

The Life and Work of Lilian Westcott Hale

by Joan Archer

Born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1880 to Edward Gardiner and Harriett (Clark) Westcott, Lilian was the youngest of three daughters. Artistically gifted, she decided at a very young age to devote her life to art. As a young student at the Hartford Art School in Connecticut, Westcott's talents were noticed by William Merritt Chase, one of the country's most influential art teachers and a member of a group of Impressionists known as the Ten

American Painters. In the summer of 1899, she studied with Chase at his summer school at Shinnecock, Long Island. Then in 1900 with a scholarship from the Hartford Art Society, Westcott began her studies at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. At Boston's prestigious Museum School, she would undertake a rigorous academic curriculum and receive excellent professional training.

Westcott loved her studies and her life as an art student. She was considered to have great promise; at Chase's recommen-

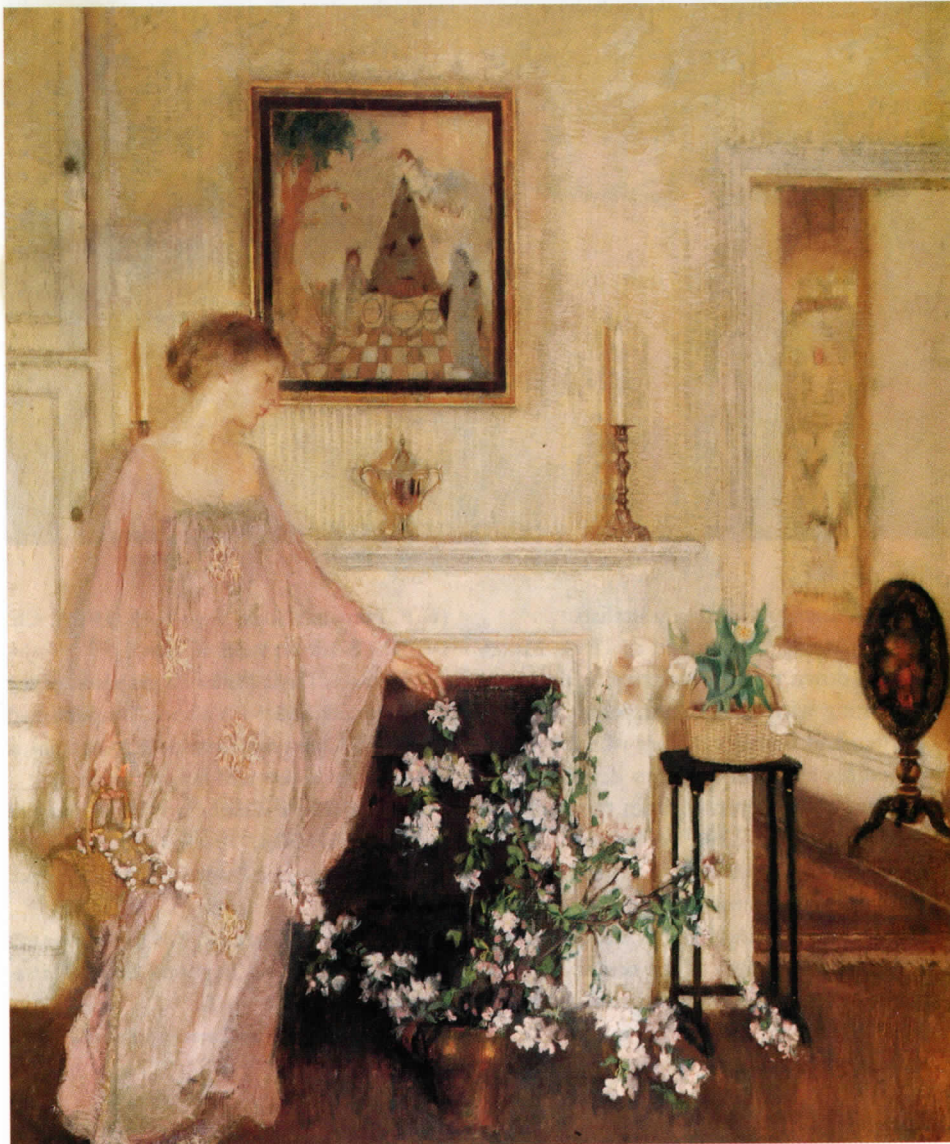
dation, she was placed in an advanced painting class with Edmund Tarbell. Her friendship with Philip Hale, a prominent faculty member at the Museum School and Boston artist, grew steadily and during her second year in Boston, they became involved in a deeper relationship. In 1902, after some hesitation and soul searching, she married Hale. Her decision to marry surprised many of her professors and even disappointed some of her fellow students who now questioned her commitment to the pursuit of a career in art.

Shortly after her graduation from the Museum School in 1904 and their celebratory trip to Europe, Lilian began exhibiting her work on an annual basis; it was highly acclaimed in Boston by the general public and artists alike. Indeed, many artists were purchasing her paintings for their own collections.

Lilian's first solo exhibition in January 1908, consisted entirely of drawings. In this show her talent and academic training were showcased to the fullest. Her superb draftsmanship and faultless drawing enthralled her audience.

Now, at a high point in her professional career Lilian faced a great expectation of another sort. She was six months pregnant; her daughter, Anna Westcott Hale, nicknamed Nancy, was born in the spring of 1908. Lilian gave up her Fenway Studio where she had worked alongside the most prominent painters of Boston: Edmund Tarbell, Frank Benson, William Paxton, Joseph DeCamp, her husband Philip Hale, and sometimes John Singer Sargent.

The Hales moved to Dedham, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston, to create a more appropriate home for their family. This change of lifestyle did cause a temporary pause in her busy career. Although Hale's attention was now consumed by motherhood, she soon began sketching her own baby and the domestic scenes which surrounded her. During this period, she produced *Flower*. From this work, it is



The Life and Work of Lilian Westcott Hale is on view from April 23 to May 8, 1999, at the Carney Gallery, Regis College, 235 Wellesley Street, Weston, Massachusetts, 02493, 781-768-7220. Curated by John G. Hagan, the exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with an essay by Erica E. Hirschler, Associate Curator of American Paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. All illustrations are by Lilian Westcott Hale unless otherwise noted.

RIGHT: *Child with Yarn (Johnny Blake)*, 1923, o/c, 36 x 30, Adelson Galleries, Inc.

BELOW RIGHT: *White Teapot*, c. 1934, 22 x 28, charcoal on paper, private collection.

LEFT: *Lavender and Old Ivory*, 1914, o/c, 30 x 25, private collection.

clear that Hale is delighted with motherhood. This depiction of baby Nancy lying on a blanket against a background of highly decorative wallpaper immediately creates a feeling of the rapture with which this baby is beheld.

In Nancy Hale's affectionate recollections of her parents, *The Life in the Studio*, the unique role of critic and mentor which Philip played in Lilian's life is clearly portrayed. She depended heavily upon Philip; his encouragement and advice helped her to achieve in her drawings what he could not achieve in his own work. She respected his comments and benefitted greatly from his vast knowledge of art. His influence is perceptible in her drawings and paintings.

R.H. Ives Gammell in his book, *The Boston Painters 1900-1930* states, "his [Philip Hale's] painterly thinking was extremely penetrating and sufficed to give a coherence to his wife's exquisite perceptivity which she might not have achieved by herself." Gammell feels that part of Lilian's success was due to having her husband "at her elbow" throughout her formative years. However, Gammell does go on to say, "we recognize innumerable compositional devices and technical methods characteristically his which become uniquely hers in the application, thereby acquiring a magic absent from his pictures." Thus, while one can attribute some of his wife's artistic development to Philip Hale, ultimately it was her unique spark of genius which separated her from her peers. In Lilian Hale's second solo show which was held at the Guild of Boston Artists in 1916, there is a new pensiveness in her work.

In 1912, the Hales moved to another





home in Dedham which they called, "Sandy Down." After purchasing this home they made moderate alterations, adding a columned front porch and enlarging a parlor with a large window wall to create Lilian's studio. Many of her snow scenes were sketched from this location; the living room with its period fireplace and mantle served as the setting for many of her paintings. The surrounding gardens were enlarged by Lilian, whose passion for gardening was said to equal her love of painting.

Hale fully embraced her roles as artist, wife and mother; she worked hard to succeed at all three. While outwardly their life together seemed to run smoothly, Lilian did suffer from periods of exhaustion and stress. At times she would be unable to paint because of this "nervous fatigue." However, she would manage to regain her strength and continue with her busy schedule. Lilian was ambitious and sought not only local recognition, but national as well. She was always interested in submitting her work to the major exhibitions. As always,

Philip was by her side offering his steadfast encouragement.

Philip's career was devoted to art: teaching, writing, painting, and drawing. He taught two days at the Museum School in Boston and between classes worked in the Fenway Studios. One day each week, Hale commuted to Philadelphia to teach at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. His teaching salary and the revenue from the sales of his work provided a reasonably comfortable life for his family. According to his daughter, he insisted on household help so that Lilian could spend her time painting, however, Lilian chose to participate in domestic activities even when it was physically difficult for her to do so.

At the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exhibition, Hale won a gold medal for her figure painting, *Lavender and Old Ivory*. These figure pieces which Hale produced are characteristic of the Boston School Tradition. In these works, a beautiful tapestry of composition often reveals elegant women in luxurious settings.

Hale's work was getting stronger as she became more sure of herself. She continued to exhibit in Boston, and also New York, Philadelphia, Washington D.C. and Chicago winning prizes and public acclaim. In the early 1920s she attracted the attention of Duncan Phillips, a major patron of the arts who was in the process of putting together his significant collection. After purchasing one of her paintings Phillips said of Hale:

A painter of considerable ability...her technique as a painter in oil departs from the usual "Boston School" polish and impersonal objectivity. Mrs. Hale lays on her colors with a method which results in rich, granulated surfaces vibrant with light, yet dry enough to catch no reflections...her portraits are decorative arrangements as well as sympathetic suggestions of character. *Home Lessons* is more than a picture of a little girl with a globe. It is a tribute to her native New England.

Nancy and the Map of Europe reflects Philip's influence on his wife's work. As Erica E. Hirshler in her 1992 dissertation, "Lilian Westcott Hale (1880-1963): A Woman Painter of the Boston School," points out, "this influence is not in stylistic terms, for its solemnity and solidity are far from Philip's decorative, sweet compositions, but on intellectual grounds. These

LEFT: *The Sailor Boy* (William Wertebaker), 1943, o/c, 38 x 26, private collection.

RIGHT: *The Convalescent* (Zeffy in Bed), 1906, o/c, 30 x 21¾, Nebraska Art Association, Beatrice D. Rohman Fund.

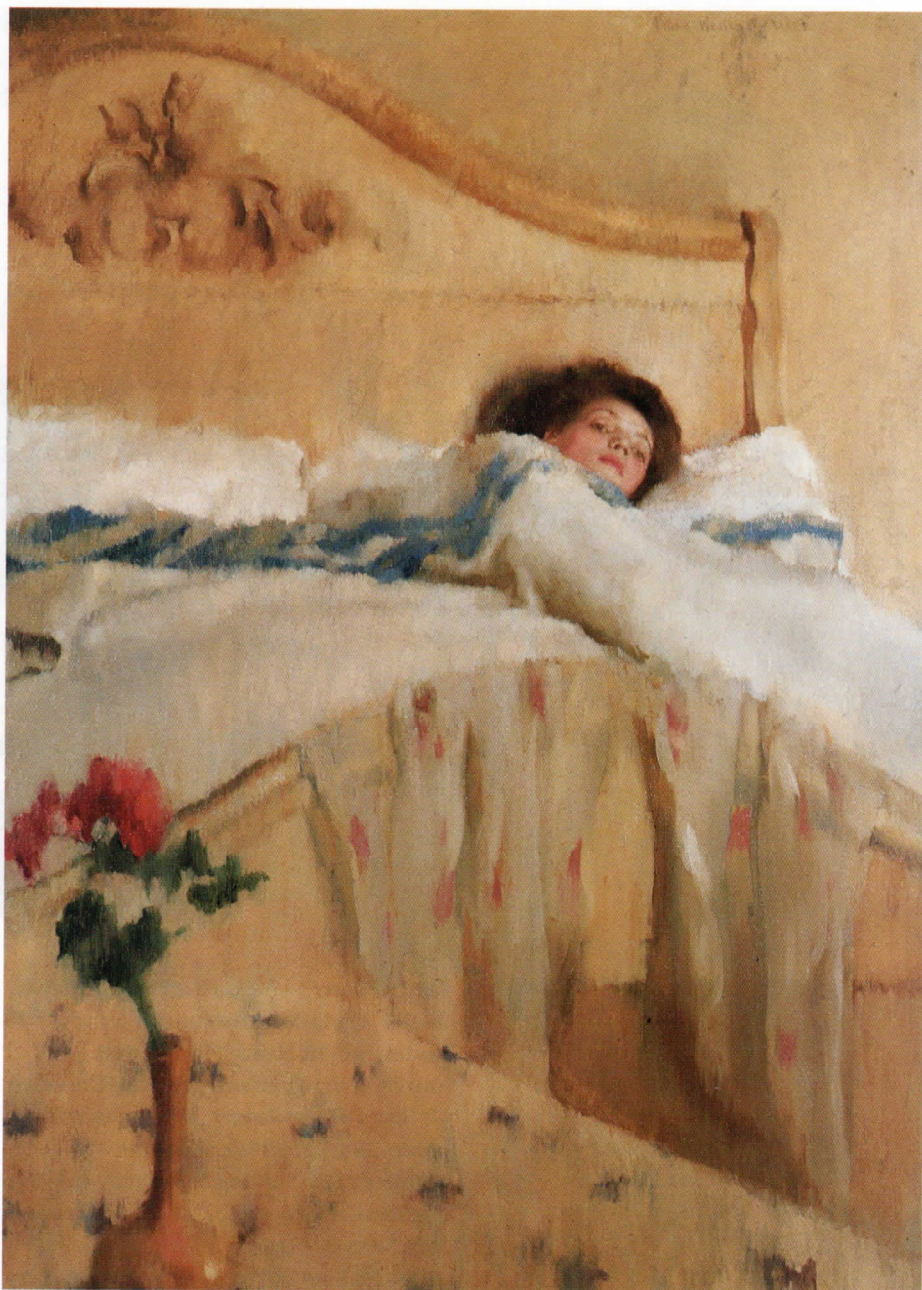
BELOW RIGHT: Edmund Tarbell, *Miss Westcott*, c. 1901, charcoal on paper, 10 x 7, private collection.

paintings reflect Philip's scholarly interests, particularly his studies on the seventeenth-century Dutch master, Johannes Vermeer."

In *Nancy and the Map of Europe* it is interesting to note that Lilian and Philip both started to draw their daughter, who posed for them in this Vermeer-like setting. Only a sketch of Philip's initial attempts remain; however, Lilian's final product is a stunning portrait/interior. It portrays a child in the process of leaving her childhood toys behind (doll on floor) for the adult world (map of Europe). Indeed, the child seems to be caught between these two worlds. The strong color of her dress and her serious expression suggest the weight of this decision.

Lilian had always longed to be a portrait painter and with the success of her exhibitions she acquired many portrait clients, including some very prominent families. She was elected a member of the National Association of Portrait Painters, a tribute to her achievements in this field. Many of her early portraits were of her daughter, Nancy, and the children of Dedham and Boston families. In 1922, the Guild of Boston Artists held an exhibition of Hale's work which featured only portraits. This met with much success, and she was favorably reviewed in the *Boston Globe* by critic, A.J. Philpott who claimed her artistic achievement in portraiture created pictures of timeless value, not merely "family heirlooms."

Portraiture provided significant income for the Hales as her portraits began commanding fees in the \$800 to \$1,000 range. Although she did portraits of adults, she was perhaps best known for her portraits of children, as was often the case of women artists. The Blake family commissioned Hale to paint all three of their children. *Child with Yarn* (Johnny Blake) is the most vibrant in color. In this portrait, Hale has caught the impish charm of this young boy. Hale was gifted in capturing a child's fleeting expression and the full charm of his or her childhood.



In 1927, Hale won the Altman prize at the National Academy of Design for *Portrait of Taylor Hardin*; she was the first woman to win this important prize. This was an unusual portrait for Hale as she rarely painted male portraits. The powerful portrait was widely praised in New York, and this exposure further promoted her as a portrait artist. In the decades of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s Hale was very busy with this aspect of her career. In 1931 she was elected a full member of the National Academy of Art, a significant recognition by her peers. Philip had been elected an Associate in 1907, but never achieved full membership.



LEFT: *Flower*, 1908, charcoal on paper, 23 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 14 $\frac{5}{16}$, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, gift of Nancy Hale Bowers.

ABOVE LEFT: *Portrait of Artist's Grandson (William Wertenbaker)*, 1955, charcoal on paper, 28 x 22, private collection.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Full-length Portrait*, c. 1907, charcoal on paper, 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 14, Mr. and Mrs. John G. Hagan.

RIGHT: *A Cup of Tea*, c. 1907, charcoal on paper, 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$, private collection.



The breadth of Hale's work is impressive. In addition to her charcoal drawings, figure pieces and portraits Hale produced wonderful still-life drawings and landscapes.

Her approach of including a still-life grouping of everyday objects on a windowsill, thereby incorporating the landscape beyond, is unique. *On Christmas Day in the Morning* represents this technique. In this drawing, Hale has created two separate worlds in one drawing; the warm and cozy interior and the harsh, cold New England winter. She is masterful in the execution of this juxtaposition. While the subject matter is rather mundane, the handling of the composition is quite brilliant.

White Teapot also employs this approach. Hale's drawings of stark tree branches in winter are lovely. She incorporated them in many still-life works and

also, in the landscapes with New England churches which were often drawn behind a foreground of these structural branches. Hale's winter landscapes represent the quintessential New England scene. Unlike the sweeping winter landscapes of Metcalf and Hibbard, Hale's landscapes portray a more narrow winter scene, almost like a

RIGHT: *Nancy and the Map of Europe*, 1919
o/c, 46½ x 40½, private collection.

BELOW RIGHT: *On Christmas Day in the
Morning*, 1924, charcoal and colored pencil
on paper, 23 x 14⅝, Richard York
Gallery.

close snapshot of a familiar spot.

Portraits of Hale's own grandchildren are quite delightful and she took great pleasure in painting them in her later years. A portrait of her grandson, William, was done several times, once as an oil painting in 1943 and then later in 1955 as a charcoal drawing. *Sailor Boy* is reminiscent of some of Hale's earlier work in that she paints her young grandson in an adult setting before a Chinese screen. His expression is endearing, but somewhat wistful.

In 1931, Philip died unexpectedly of peritonitis caused by a ruptured appendix. Lilian was devastated. His death took a terrible toll; for several years, she lost all her interest in drawing and painting. At first, she gave her attention to organizing a memorial exhibition of his work at the Museum School of Fine Arts in Boston. In this way, she paid tribute to the inspiration he had provided for her throughout her career. Eventually, after several years, she was able to find the strength to resume her artistic pursuits.

Hale remained in their Dedham home until 1955 when she moved to Virginia to be closer to her daughter and grandchildren. She continued to spend summers in Rockport, Massachusetts, where Ellen Hale (Philip's maiden sister), also a talented artist, had a home and studio overlooking the sea. There, Hale would spend her days gardening and painting. She resumed her painting with a renewed sense of energy and vigor and produced many fine works.

In the fall of 1963, after winning the portrait prize from the Rockport Art Association, Hale traveled to Europe to visit Italy for the first time. Shortly after her return, she died unexpectedly of heart failure at the age of eighty-three.

The works of Lilian Westcott Hale represent a lifetime of serious commitment to drawing and painting. Her dream of a life and career devoted to art were fully realized as she established herself as one of the finest Boston School artists. The beauty and craftsmanship of her work leave behind a rich legacy.



BELOW FAR RIGHT: *The Veil*, 1916, pencil on paper, 22 x 14, Mr. and Mrs. Jeffrey Cooley.

