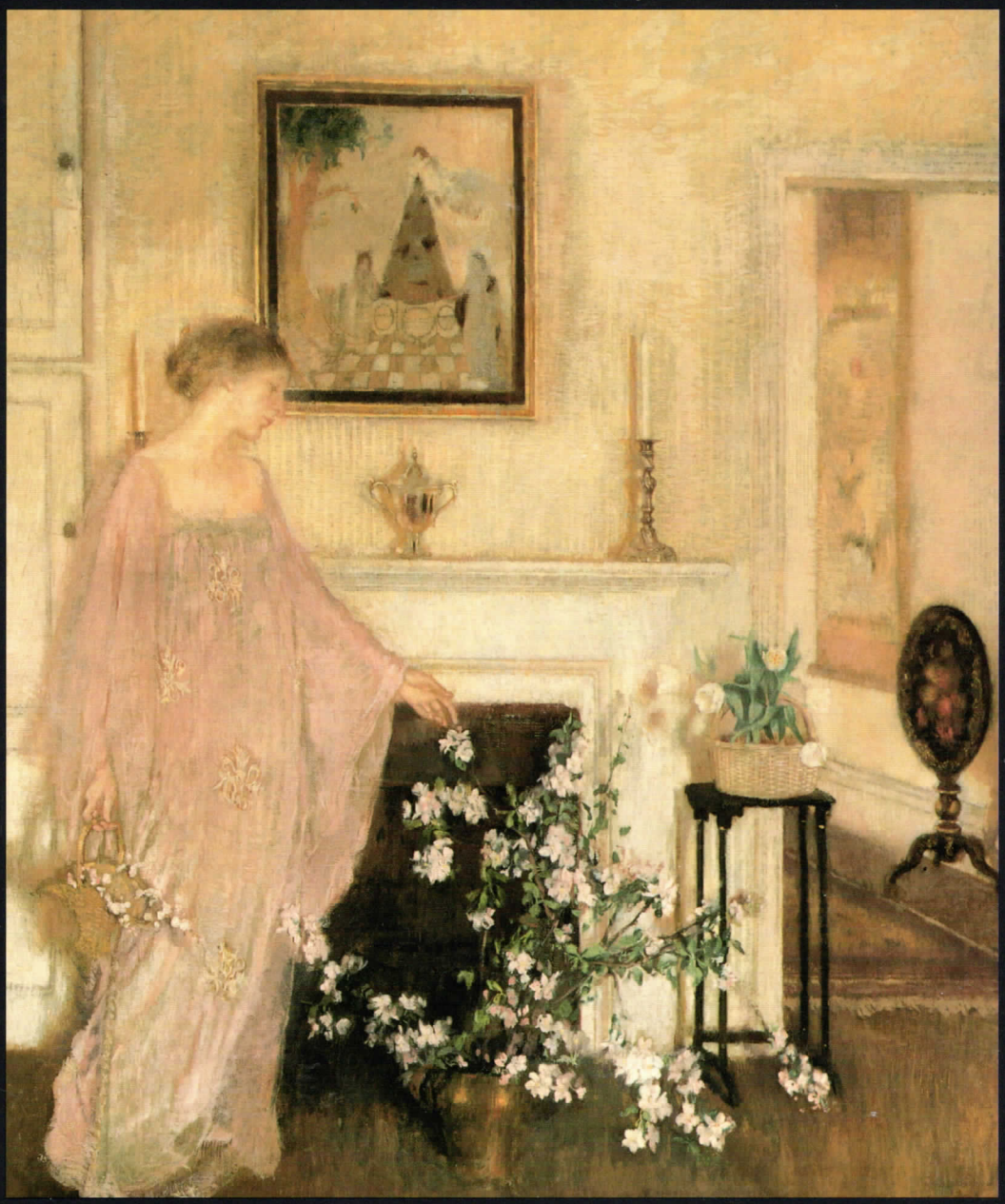


"Drawn with Butterfly's Wings"

THE ART OF LILIAN WESTCOTT HALE

1999, REGIS COLLEGE, WESTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Drawn with Butterfly's Wings: The Art of Lilian Westcott Hale

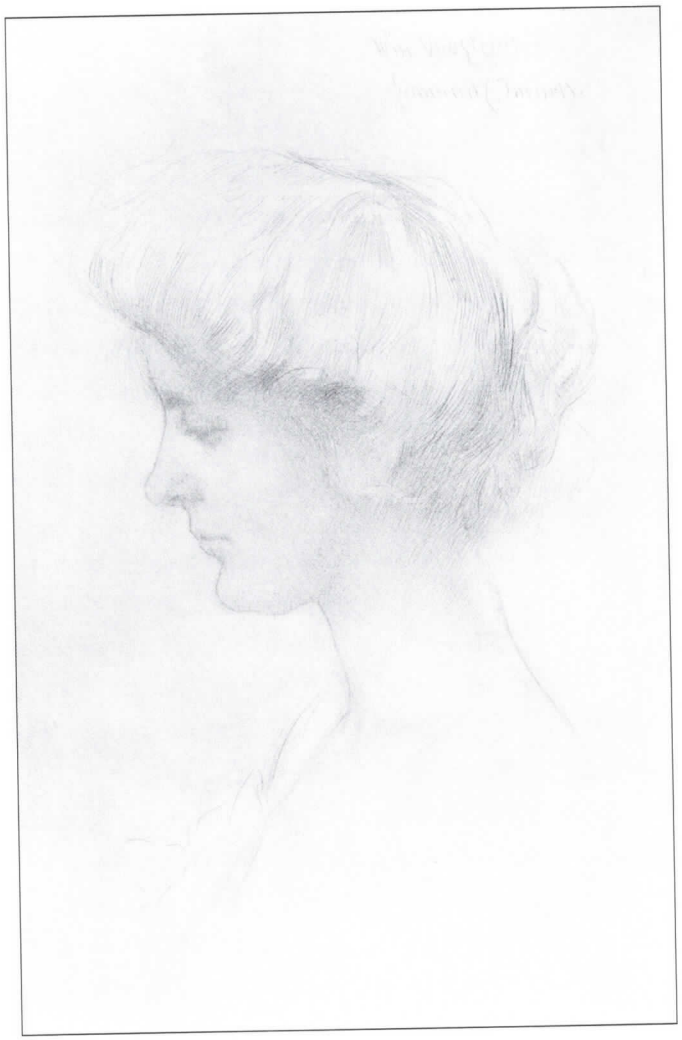
ERICA E. HIRSHLER

...Nothing more beautiful, tender, exquisite, and true, as drawing, has ever been shown in Boston within my remembrance–of forty years or more. I am also delighted to see that the success is a substantial one; for, too often in Boston great merit is neglected wholly, or treated with a "cast off indifferentism"...

The Boston painter William Paxton said that Lilian Westcott Hale drew with butterfly's wings, and his colleague Edmund Tarbell credited her work with giving him "one of the most inspiring hours [he had] ever spent."[1] Admired equally for her elegant charcoal drawings and for her graceful oils, Hale (1880–1963) was one of Boston's finest artists in the early twentieth century. She believed in craftsmanship and in beauty, and while her aesthetic creed was traditional, her ambition to succeed as a professional artist was not.

A family friend recalled young Lilian Westcott as a "fragile, dreamy child, creeping away by herself to her third story nook to draw and dream and draw again for hours."[2] That precocious artistic talent was nurtured by her proud and supportive family. In 1897, when Westcott was seventeen, she was permitted to enroll at the Hartford Art School. Her studies there, intended to lead toward a pragmatic career as a portraitist or an illustrator, were tempered by an immoderate passion–she would devote herself to her muse and never marry. Her resolution was based on convention, for once a woman had embarked upon a career, she was led to believe that she could not care properly for a husband, and once married, could no longer work. As historian Lisa Tickner has noted, "It was understood that the serious pursuit of art was incompatible with the demands of marriage and domesticity–it unsexed women and made them 'irritable, restless, egotistical'– just as the attributes of womanliness were incompatible with the production of good art."[3] A celibate existence, dedicated to the higher cause of art, had been the choice of many of America's most influential women painters, including Mary Cassatt and Cecilia Beaux.

Westcott's talent and single-minded dedication won her acclaim in Hartford, but created a crisis for her in Boston, where she continued her artistic education in 1900 at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. She entered with a scholarship from the Hartford Art Society and enrolled in Edmund Tarbell's advanced painting class, skipping the preliminary lessons in drawing that were taught by her future husband, Philip Hale (1865–1931). The son of Unitarian minister and writer Edward Everett Hale and his wife Emily Perkins, Hale was



PORTRAIT OF LILIAN
by Edmund Tarbell
1901, charcoal on paper, private collection

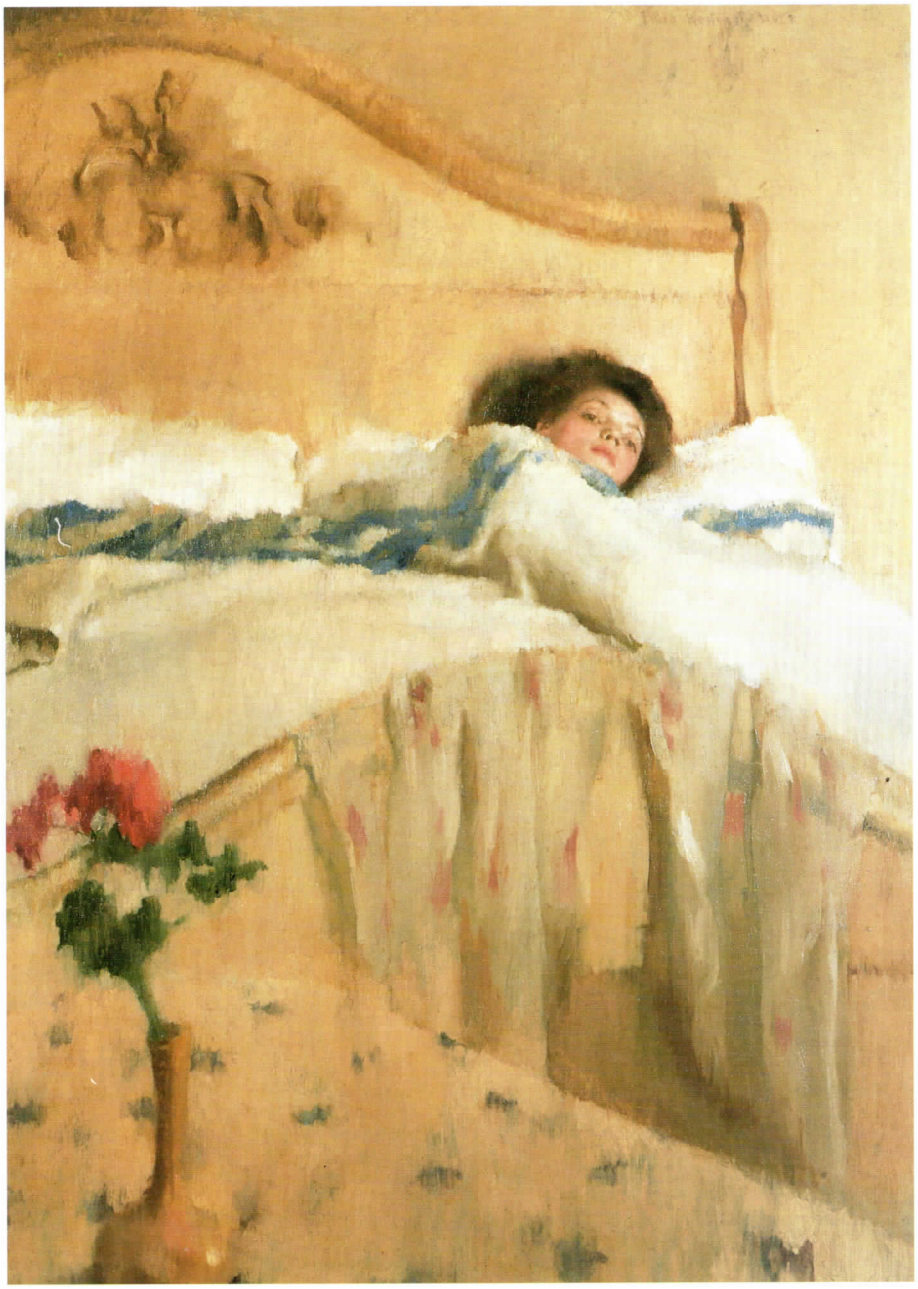


Fig. 1

THE CONVALESCENT (ZEFFY IN BED)
1906, oil on canvas, Nebraska Art Association
Beatrice D. Rohman Fund

thirty-five years old when he was formally introduced to Westcott in Hartford by his maternal uncle, Charles Perkins, during the summer of 1901.

When Westcott returned to school in Boston at the end of September, her relationship with Philip Hale progressed beyond the warm friendship and student-teacher interest with which it had begun. On October 22, Hale confessed that his "feelings were making me spell everything wrong." On the 24th, he signed himself "your devoted friend or lover as you will," and the letters from his Roxbury home to Westcott's boarding house increased to at least one every day, and sometimes two or three.[4] She, too, was falling in love, but her feelings were opposed to the artistic goals she had set for herself. She expressed her doubts to her family, and her sister Anna responded by saying, "Mr. Hale seems a man very congenial in his tastes to yours, and I do not see why [by] loving and marrying him you would break your vow of everlasting faithfulness to your work."[5]

Despite Westcott's deep misgivings about the effect of marriage upon her dream of a career, Philip Hale continued to court her. He wooed her with professional encouragement, wishing her luck and telling her if she continued with her work "we shall have you a great painter one of these days."[6] She was doing well in school. In November her efforts were innocently praised by Edmund Tarbell, who, when asked for his opinion by Hale, said that Westcott "has more idea of drawing than any of them up there. She has an Ingres-like quality of making the thing just the shape and character it is..."[7] She won class honors and was in line for the prestigious Paige Traveling Scholarship, which provided a senior student with two years of study in Europe. But that would mean being parted from Hale. He encouraged her to make her own decision; his passionate declarations of love were intended to prove that a separation would not compromise his feelings, but clearly he hoped she would stay: "I really love so much that I want what is best for you... My great and chiefest feeling is that I don't want you, in the years to come, to look back, and, in your heart of hearts, regret... I want you to feel that you've had a first rate show and haven't been interfered with—not to feel 'it might have been.'"[8]

By February 1902, Westcott had made her decision to remain in Boston and to marry Philip Hale, although she had not given up her hopes of winning the Paige Scholarship (if only to decline it in favor of her school rival, Clara Norton).[9] She returned to Hartford in March to discuss her plans with her family and on March 30 the engagement was announced. Westcott's friends and colleagues were taken by surprise. "I pictured you as wedded to your art, scorning all offers of manly protection and I can only think that it must be a man worthy of special note, who was able to overcome any scruples you might have had," wrote a woman identified only as Isabel.[10]

Throughout their marriage, Philip Hale acted as his wife's teacher and mentor, and it seems she needed him to play that role. "When my father got home from his Boston studio just before dinner at night, he would go at once to my mother's studio, on the north side of our house in Dedham, and see how her day's work had progressed," their daughter Nancy Hale recalled. "'I need a crit!' she would cry, embracing him at the front door. The slang

Fig. 4

FLOWER
1908, charcoal on paper, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Gift of Nancy Hale Bowers

There was the sharp, steady sawing of charcoal (sharpened to a needle point with a razor blade) up and down against the sheet of Strathmore board on my mother's easel as she worked... There would come a pause in the sawing, and a faint rattle, while she rummaged around in the blue-edged box that French charcoal came in. A clack—she had dropped something on the floor. If it was charcoal, it fell with a small explosion. Then a scratchy, rubbing sound, which was the careful filing of the sides of her stick of charcoal against the board covered with fine sandpaper which had a handle to keep one's fingers clean. A pause. Then would recommence the sawing of the point drawn rhythmically up and down... She sat, beautifully erect, on a high stool, her right arm out at full length, holding the charcoal in its French brass holder.[18]

Thus Hale defined her elegant details both by carefully leaving the white paper blank and by selectively erasing her charcoal to create intricate patterns. She used her paper not merely as a surface for the drawing, but as an integral part of her composition. Hale further developed her technique in her still lifes and particularly in winter landscapes, where the heavy snow carpeting branches and rooftops is defined through empty space alone (fig. 11, 12).

Although some of her images were repeated in oil, Hale considered her drawings to be complete works, not preliminary studies for paintings. When a family friend expressed interest in one of her charcoals, Mrs. Westcott suggested that Lilian give the picture away, prompting her daughter to complain: "It is not a sketch at all—but a finished drawing on which I spent three or four mornings."[19] That Hale felt her drawings were independent works of art was a result of the new status accorded the medium in the late nineteenth century. While draftsmanship long had been considered fundamental to academic training in the arts, drawings were not exhibited and collected as finished works of art until the third quarter of the nineteenth century. By 1900, they frequently were included in annual exhibitions at various academies and in shows sponsored by watercolor societies in many cities.[20] Hale first exhibited a group of her Zeffy drawings at the Fourth Annual Water Color Club Exhibition in Philadelphia, held at the Pennsylvania Academy in April 1907. At the end of the year, she planned her very first solo exhibition, a show consisting entirely of drawings.

That Hale chose to make her debut with an exhibition of graphic work rather than oil paintings is not surprising, for her drawings were highly praised by the artists she most admired. Throughout her career she would work in both media, explaining that, "When I see something that really interests me very much, then I render it as well and sympathetically as I can in the medium I think will best express my feelings about the subject."[21] She found Zeffy's stylish demeanor clearly suited to her elegant charcoal technique, and although many of her drawings would later serve as models for similar compositions in oil, she had only five recent paintings, all of them previously exhibited. She had eighteen finished drawings, enough to make a dramatic presentation of her skills. There was another reason for Hale's decision to go ahead with her exhibition despite her lack of new paintings. She was pregnant, and knew she would have little time for painting in the months to come. She believed there was no point in delaying the show. Uncertain as to how motherhood would affect her career, she decided to have a moment for herself and her art before the baby came.[22]

Fig. 5
CHINA ASTERS
1913, charcoal on paper, private collection

"Drawings by Lilian Westcott Hale" opened at the Rowlands Galleries at 402 Boylston Street in Boston on January 20, 1908. The show was an instant success. William Howe Downes, writing in the *Boston Transcript*, called Hale's drawings superior to the work of two of the era's most admired draftsmen, Paul Helleu and Charles Dana Gibson, and found them to be "characterized by a remarkable sense of form and movement, a flexibility and vitality rarely seen, and a distinct elegance of style. One does not in the least miss the color."[23] Edmund Tarbell went even further in his praise: "Your drawings are perfectly beautiful—as fine as anything could be. They belong with our old friends Leonardo, Holbein and Ingres, and are to me the finest modern drawings I have ever seen." And he paid her perhaps the ultimate compliment when he bought one of them, *The Little Silver Swan*, for his own collection.[24] Frederic Porter Vinton, another of Boston's most respected painters and also an instructor at the Museum School, asked if he could "venture to add my voice to the vast choir singing your praises... the impulse to write a line to you—after seeing your exhibition at Rowland's—is too strong to resist" and added:

Nothing more beautiful, tender, exquisite, and true, as drawing, has ever been shown in Boston within my remembrance—of forty years or more. I am also delighted to see that the success is a substantial one; for, too often in Boston great merit is neglected wholly, or treated with a "cast off indifferentism"—as Howells calls it—which stamps our city's artistic claim to exclusive superiority as a sham.[25]

"Substantial success" meant sales, and all but three of the drawings were purchased by the end of the show, many by fellow artists—William Paxton had lent his *Cup of Tea* for the exhibition (fig. 3), sculptor Bela Pratt bought two, and painters Adelaide Cole Chase, Gretchen Rogers, and Mary Macomber acquired one each.[26] When some of the drawings were displayed again a few months later, the *Transcript* noted, "These are all loaned by the owners, and it is worthy of notice that four of the owners are artists. Their approbation of her work, shown in this practical manner, is one of the highest possible tributes to her talent."[27] Hale's exhibition gained her more than the appreciation of her fellow painters, who were, after all, her colleagues and friends. She also earned for her drawings—and for future portraits—several faithful patrons, many from prominent Boston families.

Without altering her ambitions, Lilian Hale had to ease her habitual discipline after the birth of her daughter Anna Westcott Hale (called Nancy), on May 6, 1908. Over the next eighteen months, she would exhibit only once. In July, the Hales moved to the Ashcroft section of Dedham, Massachusetts. There, in a Queen Anne-style shingled house with several porches and a large garden, Hale devoted herself to Nancy. But instead of allowing her new domestic responsibility to take her away from art, Lilian Hale used her child as a model. She sketched her daughter as she napped, producing two fine finished drawings, *A Baby* (private collection) and *Flower* (fig. 4). *Flower* shows Nancy as an infant, lying on an elaborate floral cloth against a background of garlanded, rococo wall-paper. In a dramatic use of negative space, Hale left the center of the drawing completely blank, allowing the white of the paper to define the child's gowned form. The rest of the page is given over to sinuous, luxurious pattern against which the baby's plump fists and delicate features almost disappear. The infant becomes another of the joyous blossoms that decorate the composition.

Despite the euphoric acceptance of motherhood implied in this drawing, both Philip and Lilian Hale knew that the baby would change the atmosphere of life in the studio. Philip's artist friends unsparingly reminded the Hales of their new obligations in the congratulatory letters and cartoons they sent. Typical of these is Henry Prellwitz's, which depicts Philip gallantly painting from a live model with one hand while holding a squalling baby Nancy in the other (Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College). The caricature is captioned, "Mrs. Hale better not leave you to mind the baby." And Lilian did not. Instead, she gave over her Fenway Studio room to her friend Gretchen Rogers in 1909 and moved her studio into her Dedham home.

In less than ten years, Lilian Westcott Hale had achieved a remarkable triumph, transforming herself from a shy, talented student to an artist respected and admired by the most important painters in Boston. Contrary to her own expectations, she had successfully balanced career and marriage. She now started a new chapter in her career, accepting the additional challenges of motherhood and suburban seclusion. She worked steadily, but it would be two and a half years after Nancy's birth before she exhibited a new painting. As the painter Anna Lea Merritt had remarked in 1900, referring to the traditional expectations of women's duties, "The chief obstacle to a woman's success is that she can never have a wife."[28]

Hale did succeed, however, managing the delicate balance between art and everyday life. She continued to display her work locally, in both group and solo exhibitions, and also showed paintings and drawings at most of the important annual exhibitions across the United States. Her drawings, many of which still featured her model Rose Zeffler, became more complex, with figures no longer seen in isolation, but as part of an ornate interior. *China Asters* (fig. 5) combines the delicacy of Hale's early work—Zeffy's ethereal features, the transparent veils of lace, the carefully simple arrangements of flowers—with a new luxury, seen here in the lushly decorated room featuring a rococo table and wallpaper with a Chinese motif. When the drawing was exhibited at the Boston Water Color Club in 1913, Hale received perhaps the ultimate compliment for a Boston artist when the subtle ele-

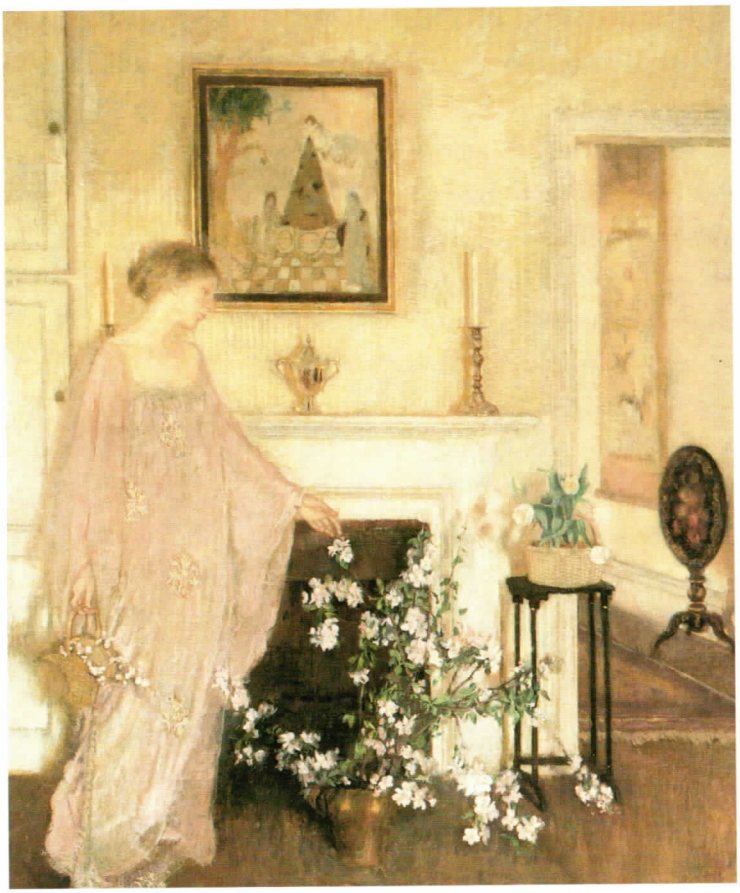


Fig. 6

LAVENDER AND OLD IVORY

1914, oil on canvas, private collection

gance of her work was praised over a charcoal by John Singer Sargent.

Her acclaim was not merely local, however. In 1915, she sent six of her drawings, including *China Asters*, to the international display at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. She won a medal of honor there for her drawings, one of the highest awards presented by the jury. Nor was her work in oil disregarded, for her painting *Lavender and Old Ivory* (fig. 6) was awarded a gold medal. *Lavender and Old Ivory* (related to a drawing entitled *Autumn Fruit and Flowers*) exhibits many of the same motifs as Hale's earlier work in charcoal, and features a similar gowned figure in a decorative interior. The setting is different, however, for in 1912 the Hales had moved into a new home, an eighteenth-century farmhouse in another part of Dedham. The room in which Hale now posed her model was her new studio, just off the dining room. Hale ornamented the spare white walls and plain cabinetry with American antiques, including a silk mourning piece that had descended in her husband's family. The composition displays all of the characteristics of a typical Boston School interior of the type first explored by Edmund Tarbell in 1904—the light-filled room, the device of a picture within the picture, and a contemplative

mood. But now Hale, as Tarbell would do, banished Victorian opulence in favor of the simplicity and moral rectitude of the colonial revival. Here was a sanctuary from the modern world, a refuge from the increasing mechanization of everyday life, and a link to the virtuous past of New England.

Lilian Hale's interest in tradition—a love for New England history, as well as for the history of art—continued in the work she created toward the end of the decade. In 1916, she made a series of images that pay homage to the Italian Renaissance. *The Bride* (fig. 7) is one of several compositions in which Hale included a cast of a relief sculpture of the *Virgin and Child* by the Florentine master Donatello. These works feature Agnes Doggett, the daughter of a Dedham neighbor, who had replaced Rose Zeffler as Hale's preferred model. Agnes was less delicate and elfin than Zeffy had been, and her appearance gave Hale's new figurative pictures a subtle dignity. (fig. 10) The modest expression and the delicate veil Agnes wears in *The Bride*, juxtaposed with the religious imagery of the madonna, the candle, and the grapevine, lend this drawing an unmatched spiritual grace.

Hale's interest in art history was not limited to the Renaissance, however. *Nancy and the Map of Europe* (fig. 8), which Hale began in the summer of 1919, was one of several other works that reflected her enthusiasm for the seventeenth-century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer. In consequence, they demonstrate another influence as well, her husband's, for Vermeer was one of Philip Hale's passions. The Dutch painter, rediscovered late in the nineteenth century, had specialized in luminous images of women in interiors, and his

Fig. 7
THE BRIDE
1916, charcoal on paper, private collection

work provided a model for modern painters of similar subjects. Philip Hale wrote the first American monograph on Vermeer in 1913, and he continued to study the Dutch painter's work for the rest of his life. His enthusiasm was so vivid that his daughter Nancy recalled that she "thought Vermeer was a friend of his."[29] Philip Hale wrote about the relevance of Vermeer's paintings to contemporary artists and particularly admired his emphasis on composition and design rather than upon narrative.

Such traits are clearly visible in Lilian Hale's *Nancy and the Map of Europe*, which also borrows from Vermeer its contemplative spirit and the pictorial device of the large map in the background. Nancy, wearing a bright blue

Fig. 8

NANCY AND THE MAP OF EUROPE
1919, oil on canvas, private collection

dress her mother had made for her, posed for both her parents, an unusual instance of them sharing the same model. "Phil and I are painting Nancy in the mornings," Lilian wrote to her sister-in-law. "I am making a big one—that is a rather little girl in a large canvas taking all of her and Phil a large girl in a small canvas."[30] Lilian Hale's painting depicts her eleven-year-old daughter with a serious expression. Nancy seems caught between the world of childhood, represented by the doll, dressed and posed just as she is—but carefully laid aside—and the adult world of knowledge, symbolized by the map.

When *Nancy and the Map of Europe* was shown in Hale's solo exhibition at the Guild of Boston Artists in 1920, it was praised for its decorative composition, its success at representing a particular quality of light, and for its unusually delicate and dry paint surface. But Hale's talent for characterization did not escape notice, a fact made evident by the increasing number of portrait commissions she received over the

Fig. 9

CHILD WITH YARN (Johnny Blake)
1923, oil on canvas, Adelson Galleries, Inc.

next few years. Hale had been promoting herself as a portraitist in her recent work, selecting larger figurative compositions that demonstrated her skills more directly than the small scale, decorative images she had made previously. Her strategy paid off, for in 1921, she began to receive her first significant orders for portraits, commissions that soon provided her with a steady and rewarding income.

Like many women artists, Hale was most often asked to paint likenesses of children (fig. 9). Women were thought to have a special facility for such portraits, and many of Hale's colleagues, including Adelaide Cole Chase, Laura Coombs Hills, and Ellen Emmet Rand, shared her situation. Hale's portraits of children were heralded as a perfect example of her ability to pursue a professional career while maintaining her femininity and devotion to domestic concerns. When Hale and Rand held a joint exhibition featuring their portraits of children in New York in 1927, the *New York Sun* announced the display with the headline, "Two

Fig. 10

THE VEIL
1916, pencil on paper, Mr. & Mrs. Jeffrey Cooley

Artists—Also Mothers—Exhibit Their Canvases; Both Admit Their Children Are Their Best Work."[31] The headline's double meaning refers not only to Hale's and Rand's art, but also to their own children. It alludes to the classical moralizing tale of Cornelia, the Roman matron who, when confronted with her friend's boastful inventory of her wealth, pointed to her children as her own most precious jewels.

Hale's portraits of children were admired not only for the reassuring social values they represented, but also for their artistic qualities. A master of still life, Hale frequently included flowers, foliage, or a favored toy in her compositions, carefully balancing the arrangement of forms and selecting jewel-like color harmonies. Critics were charmed by the result, and her success generated further commissions. She made at least twenty-two portraits of children in the five years between 1922 and 1927. The

Fig. 11

ON CHRISTMAS DAY IN THE MORNING
1924, charcoal and colored pencil on paper, Richard York Gallery

Boston Globe complimented Hale's artistry by stating that her portraits would "live in the world of art" rather than surviving merely as family heirlooms, and she won prizes for her work at the Pennsylvania Academy and the National Academy of Design.[32]

Despite her considerable success as a portrait painter, Hale preferred to think of herself in more general terms. In 1926, when she was featured in the periodical *Woman Citizen*, the writer remarked, "Lilian Westcott Hale... has taken gold medals for portraiture. But don't put Mrs. Hale down as a professional portrait painter ('May heaven spare me that!' the artist herself gasps). She has tried her hand at almost everything."[33] "Almost everything" included a brilliant series of still-life drawings, begun in 1923. Hale's subject was once again traditional, particularly for women, but her handling was not. She was an innovative and experimental still-life artist, developing an

Fig. 12

WHITE TEAPOT

about 1934, charcoal on paper, private collection

unusual and quite modern compositional format for which she was greatly admired (see figs. 11, 12).

Hale's still lifes most often represent objects arranged on a windowsill, a device that allowed her to combine still life and landscape in a single image and to eliminate the boundaries between the inside and the outside world. She united objects near and far into flattened, decorative compositions that recall the achievements of such modernist painters as Georgia O'Keeffe. These drawings stand apart from the more traditional still-life formula employed by most of her Boston colleagues, who favored dark, elegant tabletop compositions. These were most often arrangements of luxurious objects with an oriental motif, set in shallow spaces against a backdrop of a Chinese or Japanese screen. Hale's *White Teapot* (fig. 12) features instead a porcelain teapot and single teacup, resting upon a fresh white tablecloth and placed against a brilliant wintery landscape. Hale enjoyed the formal similarities between the curve of the branches and the form of the teapot's spout. With her careful design, she subtly linked together interior and exterior worlds.

Yet despite their formal similarities to modern art, Hale's still lifes represent a world far removed from the commotion of contemporary existence. They celebrate seclusion and solitude, tranquillity and order. "No harsh breath from a brutal world ever disturbs the peace of Mrs. Hale's studio," wrote a critic for the *New York World*.[34] Yet the contemplative vision that Hale made her specialty was not without emotional weight, for some of her work seems burdened with loneliness. She titled a drawing of a potted geranium plant on her studio windowsill before a winter landscape "The Sheltered Life," and while sanctuary has kept the plant flowering throughout the cold weather, its leggy blossoms seem to strain toward the outside world. The sheltered life was simultaneously nurturing and confining.

Despite this apparent emotional retreat from the tumult of every-day life, Hale maintained an active exhibition schedule and described enthusiastically a new series of drawings she had begun. But the exhilaration she had expressed after the birth of her first grandchild in 1930 was cut short the following year when Philip Hale died suddenly of a ruptured appendix. Lilian Hale was unable to work, and put most of her energy into organizing a memorial exhibition for her husband. "After my father's death," recalled Nancy Hale, "my mother could not seem to enjoy anything any more... she did not even want to paint anymore. In vain did I demonstrate how unwise it was to let her great talent lie fallow. 'I hate painting now,' she said. 'It's somehow horrible.'"[35] In the two years following Philip Hale's death, she started only one new composition, a charcoal and colored pencil drawing she entitled *Blighted Hope* (private collection).

Fig. 13
THE SAILOR BOY
(William Wertenbaker), 1943
oil on canvas, private collection

Over the next decade, Hale would slowly resume interest in her career, although she never regained the momentum she had established in the 1910s and 1920s. The collapse of the art market during the Depression and increased domestic responsibilities for her aging mother and young grandchildren contributed to the diminution of her production. Hale never stopped working, however, and again she drew inspiration for her art from her family. She drew and painted her grandchildren repeatedly, and these later children's portraits combine Hale's customary color harmonies with a new vibrancy. *The Sailor Boy* (fig. 13), a 1943 portrait of her grandson,

Fig. 14

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST'S GRANDSON
(William Wertenbaker), 1955
charcoal on paper, private collection

William Wertenbaker, shows the youth standing before an antique screen in Hale's summer studio. Hale wrote that the process reminded her of painting *Nancy and the Map of Europe* (fig. 8). The comparison is telling, for once again Hale has invested an image of a child with adult symbolism. Young Wertenbaker's enthusiasm for posing in his sailor suit was not only driven by the boys' tales of the sea that were read to him as he posed, but also by the real naval adventures currently taking place. As Hale remarked to her daughter, "he wants to have you able to see what a real sailor he is."[36]

For the rest of her life, Hale continued to create landscapes, still lifes, and portraits, painting at home in the winter and in the Rockport studio she had inherited from her sister-in-law Ellen Hale in the summer. She exhibited sporadically, both in Boston and in Virginia, where she moved in 1953 to be closer to her daughter. Her late drawings, like her oils, exhibit a new vigor and intensity (fig. 14). She began to use shorter, more jagged lines to define the contours of her subject, instead of employing long, delicate strokes of charcoal that run from the top of the sheet all the way to the bottom. In this way, Hale exchanged the seemingly effortless polish of her early work for a dynamic freshness and vitality. In 1963, at age eighty-three, Hale won her last prize at the Rockport Art Association's summer exhibition. She died later that year, leaving a legacy of art that has earned new praise as it has been rediscovered. The poet and novelist May Sarton recalled Lilian Hale's "grand simplicity," and wrote, "Always I associated her with a bunch of white single roses."[37]