



39: Kathleen McEnergy Cunningham *Woman in an Ermine Collar* (1909)

Jessica Marlen

The striking immediacy of the early twentieth-century realist painting *Woman in an Ermine Collar* continues to engage modern viewers. The limited palette and shadowy, plain background allow the viewer to become absorbed in the full-length figure. A young woman dominates the canvas. She wears a stylish ensemble of 1909: a large hat adorned with ostrich feathers, an ermine coat, an embroidered, high-necked shirtwaist, a flared, floor-length skirt, and shoes with metal buckles. Bravura brushstrokes capture the textures of fur, cotton, and leather. The finely detailed, exotic features of the woman's face repeatedly draw the viewer's eye, yet the impassive expression provides little clue as to what she is thinking. Although the model stands still for her portrait, the artist has created a dynamic figure. The languid *contrapposto* stance and exaggerated S-curve are enhanced by two gestures: her right arm sweeps back her jacket as she places her hand on her hip, and her left hand gathers up her skirt. Both gestures project vitality, action, and worldly confidence.

Kathleen McEnergy was in her early twenties and living in Paris when she painted *Woman in an Ermine Collar*. Raised in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, McEnergy moved to New York to study art—first at the Pratt Institute and then under Robert Henri at the preeminent New York School of Art.¹ In the summer of 1908, she traveled to Madrid with Henri's class, spending her mornings copying from Velázquez at the Prado and her afternoons in the studio. At the conclusion of the Madrid class McEnergy moved to Paris to continue her studies, and it was during this period that she completed this arresting painting.²

After eighteen months in Paris, McEnergy returned to New York in 1910 to immerse herself in that city's thriving artistic environment. Between 1910 and 1914, she kept a very active exhibition schedule, including shows at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Corcoran Biennial Exhibition, and the prestigious MacDowell Club. Most notably, she had two paintings in the famous Armory Show of 1913, *Dream* (Family of Peter Cunningham) and *Going to the Bath* (Smithsonian American Art Museum). These two works, both female nudes, are representative of the direction her style had taken upon her return from Paris: incorporating the New York emphasis on realism and the figure with the postimpressionist use of expressive color, space, and line. As evident in her circa 1929 portrait of Rochester artist Fritz Trautmann, McEnergy's mature style was a further exploration of the expressive potential of uniting the opposing tenets of realism and modernism.³

Although her star was rising on the New York art scene in the early 1910s, McEnergy was to dramatically change her life, moving from Manhattan to Rochester, New York, in 1914. Her connection to Rochester is rooted in a friendship she began in Madrid with the siblings Leora and Rufus Dryer of Rochester, who were classmates and fellow artists. The Dryers introduced McEnergy to Francis E.

(Frank) Cunningham of the Cunningham Car Company of Rochester, to whom she was married in September of 1914. By November, McEnergy was settled in Rochester, the city she was to call home until her death in 1971. In addition to her new focus on raising a family, McEnergy managed to continue to paint and exhibit her work, participate in the lively and erudite Rochester society of artists, writers, and musicians, and become deeply involved in the then fledgling Memorial Art Gallery (opened in 1913). Her involvement at MAG included lifetime membership on the Board of Managers beginning in 1926, lifetime membership on the Art Committee starting in 1945, lifetime membership on the Women's Council starting in 1952, and a teaching position in MAG's Creative Workshop. Through her role in the Art Committee, McEnergy had a dramatic influence on the legacy of the



Kathleen McEnergy Cunningham,
1885–1971

Portrait of Fritz Trautmann,
ca. 1929

Oil on canvas, 36 x 30 in.

Anonymous gift, 71.82

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Estate of Kathleen McEnergy

(Facing page)

Kathleen McEnergy Cunningham,
1885–1971

Woman in an Ermine Collar, 1909

Oil on canvas, 76 1/4 x 38 1/4 in.

Gift of Joan Cunningham

Williams, Peter Cunningham,

and Michael McEnergy

Cunningham, 83.13

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Robert Henri,
1865–1929
Young Woman in Black, 1902
Oil on canvas, 77 x 38½ in.
Friends of American Art
Collection, 1910.317,
The Art Institute of Chicago.
Photograph ©The Art Institute
of Chicago.

Memorial Art Gallery and its collection. As then-director Harris K. Prior wrote in the foreword to the catalogue for her 1972 Memorial Exhibition, “Her judgment and discrimination are evident in many of the finest items in the permanent collection.”⁴ In addition, McEnery’s own oeuvre is now represented at MAG by seven of her paintings. Her role as one of Rochester’s most distinguished artists has been celebrated in two major solo exhibitions: the retrospective organized by the Memorial Art Gallery a year after her death in 1972 and, after a long hiatus of thirty-one years, a show at the Hartnett Gallery of the University of Rochester organized by Janet Wolff in 2003, *The Art of Kathleen McEnery*.

McEnery’s artistic imprint in Rochester is undeniable and enduring, yet in the early years of the twentieth century the path of her career was yet to be determined. She was a young, ambitious artist eager to hone her skills and forge her future as a portrait painter. Despite the initial reservations of her parents and her teacher, Henri, she was convinced of her need to move to Paris to study painting. In a letter to her mother after arriving in Paris from Madrid, the artist’s steely determination is evident: “[H]ere is Mr. Henri’s advice. He says that it would be foolish for me to go to a school here.... He said that long before he was as advanced in painting as I am he had left the schools.... You might think that a studio in NY or GB [Great Barrington] might do just as well.... But that’s rather foolish because one hasn’t the advantages of seeing pictures and meeting artists there, that one has here.... Now what do you think of the plan? I shall take a studio I think....”⁵

As the art capital at this time, Paris provided ample opportunities for McEnery to immerse herself in a culture of art. Not long after her arrival in 1908 she was living and painting on her own in an atelier at 17 Rue Campagne-Première adjacent to the Montparnasse area of the city. Speaking of her neighborhood on the Left Bank McEnery said, “Over here everybody carries portfolios under their arms.”⁶ In fact, the center of modern art in Paris was just then shifting from Montmartre to Montparnasse. Around her swirled the early strains of twentieth-century modernism in the flourishing movements of the cubists and fauves, but these trends had yet to capture McEnery’s artistic interest. It wasn’t until her return to the United States in 1910 that she began to apply a modernist sensibility to her painting. In response to the Salon d’Automne of 1908 she wrote, “Spent the afternoon at the Salon.... Many frightful pictures belonging to what is called the Neo-impressionistic School. They are quite impossible, at first they made me laugh but afterwards *mad*.... I feel all the time that I could do much better, so now I’m going to confine myself to the Louvre where I’m troubled by no such foolish thoughts.”⁷

At the time she painted *Woman in an Ermine Collar* in 1909, McEnery’s style was still primarily influenced by realist masters Diego Velázquez, Frans Hals, Edouard Manet, and her American mentor Robert Henri. The full-length portrait was a format adopted and mastered by Henri from the precedent set by Velázquez and Hals, both of whom he greatly admired—minimal background, dark, almost monochromatic tones, bright white highlights, and primary focus upon the face of the subject rendered with sensitive realism. Henri’s own success with this format, and early acclaim for his painting *Young Woman in Black, 1902* (Art Institute of Chicago) would not have been lost on his young student seeking to jump-start her own career. Despite her proximity to the pervasive modernity in Paris of 1909, it is clear McEnery’s commitment to the American realist style remained firm. Her training with Henri drew McEnery to depictions of her time and place—the human condition as it exists in the modern world. Hence, the insistent modernity evident in *Woman in an Ermine Collar* is borne not of style, but of subject matter.

Although McEnery was seeking out portrait commissions while in Paris, there is no evidence in her correspondence of a commission for a full-length portrait of a young woman. It is more likely that this painting was intended by McEnery for exhibition: a painting in the grand manner with a hired artist's model as subject.⁸ In her letters she gives often amusing bits of information on her many French models: "Enter my model Jeanne who is fifteen and says of smoking 'C'est ma plus grande passion.' She arrives red of nose and I must hold her over the fire to see if we can restore its (her nose) natural color. Winter is not a good season for models they always come red nosed and red handed."⁹ The hands of the figure in MAG's painting do indeed appear rather ungraceful, rugged, and reddened.¹⁰

McEnery preferred models over amateur sitters or commissioned portraits because of their malleability and lack of demands. While McEnery and this model were probably close in age, their social and cultural distance allowed the artist to manipulate and construct the image we see here. As Janet Wolff has observed of her later portraits of Rochester women, McEnery "captures the moment and the personality in a style which unambiguously registers the sitter as a 'modern' woman."¹¹ Although we do not know this person's identity, her modern persona has been skillfully created. Her reddened nose and hands, her hat, opened jacket, gloves, and upswept skirt all indicate that she has just come in from the cold. This is no fin-de-siècle hothouse flower. As opposed to the paintings of decorative, passive females in interior settings by American artists like William Merritt Chase and Thomas W. Dewing, this young woman's casual vibrancy is more appropriate to the public domain.

The figure in *Woman in an Ermine Collar* is an embodiment of the New Woman—a cultural phenomenon associated with the growing women's rights movement. The New Woman, who would eventually transform into the infamous flapper of the 1920s, had her genesis in the 1890s as epitomized by the Gibson Girl, the famous illustrated character by Charles Dana Gibson. The Gibson Girl rejected the constraining attire of her mother's generation and instead often wore a white high-necked shirtwaist, a flared skirt, and a large hat atop voluminous hair. She rebelled against traditional gender roles and was independent, spirited, and physically active. The Gibson Girl was the standard of beauty and womanhood in America during McEnery's formative years, an influence notable in her artistic ambitions and in her unabashed love of dancing, riding horses, playing sports like tennis and golf, and even smoking on occasion. Kathleen McEnery was a passionate supporter of the women's rights movement throughout her life.¹² It is no surprise then to see the strength of character and physical characteristics of this new model of womanhood reflected in both the artist and the figure she chose to paint. McEnery's commitment to the American realist creed to depict with honesty the conditions of modern life resulted in this woman's unapologetic presence.

Woman in an Ermine Collar speaks volumes about the intrepid young woman who moved to New York and traveled to Madrid and Paris on her own to pursue her artistic passion. The model's composure reflects the artist's own fearlessness. Her gaze, both casual and intense, is unquestionably that of a twentieth-century woman, asserting her right to be young, confident, ambitious, and independent.



Charles Dana Gibson,
1867–1944
Untitled, ca. 1904
Reproduced in
*The Gibson Book: A Collection
of the Published Works
of Charles Dana Gibson*, vol. 2
(New York: Charles
Scribners Sons, 1906)

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