

Basic Detail Report



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Title: Woman in Purple and Green

Date: 1905

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3e1d6

Medium: Oil on wood panel

Description: The sitter in "Woman in Purple and Green" was the prominent New York artist's model Alma Allen, who appears in other Dewing paintings wearing the same gown seen here (Portrait of a Girl, 1905, and "La Comedienne", 1906, both Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). Her unique garment consists of a green velvet skirt with a purple waist and a split bodice, a rolled collar, and long sleeves of medieval design. Another studio prop that appears in these paintings is an equally distinctive curule chair with lion-headed finials and green velvet upholstery. The chair, similar to one in works by Jan Vermeer, as well as the historic quality of the costume lends "Woman in Purple and Green" an antiquarian flavor that links it to the Old Master paintings Dewing emulated at the turn of the century. His admiration for such precedents is also evident in his painting technique. The finely modeled face of the sitter is composed of tiny, featherlike hatching strokes similar to those found in egg tempera paintings of the Italian Renaissance. The painting is, however, undeniably "fin de siècle" in its subtle psychological disjunctions. The model's bodice is provocatively low, giving her a deshabelle seemingly at odds with her aristocratic, shadowed visage. This deep décolletage reveals smooth, sensuously rounded shoulders that seem strangely opposed to her distant, aloof bearing. Her body language, furthermore, reveals a modicum of anxiety, for she sits erect, arms drawn in tightly, hands clasped, and knees locked together. Such contradictions provide the enigma that Dewing sought in his works, for, as he himself once said, a painting should be "just sour enough to save it."¹ The sitter's surface calm contrasts with her underlying tension, thereby opening the painting to various interpretations and lending it a fascination that it would otherwise not possess. Dewing widely exhibited "Woman in Purple and Green" after its completion. At the first Annual Exhibition of Selected Paintings by American Artists the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy held in 1906, for example, the painting was showcased on the west wall and described as "a beautiful picture . . . the quintessence of subtlety in expression and harmony in coloring." (2) SAH Bibliography: Royal Cortissoz, "Some Imaginative Types in American Art," Harper's Magazine 91 (July 1895): 164-179; Ezra Tharp, "T.W. Dewing," Art and Progress 5 (March 1914): 155-161; Kathleen Pyne, "Art and the Higher Life: Painting and Evolutionary Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century America" (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); Susan Hobbs, "The Art of Thomas Wilmer Dewing: Beauty Reconfigured", exhib. cat. (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 1996).
Notes: 1. "First Exhibition," "Academy Notes" 2 (June 1906): 3. See also Royal

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Cortissoz, "Art Exhibitions," "New-York Daily Tribune", January 5, 1906, "Fine Arts,"
"Brooklyn Daily Eagle", January 6, 1906, "Picture Exhibit in Lotos Club," "New York
Times", April 1906,
Dimensions: 20 x 15 3/4 in. (50.8 x 40 cm)