



38: Thomas Wilmer Dewing *Portrait in a Brown Dress* (ca. 1908)

Susan Hobbs

Thomas Wilmer Dewing uniquely wove together some of the most profound painterly influences of his time, especially those of James McNeill Whistler's profile figures, the flattened patterns of Japanese prints, and the richly rendered interiors of the recently rediscovered old master, Jan Vermeer. *Portrait in a Brown Dress* reveals this legacy in its utilization of unadorned, abstract space, its shimmering and complex brushwork, and in the classic seated pose employed by a generation of American artists who were inspired by Whistler. Dewing provided an individual interpretation of these themes in a manner unlike that of any other painter of his time. Employing his own inimitable brushwork, he explored the enigmatic psychology of womanhood in works that are subtly beautiful and inscrutably provocative.

Dewing was born in 1851 in Boston to a school teacher and a millwright who died of alcoholism when Dewing was twelve.¹ After grammar school he apprenticed with a lithographer from whom he learned the basics of draftsmanship, and then, like many of his peers, worked under the artist-physician Dr. William Rimmer, who taught his students drawing and anatomy at the Lowell Institute. In July 1876, after drawing chalk portraits of local notables in Albany, New York, he sailed for Europe, where he studied at the Académie Julian and developed an interest in the exotic, enigmatic themes that appeared in his own work when he returned to Boston a year later and continued when he moved to New York in 1880. He took a job teaching at the Art Students League and in 1881 married the well-known portrait and flower painter Maria Richards Oakey.

Dewing began to exhibit at the National Academy of Design, where his Pre-Raphaelite-inspired work called *The Days* garnered him the coveted Clarke prize in 1887. As a result, he immediately became an Associate of the Academy, and the following year he was elected to full Academician. He also began to spend time at the growing art colony in Cornish, New Hampshire. There, he and Maria purchased a house where, along with their only child, Elizabeth, they lived for eighteen summers before moving to a wooded retreat near the border with Maine. The verdant Cornish setting inspired his dozen or so landscapes with small figures placed in indistinct and billowing foliage.

For many years Dewing was also a featured exhibitor with the Society of American Artists, but in 1897 he resigned from that group to join the newly formed Ten American Painters. These artists had grown dissatisfied with the Society's crowded exhibitions and wanted more controlled settings in which to show their works. Most of them were already Dewing's close friends, and had begun to employ the broken brushwork associated with the impressionism movement abroad. Therefore, "The Ten," as they came to be called, were the foremost American impressionists of the day, Dewing included.²

By the mid-1890s Dewing was well known for his elegantly gowned women in carefully appointed interiors. In 1894–95, his patron, the Detroit railroad-car builder Charles Lang Freer, funded his study and travel to England and France. Freer even arranged for him to meet the American expatriate artist James McNeill Whistler, with whom Dewing worked briefly in London before moving on to Paris, where he shared a studio with the sculptor Frederick MacMonnies. Despite such beneficial associations, Dewing was, for the most part, disappointed with his time abroad and returned home earlier than expected. He was determined to paint in his own distinct manner, and was uninterested in following the latest trends in painting. Unlike the other members of The Ten, many of whom painted freely in vibrant colors, Dewing was by now a tonalist, an artist who worked in closely related hues with relatively solid modeling. His impressionist colleagues produced scenes depicting open windows and blowing curtains. He, by contrast, utilized environments illuminated by an artificial light

Thomas Wilmer Dewing,

1851–1938

Portrait in a Brown Dress,

ca. 1908

Oil on wood panel, 20 x 15½ in.

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alexander

Millar Lindsay III, in

memory of Jesse Williams

and Grace Curtice

Lindsay and their daughter,

Carolyn Lindsay White, 57.79

source. This sort of cloistered and ambiguous setting provided the perfect context for the unique, meditative themes that are distinctly Dewing's.

In 1900 the artist staged his first solo exhibition of twenty-one paintings at the Montross Gallery in New York City. Now fully established as an important figure in American painting, he produced just a few paintings a year for a select group of clients. Many of them were noted industrialists of the era, men who purchased a Dewing for their home, perhaps, as a respite from the rugged challenges they faced in their place of business. Not coincidentally, the well-known architect Stanford White also provided intricately patterned and gilded frames for artist-friends such as Dewing.³ White's clients often were also Dewing's customers and his richly embossed borders enhanced the layered surfaces of the artist's works, enabling them to fit perfectly into the architect's ornate Beaux Arts interiors.



ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:

Thomas Wilmer Dewing,

1851–1938

Head of a Young Woman,

ca. 1895

Silverpoint on gesso-coated

wood-pulp paper board,

10¼ x 8¼ in.

Bertha Buswell Bequest, 55.79

Dewing's upward spiral of success was crowned when he captured a first-class medal and a lucrative monetary prize of \$1,500 at the 1908 annual exhibition of American paintings held at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. His winning painting, *The Necklace* (1908, Smithsonian American Art Museum) features the same model shown here in *Portrait in a Brown Dress* (also known as *Portrait*, *Portrait in Brown Dress*, and *Girl with a Book*) done the same year. The Memorial Art Gallery's painting, therefore, caps Dewing's career as a high-style work rendered in his mature style, embodying the special quality of mystery that marks his best efforts. Although her name is not known, the model is distinctive, possessing a long-limbed physique, a soft halo of brown hair, and a slightly aquiline nose. She was the quintessential "Dewing type," not quite pretty, but supremely aesthetic with her long lines and small head. The painter liked to keep his subjects ambiguous, and therefore open to various interpretations. Viewers attached a range of meaning to a work such as *Portrait in a Brown Dress*. For some she typified the vaunted New Woman whose intellect and sophistication would lead the nation. Others perceived the sitter as a passive, inward-looking, but serene symbol of culture.⁴ A recent study has suggested that the quiet demeanor of the Dewing lady indicated the period's need to retreat from the noise, stress, and unwanted complexity of industrialization.⁵

Indeed, when in February 1908, the artist displayed *Portrait in a Brown Dress* at the Montross Gallery for the first time in a joint exhibition with his friend, the landscapist Dwight Tryon, he entitled it simply, *Portrait*. The artist seemed indifferent "to the human element in his picture," declared critic Charles de Kay, writing in the *New York Evening Post*.⁶ Dewing displayed this picture along with another version of the same model in a slightly changed pose and in an alternate range of colors (*Green and Rose*, 1908, private collection). The identical sitter may have also sat for *The Print* (1908, Dallas Museum of Art), which was also on view. The noted critic Royal Cortissoz preferred *Portrait in a Brown Dress* and wrote about it in his *New York Daily Tribune* column.⁷ An admiring Cortissoz thought that Dewing "has wreaked himself...on the painting of her tawny dress. It is in great measure the exquisite color he extorts from the fabric that justifies the work; you are attracted by the figure but you linger most appreciatively over the beautiful painting that the artist gives you, the subtly manipulated surface. This is a perfect example of art existing in and for itself." Dewing's own daybook shows that the dress was indeed as important to him as Cortissoz suggested. He indicates that the sitter wore an "aspinwall brown dress."⁸ This material was thin and gauzy and perhaps imported from India. This garment appears in a number of pastels, possibly because

Dewing appreciated the manner in which the revealingly transparent fabric draped across the sitter. The dress is not actually brown, but only appears so due to the optical mixture of freely applied complementary colors that the painter layered one on top of the other. Viewed up close, the dress shimmers with gold. This effect derives in large part from the first application of an orange pigment, over which Dewing placed long sweeping motions of muted olive gray-green and taupe. From afar these colors blend and the viewer sees an unusual shade of brown. Wrote Charles de Kay of the picture in 1910, "the color wraps around the form like a garment, a diaphanous fabric of faint dyes;...the painter's style is so individual and extraordinary [that] the classic quality persisting through the nervous elegance of modern technique frequently is overlooked."⁹

As de Kay implies when he speaks of "the classic quality" of the work, Dewing did employ a traditional method in building up his intricate layering of pigment. For *Portrait in a Brown Dress*, he began work on a prepared Winsor Newton mahogany panel that was manufactured with a smooth surface of lead white. A beige tint followed, one that ultimately peeps through the layers of the finished painting. He then laid in the freely painted orange-colored dress, eventually subduing its vivid hue with long, tangled strokes of olive green and bluish taupe. These brush marks drift downward toward the lacy, lemon-colored flounce at the sitter's feet. The multidirectional, seemingly unpremeditated strokes lend the dress volume and energy. Such freedom finds a contrast in the small quill-like lines that define the pouched front of the model's gown. The flesh of her arm is suffused with tiny dots of pink and green that extend to the sitter's long, perfectly formed fingers and the crisp, delicate book that she holds.

For *Portrait in a Brown Dress* Dewing may have borrowed from Whistler and Vermeer, but his work is uniquely his own, less patterned than Whistler's, and with an airy touch quite unlike the solid handling of the Dutch master. This quality of uniqueness emanated from the almost imperceptible tensions that run through his compositions, as well as the intricacy of their painted surfaces. Only Dewing would have echoed the spindly projections of a Windsor chair in the bony limbs of his sitter. And the quality of unease derives from the ominous shadows that suffuse the floor and move upward on the curtain behind the model, where they mimic the shape of her head. The resulting, dark shape may only serve to balance the sweep of her skirt, as do the sitter's preternaturally long thighs and a chair with impossibly splayed legs. Nevertheless, such artistic license effectively suggests foreboding and a certain psychological tension. The shadow seems to echo the lady's serious, even ponderous thoughts, thereby effectively drawing us into a realm that is gently, but sadly beautiful.



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Portrait in a Brown Dress (detail),
ca. 1908
Oil on wood panel, 20 x 15½ in.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alexander
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Susan Hobbs, an independent scholar, is presently a guest curator at the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, and is compiling the T.W. Dewing catalogue raisonné.