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Two Figures Shrouded in Mystery



'Before Sunrise' (1894-95) by Thomas Wilmer Dewing *FREER GALLERY OF ART*

By SIDNEY LAWRENCE

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American art of the late 19th century produced strong figurative images—Winslow Homer's perilous sea rescues, Thomas Eakins's wrestlers, John Singer Sargent's bravado portraits—but there was another, quieter strain epitomized by the art of Thomas

Wilmer Dewing (1851-1938). Working in New York and Cornish, N.H., the Boston-born artist painted sensitive, WASP-y women in simple, modish dresses of the day. Many of these "Dewing girls," as one art critic called them at the time, sat pensively in spare interiors with Vermeer-like remove in the quietude of morning or early evening. Others, more passive and ethereal, inhabited vaporous green landscapes, assuming artful poses, often with lanterns, garlands or musical instruments.

Inspired by his summers in New Hampshire, Dewing made 12 of these dreamscapes between about 1890 and 1904, framing them, like the rest of his work at that time, in the high-gilt designs of architect Stanford White, a close friend. Dewing's aestheticized Arcadian visions can be overblown, saccharine and as artificial as a fashion spread, but naturalism and simplicity, when introduced, trump these qualities.

"Before Sunrise" (1894-95), in the collection of the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, is a prime example, and there's nothing quite like it in the American or European art of the period. Measuring, with the frame, more than 4 feet by 5 feet, it zeroes in on two women enshrouded within a greenish-pinkish miasma of predawn light filtering through the landscape, in cloudy contrast to White's glittery, garlanded surround. Not merely decorous, these women ooze psychology. The figure at center rises like a genie from a glade below, buxom and broad-shouldered, wearing a dark, scoop-necked dress, elbows bent expressively, not quite resting on her hips. She stares at us through the gauze with an expression and body language that seem to say: Look at me, deal with me, talk to me, I am here. A smaller, disheveled, submissive woman to the left by the trees, her face a fleshy blur, extends a paper lantern as if to light the way. But to what? It is an enigma played out by the "American cousins" — as art historian Wanda Corn once put it, describing Dewing's landscape dwellers in

general—"of the unfathomable fin-de-siècle women painted by Beardsley, Klimt and Munch."

Dewing, a handsome, burly, excitable man who reveled in music, poetry, good food and beautiful women, had long used figures to create narratives. After study in Boston and Paris, he began his New York career in the 1880s depicting classically costumed allegorical figures outdoors, in the spirit of English pre-Raphaelite poet-painters. By the 1890s Dewing was focusing on—and became known for—interiors and landscapes in the Tonalist style.

Dewing and a host of other American artists interpreted the moods of nature and private reveries in misty, mostly monochrome canvases that kept the brutal realities of modern life at bay. American expatriate James McNeill Whistler, who worked in London and Paris but was widely known in the U.S., helped spur the trend, and Dewing came under his spell. A generation older, the iconoclastic Whistler championed an "art for art's sake" approach as a foil to Victorian excess, aspiring to a modernism based on the beauty, simplicity and inclusive harmony of Japanese art and design.

Charles Lang Freer, Whistler's major patron in America, developed an interest in Dewing on a buying trip to New York in 1891. He bought a painting right off the artist's easel and not long after, asked Dewing to "decorate" a parlor at his home in Detroit. "Before Sunrise" was created for this commission.

Cornish was fertile ground for Dewing. There, with his wife Maria Oakley Dewing, an accomplished floral painter, he was at the center of a stimulating, stylish, well-heeled colony of artists (among them the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens), patrons and writers, and others who roamed the hills in Transcendentalist reveries, reflecting a 19th-century view espoused by Ralph Waldo

Emerson and others that attunement to nature leads to truth. Dewing filtered this aura into his figured landscapes, which he once described, as if writing about Cornish itself, as belonging to "a poetic and imaginative world where a few choice spirits live."

"Before Sunrise" is part of this world, but other factors also influenced its creation. When he began the painting in midsummer 1894, Dewing was already incorporating subtle color glazes inspired by Japanese ceramics into his work. He was also helping Freer buy the Asian art that would become his focus and received, for his friend and patron, two ukiyo-e woodblock prints by the late-18th-century master Kitagawa Utamaro (a favorite also of Whistler). Dewing had already felt the influence of these stylized, pleasure-oriented "floating worlds" (as ukiyo-e translates) depicting geishas and courtesans of the court at leisure. But the receipt of actual prints while creating this newest landscape intensified the association. He even considered retitling the work "To Utamaro."

A wave of new ideas and influences soon took hold of Dewing. That fall, he interrupted his progress on "Before Sunrise" to live and work for nine months in London and Paris, accompanied by his wife and young daughter. In London he was welcomed by, and periodically painted with, the rambunctious Whistler, who also helped the first-time visitor explore the city's artistic offerings. When spring broke, the Dewing family relocated to Paris and the artist saw Whistler again—this time with Freer (en route to Asia)—and successfully exhibited works at the Champs de Mars salon.

In Paris, Dewing worked four days a week in a rented studio north of the city at Giverny, a mecca for American artists seeking to experience Claude Monet's rigorously colored, broadly painted Impressionism. Dewing didn't resume "Before Sunrise" until returning home that summer (finishing it in November) but

Giverny left its mark, infusing the work with a looseness and freedom that overshadows the restraint of Whistler and Japanese art.

What is more, the two women in the painting seem more Parisian than American. The central figure could almost be the friendly, direct, hourglass-attractive barmaid in Edouard Manet's "Bar at the Folies-Bergère." And her companion's dress strap revealing a bare shoulder recalls Sargent's scandalous "Madame X," a sensuous Creole socialite from New Orleans who became the toast of Paris.

The models who posed for "Before Sunrise" have never been identified, but the central figure bears a strong resemblance to Mollie E. Chatfield, a Dewing favorite likely just starting to work for the artist as he finished the painting. Chatfield was also the libidinous Dewing's long-term lover. Whether the affair started then or later is uncertain, but this backstory may well explain why "Before Sunrise," unlike Dewing's other landscapes, possesses such arresting power. The Chatfield figure is the epicenter of this slow-burning Gilded Age masterpiece. She looks like she may turn to vapor at any moment, like a dream that ends when day breaks.

—Mr. Lawrence is an artist and writer in Washington.