829. The portrait is half length, focusing on Sigoigne's face rather than her body. She looks straight out at the viewer instead of at her instrument, which blocks nearly the entirety of her body. Most of the canvas space is taken up by a large harp upon which Sigoigne rests her hands. The S shape of the curved instrument leads back to her hands and face, emphasizing vision and the physical dexterity required to play the harp. Her clothing is feminine and flowy and cut from satiny peach fabric which complements her skin tone and emphasizes the softness of her facial features. The wide neckline of the dress and puffed sleeves are quintessential aspects of fashion in the late 1820s, emphasizing the neck and face while deemphasizing the body itself. Her hat is bedecked with flowers and bows, which would have been the height of fashion for the period. Together hat and dress demonstrates the opulence and decoration in clothing, newly fashionable at the time, which replaced the simplified dresses and silhouettes of the preceding decade.¹ The portrait uses dress and harp to show her refinement, femininity, and status while emphasizing her musical education and ability.

¹ "Fashion History Timeline, 1820-29," Fashion Institute of Technology, last modified August 20, 2018, <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1820-1829/>.

Sully's portrait highlights the importance of proper education for women, showing what they could become if they were to emulate Adèle. Sigoigne's mother Aimée was the owner of a school for young women in Philadelphia, and Adèle assisted in the teaching of subjects such as music and French. Aimée Sigoigne, sometimes called Anne, was raised in the Caribbean in a wealthy French family and had to flee during the tumultuous revolts happening there in the early 1800s. She and many other well-to-do women turned to educating young women as a necessity as it was one of the only ways they could make an income and afford their lavish lives in the United States.² Located at 128 Pine street in Philadelphia, the Sigoigne school was one of the most popular and highly regarded "French schools" for women.³ French schools, called such because of their focus on teaching the French language and etiquette, were the most prestigious and expensive schools that women could attend. They were popular throughout the eastern seaboard, but there were many in the city of Philadelphia, which was a northern harbor for southerners and their conservative ideals.⁴ Since the south did not have as many schools or private tutors to offer, French schools such as Madame Sigoigne's attracted a strongly southern clientele, fueled by word of mouth and the practice of sending multiple daughters to the same school. Sigoigne's school attracted the daughters of socialites and the rich from all over the east coast. A network of Philadelphia's elite that extended beyond the city into the south shows how schools like Madame Sigoigne's were able to operate for so long. Tight connections between families meant that patronage could be expected and depended upon, and this was the case throughout the American northeast where these finishing schools abounded. Word of mouth was more important than any

² Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The House of Percy: Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 98.

³ Thomas Wilson, "Philadelphia Directory and Stranger's Guide", Philadelphia Museum of Art Library (Philadelphia, 1825), 126.

⁴ Daniel Kilbride, *An American Aristocracy: Southern Planters in Antebellum Philadelphia* (University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 54.

newspaper ad could hope to be and the connections made between students who attended these schools were often lifelong.⁵

Part of the draw to these schools was how expensive they were, making a fine education a status symbol. The high tuition price of \$950— or around \$23,000 today— of the Sigoigne school indicated its status as an elite school. Sending a daughter a few hours away to a French school in Philadelphia was easier than sending her off to France, although some parents opted for that instead. Keeping their daughters in the country, and specifically in a conservative, southern-sympathizing location was important to uphold the American elite’s ideals, especially about the role of women in the burgeoning American society. Historian Daniel Kilbride argues that “French schools taught young women to assume the roles to which their wealth and social position entitled them” Sigoigne’s school taught women what they needed to know to function in their society that; is, —how to be a proper woman.

Daily life at the school was strictly controlled and scheduled to ensure that the students would make the best use of their time. Given the cost for a year at the school, it seems only fair that parents expected their daughters to be hard at work at all times. Daughters were encouraged to write home often to keep their parents informed of how their education was progressing, and these letters were often used to garner new students. According to a letter written home by Sigoigne’s student Susan Gaston from 1822, the curriculum included “rhetoric, scientific dialogues, spelling... arithmetic, drawing, singing, harp, and piano. Writing lessons on Tuesday, history, geography, dancing, astronomy, and painting. Music I have every day two to three hours”⁶ Schedules were full and Sigoigne’s students were expected to excel in all of these facets of

⁵ Ibid, 63.

⁶ Ibid, 69.

education. They offered both academic studies such as math and history as well as ornamental electives like dancing or piano. Though these electives were seen as less important than history or French, music was given a serious place at Madame Sigoigne's and girls were expected to practice with focus and dedication. After all, these accomplishments were not accomplished overnight, and dedication to all forms of study were integral for a well-cultivated young woman, showing that she was capable of patience, diligence, and refinement.

Music's place in a well-educated woman's life was to provide her with talents she could use to prove her education and status to others. The nineteenth century saw the explosive spread of etiquette books, read widely throughout the nation. These books sought to give women advice on how they ought to act, even if they did not have access to a French School to teach them. The information contained in these books is remarkably similar throughout the century and taught many of the same rules and manners as Madame Sigoigne would have. Etiquette books discussed everything from how to properly invite people to a party to what hobbies and activities women should use to fill their free time⁷. Among these was music, a so-called "accomplishment" that showed a woman's talent and ability to focus and devote herself to the hard work of practicing an instrument often. Those who could play thus had time to practice, access to an instrument, and access to a teacher of some kind, proving music as a status symbol rather than purely educational. The most popular instrument in the mid-nineteenth century was the piano which was found in most upper-class homes. Etiquette books instruct women in how to accept invitations to play, warning them to not act either too excited nor too reserved at being asked to play. They were also instructed to keep their performances short, technical, and devoid of emotional movements. Educational practices were strengthened and traditions were reiterated in the nineteenth century as parents

⁷ Florence Hartley, *The Ladies' Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness* (G. W. Cottrell, Boston, 1860), 179.

sought to “teach the substitution of higher for lower pleasures” by filling their children’s free time with selected acceptable activities.⁸ This was especially the case for women who were expected to be morally virtuous as well as accomplished in various skills. They were taught these skills to be equipped for marriage to middle and upper-class gentlemen, and the more accomplished a woman was the more desirable she might be.⁹

While men also learned music or art, the arts were seen as an educational pursuit rather than merely accomplishments like they were for women. Men learned skills which would aid them in a profession while women learned skills to refine themselves. Although men in the upper-classes could rely less upon a profession and more upon family inheritance, they were still able to transform their interests into something more than woman. Men who studied art could become artists, while few women managed to break from the “fancy art” and “pretty pictures” they were taught to copy at finishing schools like Madame Sigoigne’s.¹⁰ The same was true of music; while men could become composers or expert players, women were relegated to the background of social events where they might be allowed to play a song or two to entertain the guests gathered in their homes. Florence Hartley’s popular etiquette book from 1860 warns young women that, “pursued as a recreation, it [music] is gentle, rational, lady-like. Followed as a sole object, it loses its charm”¹¹. Women were taught to be amateurs at many things instead of experts at one. Other nineteenth century etiquette books made similar claims such as, “To be able to do a great many things tolerably well, is of infinitely more value to a woman than to be able to excel in any one. By the former, she may render herself generally useful; by the latter, she may dazzle for an hour.”¹²

⁸ Arthur D. Efland, “Art and Education for Women in 19th Century Boston,” *Studies in Art Education*, vol. 26, no. 3 (1985): 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Hartley, *The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette*, 186.

¹² Linda Nochlin, “Why Are There No Great Women Artists?,” *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and*

Practicing art and music at an amateur level showed an understanding of culture, a desirable amount of aptitude and skill, and filled leisure time with morally acceptable activities. Women were cultivated to be useful and beautiful to society. Their education enhanced their wealth and status and served as a testament to their moral fortitude and ability to cultivate femininity.

Madame Aimée Sigoigne was renowned throughout elite social circles and often played host to European intellectuals and the wealthy parents of her students. It is possible that Thomas Sully, who was by then a well-known artist, attended events such as Madame Sigoigne's nightly salons. Born in England but raised in the American south, Sully experienced a career which brought him across oceans and countries. He worked and studied in both England and along the American Eastern Seaboard where he settled in Pennsylvania for the bulk of his career to create portraits for the elite¹³. Social events were a promising place for Sully to find new clients who could commission portraits.

He painted many young society women; they were the perfect demographic for a portraitist. These women were wealthy and beautiful and their families wanted to show them off, both to the upper-class world in general and to potential suitors. Sully painted numerous other portraits of women with musical instruments such as *Miss Walton of Florida* from 1833 which shows Octavia Walton Le Vert with an instrument in her lap and *Lady with a Harp* from 1818, a portrait of Eliza Ridgely from Baltimore. Both women were well educated by the era's standards. Octavia was educated at home under the tutelage of her mother and various tutors and spoke many languages alongside her other accomplishments, no doubt including music as evidenced by her portrait which shows her holding a guitar. Octavia, who was generally known as Madame Le Vert, became a

Powerlessness, ed. Vivian Gornick, Barbara Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 28.

¹³ Carrie Reborra Barratt, "Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History: Thomas Sully and Queen Victoria," Metropolitan Museum of Art, last updated October, 2004, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tsly/hd_tsly.htm.

prominent author and was firmly entrenched in the elite social groups of the American south¹⁴. Eliza Ridgley attended Miss Lyman's Institution in Philadelphia where she studied a curriculum identical to that at Madame Sigoigne's school. Alongside the usual subjects, she learned piano and harp, as shown in her portrait which was painted when she was only fifteen years old. Eliza was known for her "virtuosity on the harp" and there are records that her father purchased the finest harp one could buy from Europe and paid for her expensive music lessons, proving the importance of music in Eliza's education¹⁵. Of the three Sully portraits mentioned, only Eliza Ridgley is shown actually playing her instrument while Octavia and Adèle use their instruments as props. In all three, the instruments in the paintings are as noticeable as the women who hold them, and it is clear that music was an important part of these women's identities as well-educated American elites. Sully's portraits emphasize the skills and knowledge of the women in them and point directly to the education these women received and their idealized femininity.

Adèle Sigoigne did more than just teach music lessons at her mother's school, she was also an important social tool. Her beauty and poise made her a "magnet for social events"¹⁶ and a powerful advertisement for the skills her mother had achieved in educating bright young women. Adèle was a testament to the school and the idea that education was a necessary tool to fashion women into the perfect form. It is likely that Adèle Sigoigne's portrait was commissioned by her friend Mrs. Jane Craig Biddle. Thomas Sully painted numerous paintings of the Biddles who were a wealthy and powerful banking family in Philadelphia and close friends of the Sigoignes.¹⁷ The rich formed their own aristocracy in the city, connecting various families through marriage,

¹⁴ Harriet E. Amos Doss, Sara Frear, "Octavia Walton Le Vert," Encyclopedia of Alabama, last updated May 22, 2017, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-2355>.

¹⁵ Robert Wilson Torchia, *American Paintings of the Nineteenth Century Part II* (National Gallery of Art: Oxford University Press, 1998), 151.

¹⁶ Wyatt-Brown, *The House of Percy*, 98.

¹⁷ Charles Henry Hart, *A Register of Portraits Painted by Thomas Sully 1801-1871* (Philadelphia, 1908), 147.

friendship, and most importantly— business. Thomas Sully painted many of the most important people in nineteenth century Philadelphia, Adèle Sigoigne included. Portraits of the rich reinforced artistic conventions— when one family commissioned a portrait, it was sure to be shown off to all of their friends who would, in turn, want to commission a portrait of their own. Adèle Sigoigne’s portrait was commissioned for \$88, equivalent to around \$2,242 today.¹⁸ It was likely on display in the school which was also the Sigoigne’s home until Adèle’s death in 1857 when the school closed and the family’s assets were divided amongst friends and distant relatives.¹⁹

The construction of femininity was specifically iterated through societal rules and expectations placed upon women, and portraits such as the one of Adele played a role in perpetuating these ideals. Simone de Beauvoir famously stated that “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman”²⁰, and that process of becoming is performed in a variety of ways. From the way that women were supposed to dress to how they could behave in certain places and with certain groups of people, every facet of upper-class women’s lives was carefully controlled by societal standards. Finishing schools and etiquette books abounded, each touting their wisdom and advice on how best to become the feminine ideal. Even the name “finishing school” suggests that women are not fully formed until they are taught how to be. Judith Butler argues that gender is an “identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts...instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.”²¹ The act of putting on clothing and cosmetics, of practicing needlework or the harp, were all ways of

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, *Catalogue of the Memorial Exhibition of Portraits by Thomas Sully* (Philadelphia, 1922), 12.

²⁰ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution, an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 356.

²¹ Ibid.

expressing femininity in an appropriate manner. Conventions of portraiture were often reiterated through conventions of gender, and such is the case in many of Sully's works. The poses, clothing, and object choices that were chosen for each portrait had specific gendered meanings and connotations. Fashion and culture were dictated by the upper-classes who had the means to commission art, music, and architectural achievements. Their often-conservative tastes became society's common denominator.

Later in the century, women were still held to the same standards of beauty and accomplishment-driven education, but these conventions were often expressed in different ways in paint. *Lady with a Lute* by Thomas Dewing from 1886 shows an idealized and symbolic image of a woman. It is not a portrait of a specific woman; rather it is an imagined and idealized figure, more of a genre painting rather than a portrait. The lady sits against a dark background, possibly playing the lute which sits in her lap. Her eyes are mostly closed and the mood of the painting is one of contemplation and serenity. Clothed in a dress with a revealing neckline, her body is on display though her head is seen in profile. She does not seem to notice the presence of the viewer; she is too focused on her music and her inner thoughts, her pose contemplative and disengaged from connection with the viewer. The lady's revealing clothing and the intimate setting hints at eroticism as if a viewer has entered her bedroom or private space and sees her sinuous body in profile. The curved shape of the lute echoes the curves of her body, as if she and the lute are one and her ear is turned towards the viewer to show that she is listening, perhaps to the sound of the lute²². Through *Lady with a Lute*, Dewing presents a muse-like figure who is meant to be looked at as well as heard.

²² Franklin Kelly, *American Paintings of the Nineteenth Century Part I* (National Gallery of Art: Oxford University Press, 1996), 128.

Dewing often painted imagined spaces removed from the world around him, decontextualizing his human subjects so that the focus is on sensations rather than stories. His paintings, like *Lady with a Lute*, have indistinct backgrounds that are often comprised of fields of color. The background serves to emphasize the figures in the painting while also obscuring any possibility of temporal or geographical specificity. Dewing does not create a portrait in *Lady with a Lute*; instead he creates a vision of what an ideal woman might look like outside of particularities of time and place. His other paintings of women with instruments are similar. In *The Lute* from 1904, Dewing creates a field of green mist and places four women in this imagined space. Three women watch as a fourth plays a lute. None of the figures have visible faces and they look so alike that they might be the same figure. They are ghost-like, slender muses, lounging in an imagined space for the sensorial enjoyment of a viewer. Distanced just as in *Lady with a Lute*, Dewing hides the identity of the women as well as their placement in an actual location.

Dewing conveys a sense of the sound of the lute. In *Lady with a Lute* as well as in *The Lute*, he evokes this aural sense through color and hazy brushstrokes that hint towards the invisible movement of sound from the women playing instruments to the ears of the viewer.²³ Through his paintings he creates imagined sensorial spaces that evoke both sight and sound. *Lady with a Lute* allows viewers into the private space of an unknowing woman, allowing eyes to see and ears to imagine the sounds of her lute playing. Her identity is hidden, leaving her appearance and her music to be the sole judgements of her quality as a woman. Sully likewise shows a woman playing an instrument in Eliza Ridgley's portrait; however, Eliza's expression is trained out towards a viewer and does not convey a sense of contemplation or emotion like Dewing's. The focus in

²³ Asma Naeem, *Out of Earshot: Sound, Technology, and Power in American Art 1860-1900*, (University of California Press, 2020), 130.

Eliza's portrait is her social identity: her body, the clothes she wears, the setting she is in, and her activity which reflects her education and refinement. *Lady with a Lute* is a painting about sound and sight, viewers are meant to focus on the potential for music and its ability to lift one out of the mundane into a world beyond while Sully asks only for one to see the woman he has depicted and to acknowledge her status in society. To be sure Dewing's works idealize female beauty, but he connects his works to the realm of spirituality, explaining that his works, "belong to the poetic and imaginative world where only a few choice spirits live"²⁴.

He displays this sense of augmented time and place through the lady's costume. She is dressed in a medieval inspired dress, showing Dewing's early attraction to the Pre-Raphaelite movement. The Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, as it was often called, hit its stride in the nineteenth century in Britain, bringing together various artists who shared an affinity for aesthetics, most especially those of the Renaissance and Medieval times. Painters of this movement frequently pictured women in medieval clothing and portrayed medieval stories and allegories. The Pre-Raphaelites were inexorably linked to the aesthetic movement which prized "art for art's sake".²⁵ a sentiment of which Dewing was a follower. The fashion of the late nineteenth century included tightly controlled body forms such as corsets and high necklines on dresses. Such dresses were often highly restrictive and offered little movement for women. As such, there was an anti-corset movement throughout Europe and America which sought to do away with the highly restrictive, and potentially health damaging, clothing device²⁶. In contrast to the high fashion of the period, the Pre-Raphaelite Renaissance revival brought the trend of dresses with "loosely fitting waists

²⁴ Ibid, 129.

²⁵ Elizabeth Prettejohn, *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England* (Manchester University Press, 1999), 2.

²⁶ Harper Franklin, "Fashion History Timeline, 1880-89", Fashion Institute of Technology, last updated October 11, 2019, <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1880-1889/>.

and puffed sleeves” in earth toned colors like green and ochre²⁷, similar to the dress Dewing’s model wears in *Lady with a Lute*. Her dress also features slit sleeves which reveal a contrasting lighter green color underneath, a style seen in Pre-Raphaelite works and portraits from the Renaissance when that style was in fashion. Slit sleeves were not part of nineteenth century conventions, and neither was the rest of the Lady’s dress. In Dewing’s later works such as *Summer* from 1890 and *A Reading* from 1897, his models wear fashionable nineteenth century evening gowns, but his earlier works were more connected to the aesthetic movements of the Pre-Raphaelites who sought to return to the romantic sensibilities of the past.

Dewing valued classical ideals of education for the sake of moral enlightenment and viewed his art as a means of promoting cultural elevation and refinement. Paradoxically, moving forward towards a cultural ideal meant looking back to romantic literature and painting from earlier centuries and the artistic standards of ancient Greece and Rome, which provided a standard of beauty for artists to follow. Reflecting upon the past was a common theme in Dewing’s life as he prized studying the classics and looking to the writing and artistic works of the past for knowledge. Aestheticism was meant to cultivate beauty and refinement through sensuous experiences such as listening to music, exploring nature, and devoting oneself to creating art and literature. It was a way of producing culture through various mediums, in art, literature, and music. Dewing’s works sought to convey this elevation of society beyond a time and place and instead to an imagined space of sensation.

Dewing spent much of his time at his summer home in Cornish, New Hampshire, which served as an artist’s colony. He and his wife Maria Oakey Dewing, who was also an artist, spent

²⁷ Ibid.

the bulk of their careers painting at Cornish and interreacting with the other artists and aesthetes who lived there. Those who travelled to Cornish shared similar affinities for the classical era and the Renaissance²⁸. Many shared anxieties about the state of the increasingly expanding and industrializing world around them. Fear of immigration and how new, potentially harmful, ideas could enter the country induced anxiety in Dewing and his friends who saw themselves as the last remnants of a truly elevated society. They saw a potential moral crisis on the horizon, and the possibility that the high aesthetic ideals they ascribed to could be diluted or lost in the chaos of a new century. Those who lived at Cornish sought to improve themselves through art and an almost religious devotion to knowledge and high culture.²⁹ They truly believed themselves to be part of an elect upper echelon of society, not through money or birth status, (although most Cornish residents came from affluent backgrounds) but through their devotion to the arts.

Lady with a Lute aspires to these high ideals through its connection to the spiritual potential of music. It exemplifies Dewing's devotion to creating a scene set somewhere above and removed from the realm of the mundane or uncultivated world around him. The ethereal clothing and setting the woman is in creates an imagined space removed from the high society world of Philadelphia, Boston, or even Cornish. Instead of a specific woman from a wealthy family, Dewing shows a medieval princess or a goddess; she embodies the spirit of femininity without being a "real" woman.

Dewing was a proponent of women's education, stating that his only qualification for his models was that they "had a brain"³⁰. However, he and his wife Maria advocated for a finishing

²⁸ Kathleen Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life: Painting and Evolutionary Thought in the Late Nineteenth Century America* (University of Texas Press, 1996) 138.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Bailey Van Hook, *Angels of Art: Women and Art in American Society 1876-1914* (Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 254.

school education for women and stayed firmly in the conservative camp for women's education, reinforcing the gendered expectations of the American upper class. Neither Maria nor her daughter, nor even her granddaughters, attended college, turning to their French school educations as evidence of their moral and intellectual refinement.³¹ However, the family did have connections to the Art Students League in New York, of which Maria Oakey Dewing was a founding member. The Art Students League was a progressive art school which admitted women and it was where Thomas Dewing taught until 1888³². Maria was a well-known artist in New York, but she turned away from a career in art after marrying Thomas, moving instead to painting smaller landscape and floral scenes and writing treatises on aesthetics and even interior design. It was typical of the time for women to halt their careers to become full-time wives, and eventually mothers, and although Maria continued to create art she purposefully did not attempt to create grand works, which could compete with her husband's works.³³ Although the Dewings clung to many conservative ideas about women and their role in society, the nineteenth century at large was moving in a different direction.

In fact, ironically perhaps, Dewing's *Lady with a Lute* found its home in a setting of higher education for women. Dewing sold the painting in 1889 to Smith College, one of the first women's colleges located in Northampton Massachusetts³⁴. The college was established in 1871 and welcomed its first class of only fourteen students in 1875. Tuition was \$100 a year and at the time, women's colleges did not have a strong reputation.³⁵ The school had many things to contend with, not the least of which were prevailing conservative ideas that a college education could be

³¹ Kathleen Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life*, 189.

³² Susan Hobbs, "Thomas Wilmer Dewing: The Early Years 1851-1885," *The American Art Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2 (Spring, 1981), 26.

³³ Kathleen Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life*, 189.

³⁴ Franklin Kelly, *American Paintings of the Nineteenth Century Part I*, 127.

³⁵ L. Clark Seelye, *The Early History of Smith College 1871-1919* (The Riverside Press, Cambridge MA, 1923), 35.

physically harmful for the delicate disposition of women³⁶. The college overcame these arguments by proving to be an academic institution which could stand up to the male colleges and universities women were barred from entering.

During the first year at Smith courses included: Greek, Latin, Algebra and Geometry, Botany, French, Grammar, and exercises in translation, Punctuation and Orthoëpy, Lectures on Physiology and Hygiene, Lectures on the Origin and Authenticity of the Scriptures, and Lectures on the History and Method of Collegiate Education.³⁷ In addition to this course load, students could take private lessons in art and music for an added cost.³⁸ At the beginning of Smith's history, music was once again relegated to the sidelines of education in favor of allowing students to focus on more strenuous educational endeavors, which would make them more competitive with graduates from other colleges. However, by 1880 an official School of Music was established and by 1883 a music building had been constructed to house the School of Music³⁹. There had always been music rooms and opportunities to practice music if a student so desired, but it became apparent by the mid-1880s that there was demand for more formal musical education in a collegiate setting.

Through its curriculum, it is clear that Smith College saw musical education as more than just a finishing school accomplishment. L. Clark Seelye., the first president of the college stated that, "Music and Art have not been treated at Smith College as mere accomplishments, but as serious pursuits which demand strenuous intellectual work in order to prosecute them successfully. So far as a knowledge of their method is concerned, they require no less thoughtful study than some of the sciences with which they have often been depreciatingly contrasted"⁴⁰. Though

³⁶ Ibid, 20.

³⁷ Ibid, 37.

³⁸ Ibid, 23.

³⁹ Ibid, 57.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 105.

Smith's students could not focus their entire course of study on music, the curriculum in music was treated with as much rigor as languages or sciences were, and if one wanted to study music, one needed to pass entrance exams and prove one's talent. The music department continued to grow each year just as the school grew so that by 1888 nearly forty women were studying music at Smith, some of whom were enrolled in the college as regular students and some who attended just for music courses and not for a degree.⁴¹

The campus museum opened in 1879 and collecting art was always one of the goals of the college.⁴² With a focus on collecting contemporary art and Smith's dedication to music and art education, it is no wonder that Dewing's *Lady with a Lute* would have appealed to the college. The work was likely on display until the 1940s when the Smith College Museum of Art sold off many works, including *Lady with a Lute*.⁴³ The college had other works by Dewing on display, and his painting *Lady with a Cello* can still be seen at the Smith College Museum of Art today.⁴⁴ Although Dewing may not have intended for his painting to take on an educational meaning, through its context at Smith College its connection to music and women's education is solidified.

Dewing's depiction of music in *Lady with a Lute* as a sensual and bodily experience differs from Smith College's scientific devotion to musical education. Dewing viewed music as something which had the power to take one out of the real world and into the realm of spiritual sensation, and the lady in his painting is playing music for the sake of music itself. She plays her lute to create sensations and emotions, within herself and unconsciously within the invisible viewer. Smith College, however, sought to prove the academic rigor that music could contain.

⁴¹ Smith College, *Smith College Annual Circular 1872-89* (Smith College, Northampton MA, 1890), 51.

⁴² *Ibid*, 3.

⁴³ Linda Muehlig, *Masterworks of American Painting and Sculpture from the Smith College Museum of Art* (Hudson Hills Press, New York, 1999), 11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 154.

They wanted woman to leave their college, whether they studied arithmetic or music, to obtain the same level of education. As Smith College President Seelye stated, music was “strenuous intellectual work” and not simply an amusing elective or marker of elite status⁴⁵. Smith College was grounded in reality and the hard work needed to achieve success as a musician while Dewing erases the effort behind the act of playing music, setting his lady firmly apart from the education she would’ve needed to play her lute. He depicts her as having innate ability, a perfect and unreal woman who belongs decisively to the ethereal space of the painting she occupies rather than the college museum she was displayed in.

The similarities and differences between Sully’s and Dewing’s depictions of women with musical instruments show this shift in views about women’s education. Just as Sully showed Adèle Sigoigne and other society women as ideal debutantes, Dewing shows the woman in his painting as an example of ideal femininity per the tenets of Aestheticism. Both Adèle and the Lady are beautiful and well dressed, and although Adèle is dressed in the style of her day and the Lady wears an idealized historical costume, they are both clearly from an upper-class background and have the gentility of someone with that status. The addition of an instrument in both paintings points to education and refinement as well as feminine skill. However, the choice of instrument has different meanings for each woman. In the portrait by Sully, Adèle Sigoigne holds a harp in front of her, accentuating her skill on the instrument although she does not play it in the painting. The harp has existed since ancient times and was frequently depicted in art and literature⁴⁶. It evokes a timeless and almost unchanging link to the past and was a thoroughly suitable instrument for a young woman to play. Images of royalty such as Marie Antoinette with harps solidified the

⁴⁵ Seelye, *The Early History of Smith College*, 105.

⁴⁶ Roslyn Rensch, *Harps and Harpists, Revised Edition* (Indiana University Press, 2017), 4.

popularity of the harp as an instrument for young women.⁴⁷ The music produced by a harp is delicate and one must sit to play it, further cementing its status in the parlor of many upper-class homes. In Adèle's portrait, the harp acts as furniture, a prop to support her pose rather than an active part of the painting.

The lute, however, had different connotations. It was an instrument that had been in Europe since the middle ages and was brought to the New World alongside settlers.⁴⁸ The lute was often portrayed in medieval and romantic art and poetry. It was portable and could be played anywhere, unlike a heavy harp like the one in Adèle's portrait. While a harpist must sit and delicately pluck the strings of a harp, a lute allowed for mobility. Commonly shown in the hands of a suitor attempting to serenade and woo a beautiful woman, the lute had a connection to passion and emotion that the harp did not possess. Dewing shifts the instrument to the hands of a woman, and evokes her emotional state as she plays the instrument either by herself as in *Lady with a Lute* or for other women. In *Lady with a Lute*, the playing of the instrument, or imminent playing, is the focus of the painting. The lute adds to the dramatic and emotional effect of the painting, adding an imagined auditory sense to the visual imagery of the work, and showing the woman transported through music into her inner life, emotions and passions.

Both women are meant to be looked at, but only Adèle seems to be aware of this. Her gaze meets the viewer directly and she smiles as if greeting whomever is looking at her portrait. Dewing's Lady is unaware of the viewer's gaze and her body is turned sideways and away from view. While Sully provides open access to the identity and personality of his sitter, Dewing creates a sense of distance in both space and time. His Lady is imaginary, absorbed in her own inner life

⁴⁷ Ibid, 132.

⁴⁸ Alberto Ausoni, *Music in Art* (Getty, 2009), 257.

while Adèle Sigoigne was a real person meant to be represented and remembered. *Lady with a Lute* sits against a completely blank background, no hints are given as to where she is located or what time of day it is. The women in Sully's portraits live in the real world, close to the picture plane while Dewing's waifish women seem to be otherworldly and removed from reality, floating in decontextualized spaces whether in an interior space or outdoors.

The task of painting a portrait of a real person meant that Sully had to account for a specific audience. He knew that the painting would likely be seen by Sigoigne's students, their parents, and visiting intellectuals and members of high society. The painting was meant to portray Adèle as the epitome of nineteenth century grace and style. Her portrait became an advertisement for the skills and prestige that could be acquired at her mother's school. Sully painted her in a manner befitting her class status while also creating a painterly work that displayed his skill as an artist. Portraits are a double advertisement, showing the quality of the sitter and the painter. On the other hand, Dewing did not have to contend with a specific patron commissioning a portrait. *Lady with a Lute* was meant to be viewed by anyone who happened to see the painting in the Smith College Museum or, today, in the National Gallery of art in Washington D.C. It was created with a general audience of aesthetes in mind and thus does not seek to connect to particularities of identity. Dewing sought to create imaginary scenes for visual and aural pleasure and uplift rather than for the specific purpose of picturing a person.

While both Dewing and Sully portrayed idealized women with instruments, they did so with varying motivations. Thomas Sully painted Adèle Sigoigne in the early part of the century, showing her in the proper attire and pose for an upper-class woman. The harp she holds is a prop that alludes to her musical education and skills as well as her occupation as a teacher at her mother's finishing school. Her portrait shows the ideal well-bred nineteenth century woman.

Thomas Dewing's *Lady with a Lute* shows a woman similarly sitting with her instrument. However, Dewing's work seeks instead to achieve purely aesthetic goals. Though the presence of the lute shows the refinement and intelligence of the Lady, the theme of women's education in the work was not intentional and was produced instead by the context in which it was displayed at Smith College.

The nineteenth century saw an improvement in the conditions of women and the agency they were allowed to have. The fact that Adèle's mother Madame Sigoigne was the owner of a school shows the new emerging roles that women were allowed to have besides that of being mothers and wives. However, women's education was still undertaken with the goal of improving and cultivating young women into perfect wives. The skills women were taught in school, from reading and writing to painting and music lessons were not done to prepare women for an occupation but to prepare them for upper-class life. They were expected to know a little about a lot and to be able to cultivate beauty in themselves and their future homes through their carefully honed skills. Through their education, upper-class nineteenth century women were instructed how to look and behave to fit in to their society. Their everyday performances consisted of carefully chosen clothing and cosmetics as well as actual performances of skills and social behaviors. Women were expected to perform their feminine role, playing the part they had been instructed for since birth. By the end of the century however, these conventions were being challenged. The rise of colleges for women allowed them to look beyond French schools and their parlors and into the new century which would allow them more opportunities and occupations than Adèle Sigoigne could have dreamed of in the 1830s. The shift of musical education for women echoes the shift made in women's rights in general, showing the power education could contain for nineteenth century women.

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