
TOURING *P.S I LOVE YOU: A PORTRAIT OF MISS ELSIE PALMER*

August 11, 2018 – March 3, 2019

This packet is intended to help you develop comfort with the informational content displayed in the galleries. The questions provided here will facilitate experiential learning and allow visitors to develop personal connections to the exhibition.

Pronunciation:

Glen Eyrie: **glen ē-rē** (*'Eyrie' is pronounced like 'Erie'*)

Ightham Mote: **īd-um mōt** (*i-g-h-t is pronounced like it is in 'might' or 'light'*)

Sargent: **sar-jint**

Walk through the exhibition and direct visitors to: Think about a place, perhaps a home you have lived or somewhere you have traveled that is meaningful to you.

ASK

- What objects would you include in an exhibit about your special place and why?
- How would these items capture and portray your special place to a visitor? Accept all answers.

INFORM: The story of the Palmers is largely a tale of two worlds.

- One world existed in Colorado Springs, at Glen Eyrie castle in the Garden of the Gods.
- The other world existed at Ightham Mote manor house in England, where Queen Palmer hosted parties for leading artists, writers and intellectuals (like John Singer Sargent, Henry James, and Ellen Terry)
- (*See the introductory text in "Concept of Exhibition" section in this touring packet for information on the exhibition title and layout*)

ASK: How do we learn about the past?

- Potential answers: by hearing about it, by reading about it, architecture, artwork, photographs, letters, digging it up etc.

INFORM: We learn about history in two modes: primary and secondary sources.

- In history, a **primary source** is a firsthand account or direct evidence of the past. Primary sources include: letters, photographs, artwork, objects, architecture, videos, etc. **(like the objects in this exhibition)**.
- A **secondary source** is an interpretation based on primary sources and is therefore mediated. **(like the text created by historians and curators about the objects in this exhibition)**

Pick an object in the gallery that you are comfortable leading the following conversation about.

ASK: What do we *know* about this object? What questions are we left asking about the object? And what interpretations (guesses) might be made about the object?

- INFORM: History is a subjective study: the majority of history is a combination of interpretation and guesswork based on evidence, intuition, logic, and bias.
 - **Bias** refers to an individual's personal perspective, values and beliefs which make them inclined to think a certain way. Often our biases are subliminal, which means even historians who seek to be objective may construct biased narratives.
- INFORM: Ideally, historians and curators of history seek to address their own bias so as not to present their interpretations as facts. This can be done by:
 - using conditional language (might, may)
 - stating the limitations of knowledge (it is impossible to know...It is unknown...),
 - identifying the existence of a variety of accounts ("Elsie...displayed a quiet maturity that was alternatively described as: reserved, warm, wise, and naive")

(YOUR PREFERENCE) VTS* or FACILITATE A DISCUSSION ON "A YOUNG LADY IN WHITE"

*If you choose to do VTS, you may follow by INFORMING on the topics that came up during the session. So as not to invalidate unique interpretations/observations **SAY: "You have all noticed so many details that contribute to the understanding of this artwork. Historians have also speculated and on this piece and have proposed..."**

or FACILITATE AS FOLLOWS:

ASK: How old do YOU THINK Elsie Palmer appears to be in this portrait? (Encourage speculation with VTS Q2: What do you see that makes you say... MODIFIED Q3: More thoughts on Elsie's age or appearance?)

- INFORM:
 - With her mother's declining health, Elsie helped to care for her younger sisters, caught, in a sense, between childhood and adulthood about the time of Sargent's painting when Elsie was 17.
 - Some observers identify a confidence of character in her expression, perhaps attributable to a premature departure from adolescence.
 - Some cultural clues of Elsie's youth in the painting: the style of wearing one's hair down was reserved for girls, as well as the ankle-length styling of her white dress.
 - (*Show group the preparatory painting in the digital interactive, for comparison*)

ASK: What sort of relationship do you think existed between sitter and painter in John Singer Sargent's portrayal of Elsie in *A Young Lady in White*?

- INFORM:
 - Some historians believe that Elsie's features display tension or caution, which might be interpreted as a reservation towards Sargent himself, or the numerous and tedious sitting sessions required to complete this piece.
 - Others believe that he perfectly captures Elsie's natural expression.
 - Still others think that Sargent just missed the mark.

- There are historical clues throughout the exhibition that help you understand more about the role Sargent played in the life of the Palmers.

EXTENDED LABEL for *A YOUNG LADY IN WHITE*

*Sargent depicts Elsie caught in between two worlds: childhood and adulthood. Elsie's uncanny gaze confronts the viewer with an intensity uncommon for a seventeen-year-old. Yet she wears her hair down—a social convention that would have marked her as a child at that time. A letter from Sargent to Elsie's mother, says that "we will see what we can do—with the hair if not with the picture," revealing that there **might have been** some conversation about her appearance in the portrait.*

*Not only was Elsie a young woman on the brink of adulthood, but she was also divided between the world her father had created in Colorado Springs and the one her mother cultivated in England. Queen Palmer, aware that her poor health might cut short her time with her daughters, raised Elsie to be a maternal figure for her two much younger sisters. Elsie's intensity in this portrait **may reveal** some of the tension that this young woman **might have** felt at that moment in her life.*

IF VISITORS WANT MORE INFORMATION

Concept of Exhibition:

P.S. I Love You: A Portrait of Miss Elsie Palmer celebrates the return of John Singer Sargent's portrait of Elsie Palmer from an extended exhibition at the English country home where the painting was completed. This exhibition presents not only the painting of Miss Elsie Palmer, the daughter of founder of Colorado Springs General William Jackson Palmer and Mary Lincoln "Queen" Palmer, but also a portrait of her moment in time. The objects, photographs, letters, and diaries within seek to illuminate what life might have been like for Miss Elsie Palmer and her family.

Although the couple spent much of their marriage apart due to Queen's poor health, both General Palmer and Queen Palmer carefully constructed an ideal world for their three daughters: Elsie, Dorothy (called "Dos"), and Marjory. For Queen, that world was Ightham Mote in England — a realm of Old World sophistication populated by a famous cast of characters, including artist John Singer Sargent. For General Palmer, it was Glen Eyrie in Colorado Springs, a castle installed in the red rock formations of Garden of the Gods that demonstrated the railroad tycoon's innovation and ambition. *P.S.*, normally short for *Post Script*, here describes the thematic pairings that make up the exhibition: *Painter/Sitter*, *Portrait/ Setting*, and *Paramour/Sisters*. The repetition of this motif alludes to the wealth of letters that allow a glimpse into the Palmers' lives. **But how much can we really know about the past?** The small elephant figurine behind you embodies that question. With little known background, this object inspires curiosity. Was this elephant a cherished keepsake or an unremarkable trinket?

This exhibition is made possible through the generosity and collaboration of the Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum, which collects and interprets many of the objects and letters owned by the Palmer family; Glen Eyrie, the estate that the Palmer family built in Colorado Springs; and Ightham Mote, the English manor house that the Palmer matriarch and daughters once called home.

Painter

John Singer Sargent was born in Florence in 1856 to expatriate American parents. As a child he studied music and drawing and had his first formal art training at the Academia di Belle Arti in Florence in 1873. Young Sargent moved to Paris to study alongside painter Carolus-Duran and attended the Ecole Des Beaux-Arts.

Although he was a masterful painter of many subjects, portrait-painting defined his career. His well-known Portrait of *Madame X* caused a stir at the 1884 Paris Salon, and negative reaction to the work was likely one of the reasons Sargent moved to London. In 1889 he visited Ightham Mote, where Queen Palmer lived with her daughters. The Palmers commissioned him to paint Elsie's portrait, a process which started the day after her 17th birthday.

Elsie's portrait took over a year to complete. During the process, Sargent became close friends with Queen Palmer and her daughters and after his commission had ended, he accompanied the women on several excursions around England. Elsie appreciated her friend's steadfast character noting, "one feels great trust in him, and sure of sympathy in trouble."

Susan Fletcher, Historian and Archivist, Glen Eyrie

Sitter

Who is the captivating girl in the white dress? Is she precocious or mournful? Feisty or dull? Knowable or not? Even John Singer Sargent, an artist renowned for his skill and speed in creating provocative likenesses of his sitters, struggled with capturing 17-year-old Elsie Palmer in *A Young Lady in White*.

So who was she? Elsie was born in New York on October 30, 1872. Much older than her sisters Dorothy (called "Dos") and Marjory, Elsie was her mother's confidante. Their letters demonstrate an extremely close relationship and highlight Elsie's role supporting her long ailing mother. In a note on Christmas 1894, Elsie writes rather plaintively, "Good Morning my own darling Motherling; I can write you now though I can't talk to you— because it tires you ..." And then, seeking to buoy her mother's spirits, "... we feel your presence with us every second. It is wonderful how you do that! And all your little thoughts for peoples' pleasure — come showering downstairs to everyone ... almost as if you were there." As the eldest

daughter, Elsie served as a surrogate mother to her two siblings and displayed a quiet maturity that was **alternatively described as: reserved, warm, wise, and naïve.**

Leah Davis Witherow, Curator of History, Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum

Paramour

What did John Singer Sargent and the Palmers have in common? Lawrence Alexander “Peter” Harrison, a painter and bon vivant of the London art scene. He was a friend, frequent traveling companion, and jealous critic of Sargent. In addition to his reputation as a tortured artist, Peter was a well-known lothario; ever charming and ever philandering.

Alma Strettell, Peter’s wife, was a close friend to John Singer Sargent and the Palmers. “Auntie Alma” as she was known to the Palmer girls, was 13 years older than Peter and an accomplished translator of over 40 books of poetry and songs. Scandalously, not long after marrying Alma, Peter began courting young Elsie Palmer through a barrage of letters: “My Elsie I am missing your letters so much. Yesterday and this morning I had a great return wave of longing for you and a sight of you. All last night, at least so it seemed, I dreamed of you. You had come back to England ... I was shy of you; and you looked at me with the same look; the look I have seen so many times ...” When his passion for Elsie eventually cooled, he began a decades-long affair with Elsie’s younger sister Dos Palmer.

Sisters

How much did anyone know about the love affair between Elsie and Peter? How did Elsie feel about Peter’s affection shifting to her younger sister Dos? How did Alma feel about any of it? **It is impossible to know** the inner-workings of a relationship, let alone two or three carried on simultaneously. However, one can see the relationship between Peter and Elsie wax and wane in their letters. As author Donna Lucey documented in her book *Sargent’s Women*, the final break came in 1904, when Peter detailed in a letter to Elsie, “... how beautiful and happy Dos looked and how he noticed her, ‘delicious lines of throat and neck ...”

The affair between Dos and Peter was hardly secret among their English friends. In 1908 Dos moved to London to study nursing and the pair began to travel openly together — including spending summers with her sister Marjory and her husband. **It is unknown** to what extent either General Palmer or Queen knew the truth about Peter. Certainly, the sisters did. What they thought of it has never been revealed.

Leah Davis Witherow Curator of History Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum

Portrait

How did *A Young Lady in White* come to be? Queen Palmer and her daughters were connected to an astounding set of both American expatriates and the leading figures

of contemporary British and European art and culture. Through this myriad of relationships, John Singer Sargent came to know the Palmer family. Sargent was an artist of growing acclaim and controversy — whose audacious 1884 painting *Madame X* forever altered the genre of portraiture.

It took the painter over a year to capture this essence of a teenager in metamorphosis. Working alternately at his studio in Chelsea and during visits to the Mote, the painter and sitter formed an unlikely friendship. Sargent desired liveliness in his studio by encouraging visitors, music, and conversation. His sister Violet was often on hand and breaks were taken to eat lunch, play piano, or visit friends nearby. Although his letters reveal that he was never fully satisfied with Elsie's portrait, "... I want to do something more to your portrait, so won't you wait ... to have it photographed?", other commissions soon occupied his time and work on the painting ceased soon thereafter.

Setting

It is difficult to exaggerate how fond Queen and her daughters became of "The Mote," their brief but beloved home in Kent, southeast of London. Ightham Mote (pronounced "item") is a medieval manor house with endless charm and dramatic history. Perhaps less charming were the creaky hallways, drafty rooms, plentiful mice, resident ghosts, and lack of electricity. But the Palmers and their friends loved it. As Elsie, the only Palmer daughter to have vivid memories of her Colorado home, described to her mother in a letter, "I love the Mote better than any place in the world except!!!! And when I am away from it I always long to get back to it, just the way with Glen Eyrie ..."

Leah Davis Witherow, Curator of History, Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum

MORE INFORMATION

GLEN EYRIE CASTLE now serves as a tourist destination owned and operated by a private organization. It offers lodging, tea, tours, and event space.

IGHTHAM MOTE MANOR is now a National Trust of the United Kingdom. It is located in Kent, southeast of London. The manor, museum, grounds and gardens are open to the public.