

Thomas Wilmer Dewing

A Look Beneath the Surface

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Since the advent of modernism, the paintings of Thomas Wilmer Dewing (1851–1938) have sometimes been faulted for a lack of variety despite their technical mastery. Indeed, the diagnostic technique of neutron-induced autoradiography reveals that Dewing was so skilled that he typically proceeded from start to finish with an unflinching, unerring hand.¹ But modern methods of analysis also show that Dewing experimented and responded to new techniques. Because he was in many ways a painter's painter, recognized in his own day for his superb ability as a draftsman and colorist, scientific evidence of the evolution of his techniques is particularly revealing.²

Dewing rarely expounded on the theory and practice of painting and left no separate preparatory drawings or oil sketches, so the art historian must go to the works themselves to ascertain Dewing's methods. Autoradiography, which can suggest the sequence in which the painter laid in his composition, is especially instructive to understanding a painter like Dewing, who employed throughout his career the classical *ébauche* he had learned while a student in Paris.

An *ébauche*, as taught by the French Academy, is the initial underpainting that establishes the

broad lines of emphasis in a projected painting, its "characteristic masses, forms, action, effect and colour scheme."³ Having laid in this "mosaic" of lights and darks, the artist would then link the patches with *demi-teintes* (intermediate hues). On occasion the artist retained this mosaic until he had neared the work's completion, when he would use white pigments to pull together and resolve separate portions of the painting.

Autoradiography, with other methods of scientific analysis, can reveal Dewing's original *ébauche* as well as his subsequent application of paint. In this technique the painting is exposed to a low dose of neutrons. A series of films is then placed on the surface of the canvas for predetermined intervals correlated to the known half-lives of inorganic elements in the paint. The film, sensitive to the charged particles, registers the location of activated elements, producing a visual image of the spatial distribution of the pigments. The chemical elements that produce the images are identified by gamma ray spectroscopy, then verified by X-ray fluorescence and the scanning electron microscope. Used in conjunction with X-ray radiographs, which show such heavy elements as lead that are undetectable by autoradiography, this scientific

Thomas Wilmer Dewing, ca. 1910



- 1 Portrait of Frances L. Houston, ca. 1880–89. Oil on canvas, 19⁵/₈ x 14¹/₄ in. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of John Gellatly



analysis can document Dewing's evolving design, including his palette-knife work, stippling, and smoothly applied finishing strokes, as well as the addition and elimination of passages in the composition.⁴

Dewing's Early Academic Works

Dewing "did not look in the least like the type who would be painting Dewings," a studio mate once observed of the tall, robust artist. "Little contradictions are

everywhere on his surface," recalled Ezra Tharp after he interviewed Dewing for an article published in 1914. Much to his surprise the critic found the artist to be "a tall, fierce, bristling man, bitterly ready to quarrel, using a witty tongue so as to cause bitterness in others." Dewing was, however, intensely dedicated to art, as Tharp thus noted:

His work is the only thing he's interested in all the time, his one passionate interest. . . . At his

- 1a *This autoradiograph, fifth in a series of twelve, clearly shows the mosaic of lights and darks Dewing employed to model Houston's face, particularly the area just below her right eye. The image also shows the bow or flower that was present before Dewing lowered the neckline and lengthened the ruff.*



studio by half-past eight, he sits there for ten months of the year every day as long as the light lasts, sitting hunched and doubled up, in a low chair despite his enormous size, so that he shan't see the tops of things too much.⁵

This passion for painting and love of technique were undoubtedly deeply rooted in Dewing's youthful academic training.

Born in Boston in 1851 to a family of modest means, Dewing had little formal education. In-

stead, he went to work for a lithographer while still a boy and soon became a remarkable draftsman. He further developed this skill under the physician-sculptor William Rimmer, who taught drawing and anatomy lessons in Boston's Studio Building in 1874–75 and lectured at the nearby Lowell Institute. Dewing had gained a reputation for his fine chalk portraits before he departed for Paris in July 1876. There he entered the Académie Julian, which offered students vir-

- 2 Nude, n.d. Oil on panel, 13³/₈ x 10¹/₂ in.
Akron Art Museum, Bequest of Edwin C.
Shaw



tually the same curriculum as the *École des Beaux Arts* without the stiff entrance requirements. Along with other aspiring young American artists, Dewing learned how to lay in an *ébauche* and to draw and paint from the live model, primarily under the direction of Gustave Boulanger (1824–1888) and Jules Joseph LeFèbvre (1834–1912), as well as other instructors who taught at the *École des Beaux Arts*. As one student remembered it, in planning a painting, the artist was to stress the ensemble, not the details.⁶ Dewing also frequented the private atelier of academician Léon Joseph Florentin

Bonnat (1834–1923), who taught several of Dewing's close friends.

When he returned to the United States in 1878, Dewing worked first in his native Boston and then in New York City, where he moved in October 1880. There he employed the techniques he had just learned in a portrait of his friend and pupil Frances Lyons Houston (fig. 1). The work is a costume piece featuring an elaborate ruff framing Houston's face, reminiscent of the sort of *tête d'expression* (character head) Dewing learned to paint at the Acadmie Julian.⁷ Autoradiographs of the painting reveal that Dewing



- 2a *Infrared reflectography reveals the flowing contours of the academic nude and the artist's uppercase signature, which he employed early in his career.*
- 2b *This autoradiograph, seventh in a series of nine, shows the unbroken stroke with which Dewing outlined the figure, as well as the agitated brush strokes with which he laid in the background.*

executed his *ébauche* following the time-honored academic practice.

Using a thin, diluted pigment, Dewing blocked in the background with a wide brush, which he brought down squarely to the outline of the ruff. He left the collar as a reserve area to be completed later, at this point merely indicating a few shadows. He then proceeded to lay in the lights and darks as a foundation for modeling the face (fig. 1a). A glance at the area just below Frances Houston's right eye, for example, shows some four or five unconnected patches of pigment. When Dewing applied brilliant white scumbling to the sitter's forehead, this bright area must have made the composition seem top-heavy. To correct this effect, the artist proceeded to elongate the opening of the ruff into a V, for, as the autoradiographs show, the ruff

was originally cropped at the neck. Dewing framed Frances Houston against a mottled background typical of an *ébauche*, usually "rubbed" in quickly with broad, transparent strokes that allowed the grain of the canvas to show through.⁸ In his finished work he elaborated on this effect by applying a brown glaze over his yellow pigment. Mottled backgrounds remained a consistent feature of Dewing's work throughout his career.

Infrared reflectography of Dewing's recently restored *Nude* (fig. 2), painted about the same time, uncovered beneath the painting's surface the flowing contours and melancholy *profil perdu* (lost profile) characteristic of an academic nude (fig. 2a). Autoradiography demonstrates that the artist traced his relaxed nude with a sure and unhesitating hand (fig. 2b), thereby confirming, through



3 Tobias and the Angel, 1886. Oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 40 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Edward D. Adams

3a (opposite) This autoradiograph, sixth in a series of eleven, shows Dewing's first version of the painting, in which the two figures communicate by look and gesture. It also reveals the trees Dewing placed behind the angel and later eliminated. (What appear here as grid lines are the edges of film, which must be pieced together to cover the surface of Dewing's larger works.)

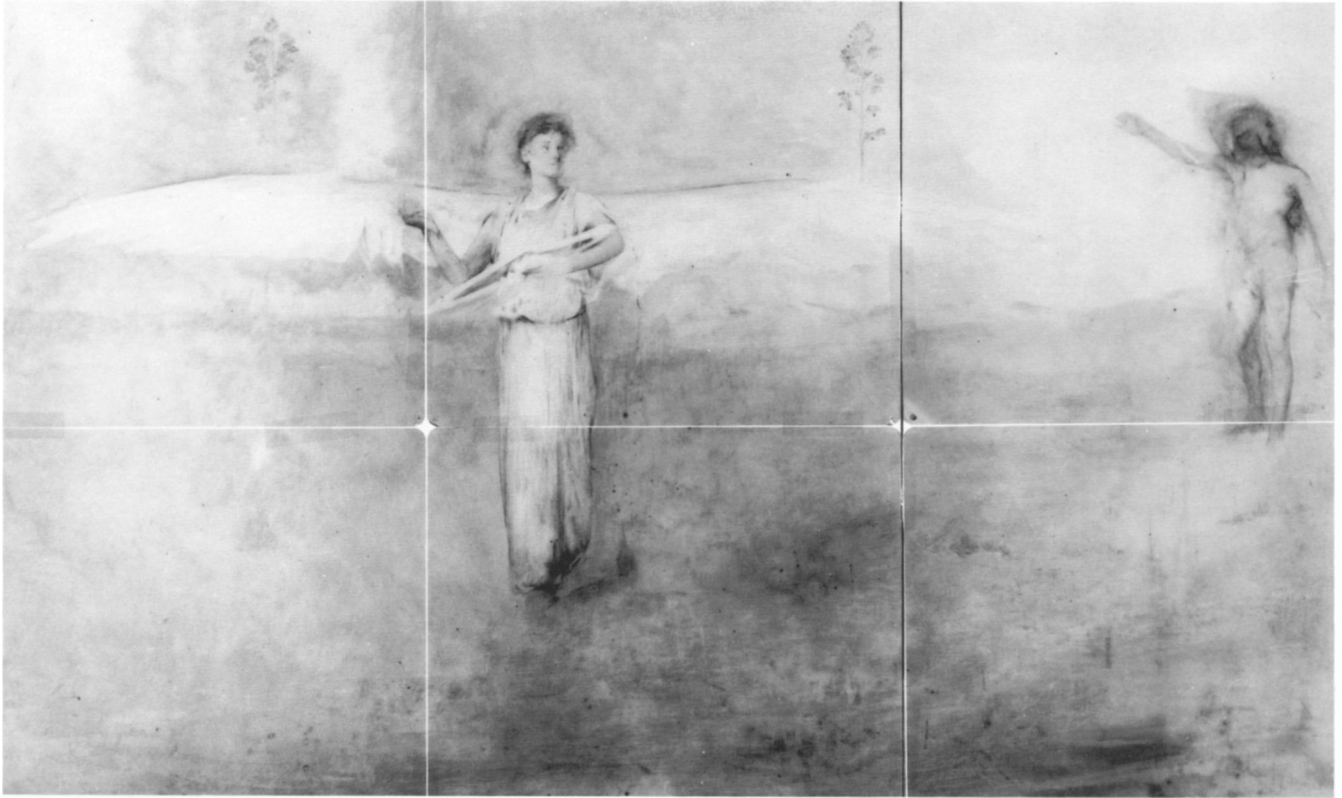
3b (opposite) This X-ray radiograph indicates the lead white strokes that Dewing eventually distributed throughout the sky, probably in an effort to balance the angel's white wings. The thinly painted wings were probably painted in zinc white, virtually transparent to X-rays. The small portion of the wing near the angel that does appear was most likely applied in a different pigment.

scientific analysis, Dewing's technical mastery and adherence to academic practice. Dewing himself explained, "The whole figure must be considered in everything you draw. If you think the nose is too short you may find that it is the elbow which is too long." Possibly using bone black, he drew directly on an ungrounded wood panel. Following the accepted academic method, he massed shadows and added highlights in a pattern of unjoined brushstrokes. To keep both portions of the painting in tonal balance, he probably worked the background as he painted the figure.⁹ The brushwork against which the nude is framed, more agitated than usual in such works, is possibly the result of over-painting, for the artist—and possibly others—altered the work at a later date.

Dewing's *Tobias and the Angel* also reflects his academic training, although he painted it at his

summer place in Cornish, New Hampshire, eight years after he had returned from Paris (fig. 3). Dewing's master, Gustave Boulanger, had won the Prix de Rome in 1849 for his rendition of *Tobias and the Angel*, the competition's *sujet du premier essai*, so Dewing was probably familiar with well-known interpretations of the theme. Yet his treatment was strikingly different from that of his predecessors. Whereas others had subordinated the angel Raphael in the composition, Dewing reversed this emphasis in an attempt to "get away from the beaten tracks," as one critic put it.¹⁰

Autoradiography and X-ray radiography reveal the alterations the artist made to the painting before he exhibited it in 1887.¹¹ He positioned the draped figure of the angel Raphael in the center of the composition and placed Tobias off to the far right (fig. 3a). In an apparent attempt to balance





4 The Spinnet, 1902. Oil on panel, 15½ x 20 in. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of John Gellatly

the angel's large wings, Dewing placed two trees on either side of him. Finding this treatment to be unsuccessful, he then lowered the horizon line and eliminated the trees. Just as he had found it necessary to balance one bright white area with another in his *Portrait of Frances L. Houston*, here, too, he saw the need to balance the angel's ponderous wings with thick white patches scattered throughout the sky (fig. 3b).

Of greater interest, however, is the change that Dewing made in the figures themselves. In the earlier version of the painting Tobias and Raphael interact, whereas in Dewing's final conception each is

withdrawn and introspective. Raphael's face, turned away from Tobias, looks heavenward with an expression of mystical rapture. Tobias, on the other hand, draws his arm over his head, enshrouding himself in his fishing net. The result is to evoke what one critic termed that "picturesque awkwardness which Dewing so well affects."¹²

Dewing at Mid-Career

Throughout the 1890s Dewing's signature works featured interiors with seated female figures or young women disposed in ethereal landscapes. Then, shortly after 1900, he began to employ a darker,

4a-b Antimony and mercury, associated with yellow and red pigments, were detected in autoradiograph 4a, top, ninth in a series of twelve, which gives excellent definition to the intricately patterned wall hanging behind the spinet. This autoradiograph also shows details of the cascading skirt. The framed mirror above the spinet is missing and must have been added toward the last. Autoradiographs 4a and 4b, the latter fourth in the series, both show how the artist delicately shaded in the sitter's spine and shoulder blades and used a thick impasto to model her back.



more Italianate palette on smooth, commercially prepared Winsor & Newton panels, conducive to precise, detailed paint application. During this period he depicted strongly illuminated subjects using brown, cream, and rust hues.

One such example is *The Spinet*, which Dewing produced in

Cornish, New Hampshire, using a fellow artist who lived nearby as the model for the seated figure (fig. 4). Autoradiographs of this panel painting illustrate the finesse with which Dewing drew the composition's preparatory oil sketch, rendering it deftly from start to finish. An exposure late in the au-

5 Alma, ca. 1895–1905. Oil on wood, 20 x 15⁵/₈ in. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of John Gellatly



toradiograph series defines the oriental arabesque of the tapestry, its asymmetrical pattern more clearly visible than in the painting itself (fig. 4a). This autoradiograph also shows details of the cascading skirt. As the framed mirror above the spinet is absent, it must have been added later. The autoradiographs in figures 4a and 4b also demonstrate how, through the use of different pigments, the artist exquisitely modeled the bone structure of the sitter's back.

Dewing's *Alma*, another product of his Italianate period, was also painted on the smooth surface of a prepared Winsor &

Newton panel (fig. 5). Like many artists at the time, Dewing seems to have discovered that the *ébauche* better expressed his artistic aims than did a more perfected work.¹³ He deliberately left it visible throughout the lower portion of his painting, where freely applied strokes around the torso, arm, and hand zigzag across each other (fig. 5a). The autoradiograph also reveals the freedom with which Dewing painted in the background. While it appears as a flat, dark field, in fact the artist used randomly angled strokes, which he brought up to his sitter with a wide brush. By contrast,



- 5a This autoradiograph, fourth in a series of eleven, illustrates the spontaneity with which Dewing laid in the lights and darks of his *ébauche*, which he later left visible in the garment as he finished the face. The blocking in of the neck and face is visible where the autoradiograph is prominently darkened by the presence of zinc, identified by X-ray fluorescence.
- 5b This detail shows the fine modeling of the face, where the brush strokes are barely perceptible because of the panel's smooth surface.

Dewing finished modeling the face with fine, parallel hatching strokes (fig. 5b). In the neck he stacked short, horizontal strokes to define the long chords of Alma's taut tendons. Apparently pleased with his juxtaposition of a highly finished head and an uncompleted torso, the artist signed the panel and sold it to his patron John Gellatly (1853–1931).

The finished appearance of Dewing's prizewinning work *The Necklace* (fig. 6) contrasts markedly with the freely painted *Alma*. In *The Necklace* Dewing set himself aesthetic challenges in the rendering of fabric and the use of palette. He painted complicated folds of diaphanous silk and brocade, while his likeness of Alma features casually draped, rough

wool. The earlier work is essentially brown in hue, *The Necklace* predominately green. With visual references to James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), Jan Vermeer (1632–1675), and Japanese prints, this work exemplifies the soft tonalism with which Dewing is most often associated. The diminutive panel was first shown at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Institute, where it was given a gold medal in 1908. A writer for the *New York Times* observed, "In a measure it is impressionistic [*sic*] . . . but it is at the same time profoundly studied." Noting this juxtaposition of freedom and precision in Dewing's work, critics periodically commented that Dewing's method of achieving this effect could not be analyzed. "How he accom-

- 6 The Necklace, ca. 1907. Oil on wood, 20 x 15¾ in. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of John Gellatly



- 6a As a tonalist Dewing used essentially the same pigment throughout the entire painting; this autoradiograph, fourth in a series of eleven, shows the overall darkening produced by zinc. The painting's predominant green tonality is due to the presence of chromium, identified by X-ray fluorescence. Although Dewing finished the figure's head and shoulders with fine stippling, he made very few changes in the skirt, where he allowed his ébauche to show on the painting's surface and play a positive role in the finished design.

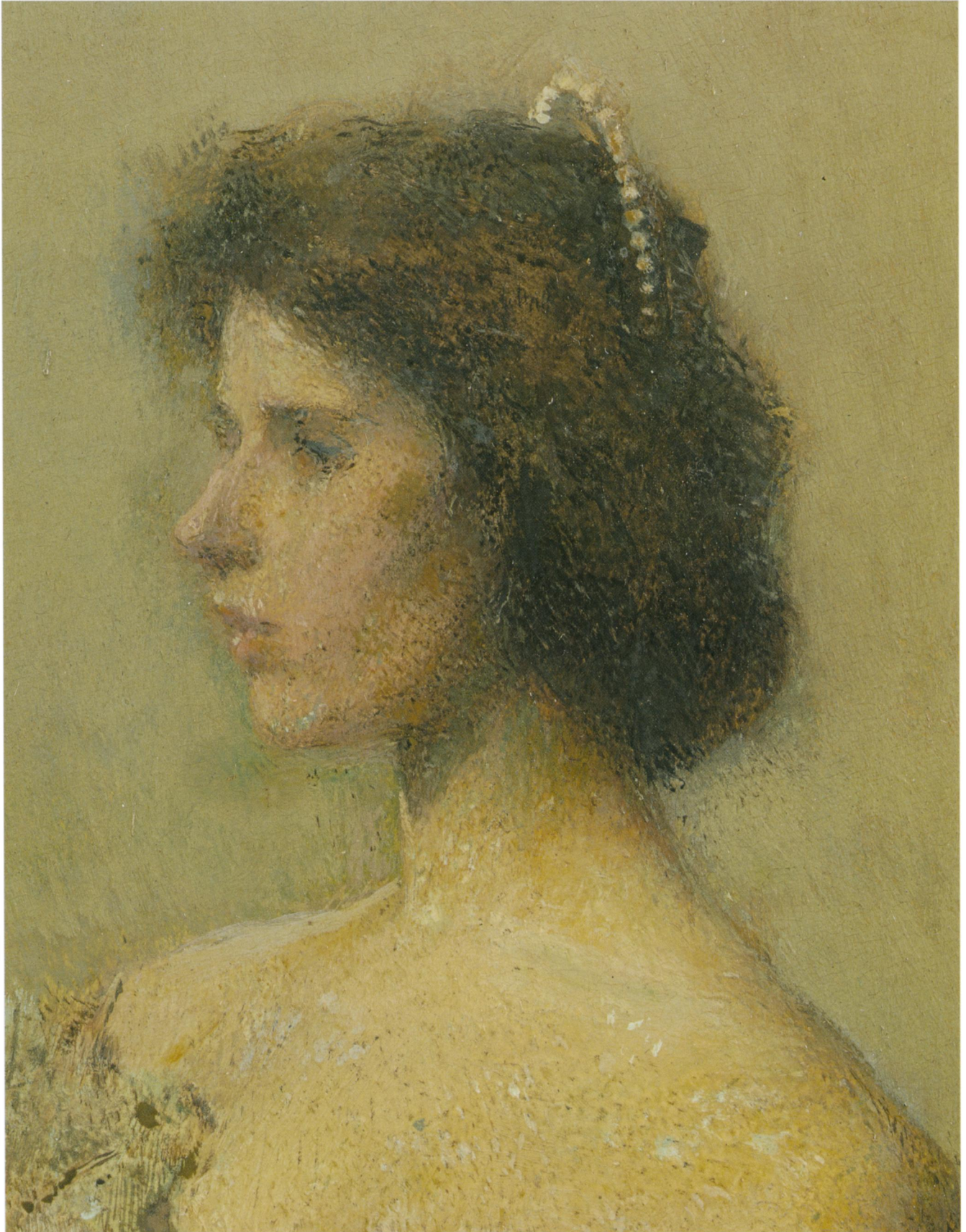


- 6b (opposite) This detail shows how Dewing scattered tiny strokes of multicolored pigment over the surface of his sitter's shoulders and throughout her face, thereby adding vibrancy to her flesh tones.

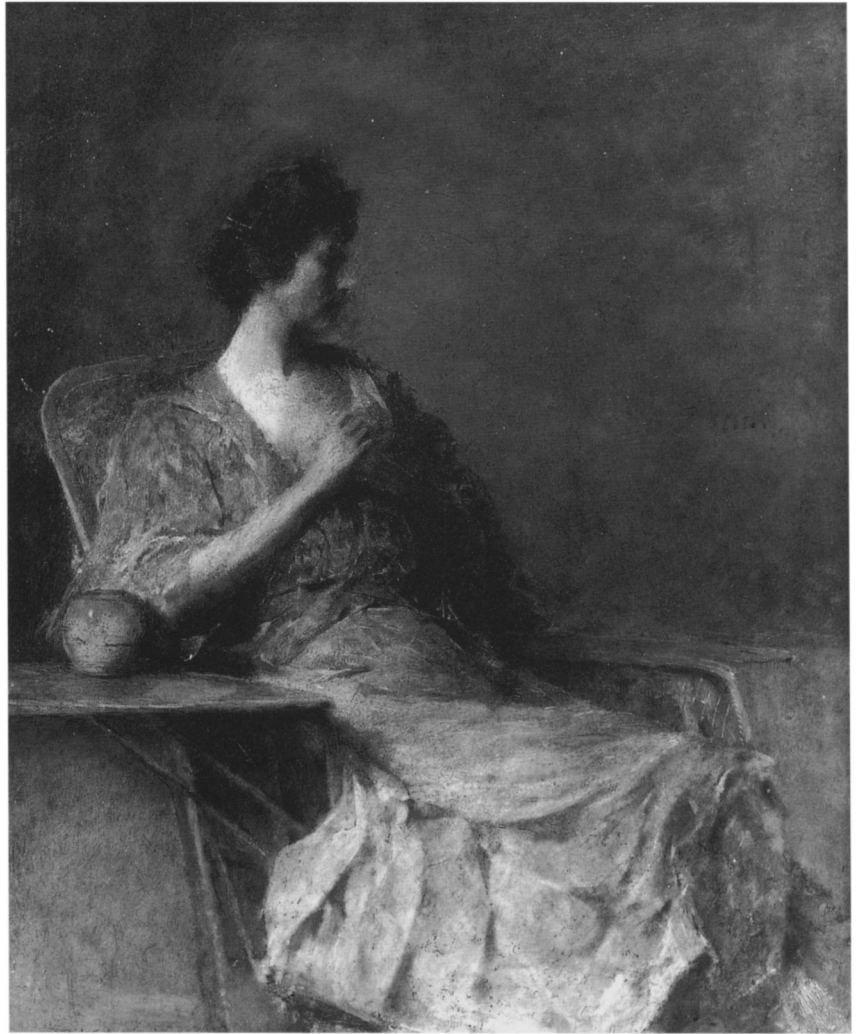
plishes his results is quite beyond the ken of the observer," one of them asserted.¹⁴

As a tonalist employing a narrow range of colors, Dewing placed great importance on first establishing the light and dark areas of his painting. In *The Necklace*, light flesh tones capture the eye, drawing it first to the head and shoulders and then down to the pale pattern that runs throughout the skirt. Dewing's method of laying in the lights and darks is illustrated in the autoradiograph, in which the artist's ébauche is clearly visible in the crisscrossed folds of the gauzy,

silk dress (fig. 6a). Dewing painted the underdress first, for the folds that cross the sitter's lap extend underneath the outer garment. After thinly sketching in long, diagonal shadows, Dewing, by way of contrast, rendered the pale stripes of the open coat in thickly applied pigments. Unlike his *Alma*, Dewing completed his figure's garment with delicate glazes and stippling. For the most part, however, he allowed his underpainting to show on the surface, particularly in the lower portions of the outer dress, where he left the white lead ground to function as the brightest highlights.



- 7 Lady Listening, ca. 1910. Oil on wood, 23 x 18⁷/₈ in. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Nelson C. White



The autoradiograph shows that Dewing blocked in the background around the sitter's head and shoulders with short, staccato brush strokes of dark blue-green pigment, now evident only along the edges of the panel. Scarcely visible in the composition, this underpainting nevertheless adds depth and resonance to the completed work. *The Necklace* reminded one critic of the shimmer "one gets in certain old potteries with hints of splendor in their blunted lustres."¹⁵

Although he allowed himself a measure of freedom in rendering his model's costume, Dewing laboriously used stippling—in contrast to the fine hatching strokes

he employed to model Alma's face—to depict her head and shoulders. One gallery-goer conjectured that by using these tiny, staccato strokes, Dewing achieved "depth and vibratory sensation in [the] flesh tint."¹⁶ These little dashes of the brush, which under the microscope appear as miniature crosshatching, form patchworks of cool, gray hues that in turn tone and soften the harsher orange and pink stippling under them (fig. 6b). A halo-shaped shadow, possibly inspired by Vermeer's noted halations, extends beyond the model's face. Although Dewing's application differs from Vermeer's, his use of stippling may also have been inspired by



7a This autoradiograph, third in a series of eleven, shows an earlier figure framed by an architectural feature at the far left.

7b This autoradiograph, sixth in the series, shows that Dewing painted over the first figure with sketchlike strokes. He subsequently painted a new figure placed similarly to the one seen today, roughly outlining her chair and painting a halo of pigment beyond the upper body. Later he scratched out the head and shoulders, repainting the figure but using portions of the earlier chair and skirt.

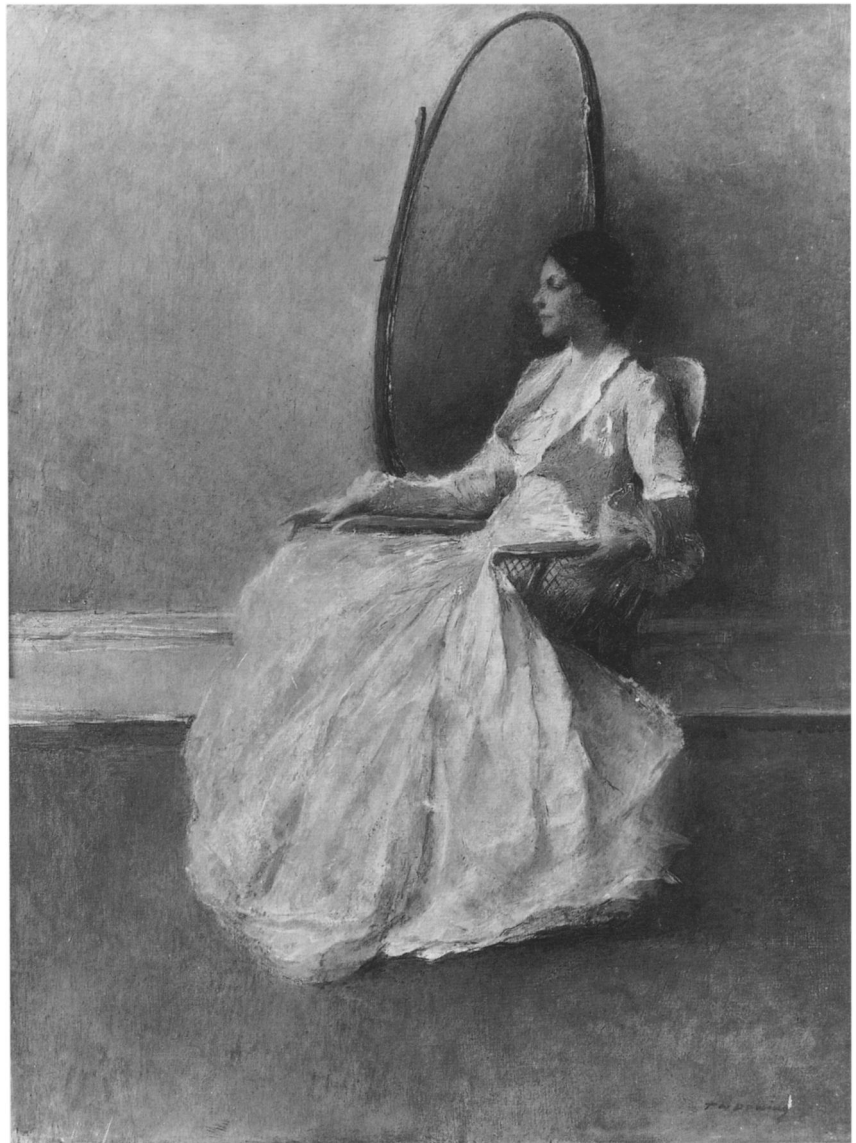
the Dutch painter, who applied tiny dots of impasto as a means of indicating light reflected from jewelry, furniture, and other burnished objects.¹⁷ And like Vermeer, Dewing completed the hands of his figure with great care and precision. Even though he laid them down briefly in his *ébauche*, as indicated by the autoradiograph, he later painted each finger with exquisite finesse, allowing the light and shadow to define each joint.

In February 1910, Dewing exhibited a number of key works at the Montross Gallery in New York. It was a time when he looked back at his achievements and forward to new accomplishments. One critic at the *New York Times* observed the artist's "growing tendency to greater freedom and more ample treatment of form," while a writer for the *Globe* noted

Dewing's increased "experimentations . . . and researches," particularly in the use of surface texture.¹⁸

Lady Listening, painted directly after the exhibition, testifies to Dewing's increasing experimentation (fig. 7). Autoradiographs show that it may have gone through two earlier versions before it was eventually shown in the *Third Exhibition of Oil Paintings by Contemporary American Artists* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., from December 1910 through January 1911. The first figure, for example, was originally framed by an architectural feature not visible in the surface painting (fig. 7a). An autoradiograph later in the series shows that Dewing painted over this feature and the first figure with what appear to be rapidly applied sketchlike strokes (fig. 7b). He then painted a new figure placed similarly to the one

8 Lady in White (No. 1), ca. 1916. Oil on canvas, 26¹/₄ x 20¹/₄ in. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of John Gellatly



seen today, using a quarter-inch brush to outline in an even and unfaltering stroke the arms and back of her chair. In this version Dewing painted a halo of pigment beyond the upper body. He must have considered his work complete for he signed it at the lower left, as revealed by infrared reflectographs.

Dewing then appears to have set the painting aside for some time. When he returned to it, he apparently attacked his composition with a vengeance, scratching out the model's head and portions

of her shoulders using a rapid, circular motion. He did not remove the image cleanly, but left small islands of residue pigment behind. Painting over the partially removed figure, he rendered the new head and shoulders seen today, casting the model's delicate profile into shadow. He raised the chair back and used portions of the earlier chair and skirt. The lower margin's prominent palette-knife work, as seen in the autoradiograph in figure 7b, however, does not relate to the folds in the dress and therefore may be associ-

- 9 *Lady in White (No. 2)*, ca. 1913. Oil on canvas, 22³/₈ x 21³/₈ in. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of John Gellatly

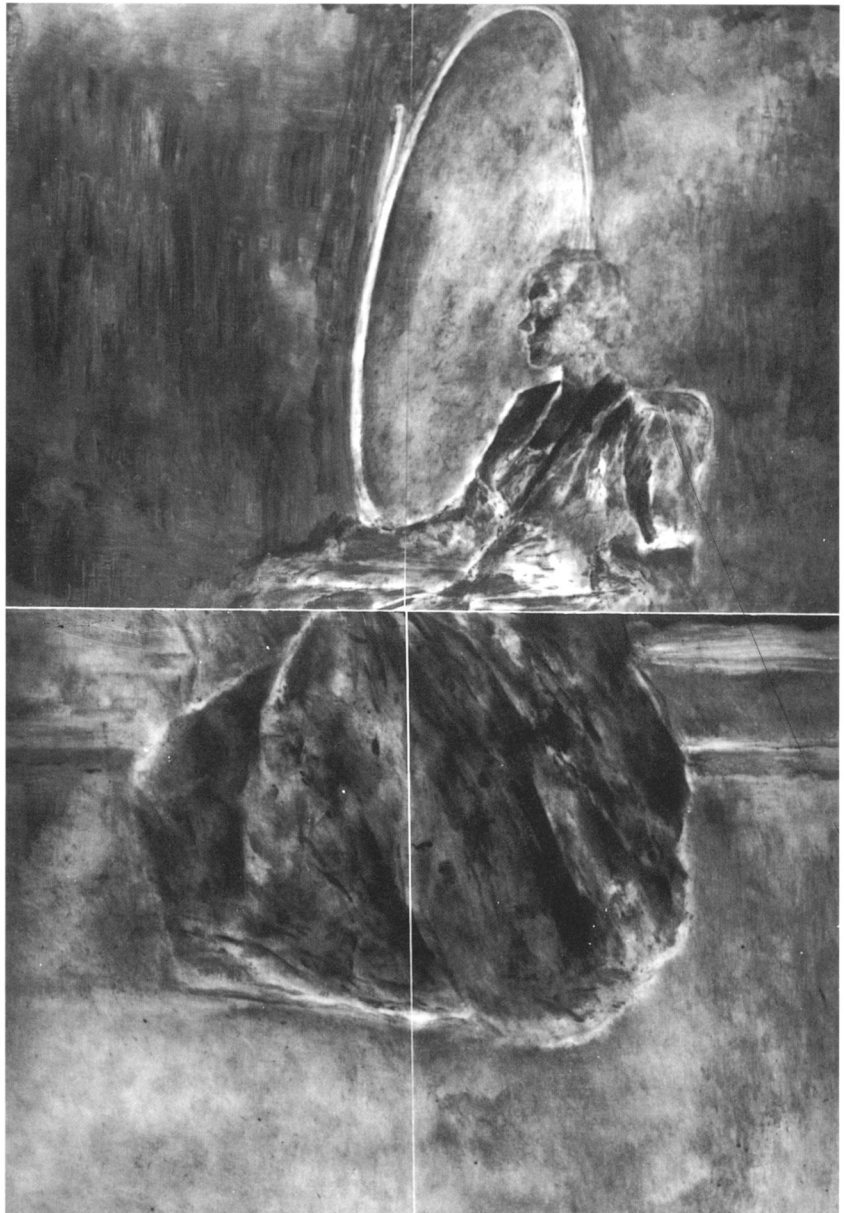


ated with the earlier figures. To cover the extensive scratch marks, Dewing extended the halo, or nimbus, well beyond the figure. Finally, he painted over the earlier signature and signed just below it this third and final version of the painting. When it was exhibited, *Lady Listening* was well received. No mention was made of the circular scratches even though they are faintly visible in the Corcoran's catalogue reproduction.

Later Works

Several years after completing *Lady Listening*, Dewing painted a series of profile figures which he sold to Gellatly in the mid teens. Two of these works were so much alike that Gellatly called them

Lady in White (No. 1) and *Lady in White (No. 2)*, although they probably were not painted in that order (figs. 8, 9). Although the paintings may look similar and employ a similar pigment, autoradiographs (figs. 8a, 9a) indicate that they were painted very differently. Dewing handled *Lady in White (No. 1)* boldly, unlike his relatively delicate treatment of *Lady in White (No. 2)*. He worked the background of *Lady in White (No. 1)* by laying on the pigment in vigorous vertical strokes, which he then smoothed and blurred with a light, horizontal, sweeping gesture. He applied shadows behind the mirror with a finer brush, using small, upright dashes. In *Lady in White (No. 2)* he appears to have sponged pigment



onto the right-hand side of the canvas to achieve a diaphanous effect and then added thicker diagonal passages at the left. Despite these differences, the mottled backgrounds of both works shimmer in a manner reminiscent of the oriental celadon ware that Dewing occasionally bought at auction for his patron Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919). Like his close friend and fellow artist Dwight W. Tryon (1849–1925), Dewing may have been inspired

by the deep glazes on these ceramics, as he seems to have emulated their variegated surfaces in the pigments of his own paintings. One critic was prompted to suggest that *Lady in White (No. 1)* was “almost a theorem” and to exclaim, “Dewing might have been a Chinese potter.”¹⁹ As evident in *Lady in White (No. 2)*, Dewing enjoyed depicting such pottery in his own paintings. In this case, autoradiographs show that the artist experimented with several versions

8a, 9a *Lady in White (No. 1), left, and Lady in White (No. 2) are quintessentially tonalist works in that one pigment or combination of pigments produce the overall darkening of the film, as seen in these autoradiographs, both fourth in series of eleven and twelve, respectively. Yet Dewing used his pigment differently in each canvas. Broadly applied swaths of paint create the effect of taffeta or heavy silk in Lady in White (No. 1), while long, disengaged strokes in Lady in White (No. 2) give the impression of cascading lace.*



of the vase before settling on its present contours.

In painting the garments in these portraits, Dewing varied his paint application to achieve different effects. He rendered the dress of *Lady in White (No. 1)* with wide swaths of pigment to suggest a crisp, heavy fabric. In *Lady in White (No. 2)* he applied long, thin disengaged strokes, along with shorter dabs of paint. These seemingly haphazard and sometimes oddly shaped brushmarks create the visual equivalent of lace cascading from his sitter's lap. So thinly applied is the paint that it seems wafted onto the canvas. In fact, the *ébauche* itself remains as the finished work in both paintings. Dewing freely

sketched in the dress of *Lady in White (No. 1)*, allowing the lead ground to show through as a white highlight in areas of the dress and around the periphery of the figure. Even more of this lead ground is visible through the paint strokes in *Lady in White (No. 2)*. Dewing may have then strengthened these bright white passages with the additional application of lead white on the surface of the garment.

In all his paintings, Dewing's handling of the head—the most challenging portion of the figure—is distinctive. His style changed over time and was highly influenced by whether he painted on panel or canvas.²⁰ This is amply demonstrated by an examination

9b This detail of *Lady in White* (No. 2) shows how Dewing used the canvas to break up his brush strokes.



of three works from one decade of his career. When he painted *Alma* circa 1905, Dewing modeled his sitter's handsome profile in the classic manner by placing fine hatching strokes along the side of her cheek. With the exception of a few small, broken strokes around her eyes, the overall effect is smooth and sculptural (see fig. 5b). Several years later, in executing *The Necklace*, Dewing altered his style considerably by applying a fine stippling over the face and shoulders of his model (see fig. 6b). By breaking up the flesh tones with tiny flecks of paint that radiate beyond some portions of the figure, Dewing provided a shimmering atmosphere around his subject. This handling was necessary given the smooth nature of the prepared panel, whereas in *Lady in White* (No. 2) the support itself contributes to Dewing's application of paint (fig. 9b).

Achieving an effect similar to that in *The Necklace*, Dewing used the canvas to break up his paint strokes, catching the nubs of the canvas weave as he dotted in pigment with the tip of his brush. In some areas such as the throat and under the cheekbone, he left the canvas's primer uncovered. Because this exposed area is darker than the surface paint, it functions as a shadow, as does the primed canvas around the sitter's head, creating an atmospheric aura around her.

In *Lady with a Rose*, this type of delicate work is covered by heavy veils of darkened pigment that obscure the former beauty of the painting (fig. 10). Sold by the artist to a private collector in 1924, the canvas had become progressively darker over time, particularly around the sitter's head, probably the result of reworking by the artist. The initial *ébauche*, how-



10 Lady with a Rose, ca. 1915–24. Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Nelson C. White

10a This autoradiograph, seventh in a series of ten, reveals the initial *ébauche*.

ever, as revealed by autoradiography, indicates that some forty years after he had studied in Paris at the Académie Julian, Dewing still followed the academic method he had learned in his youth (fig. 10a). The artist delicately sketched in his figure, thinly rubbing in the folds of her garment. He rendered her form with the utmost delicacy, applying the paint so thinly that the canvas shows through. He then applied thick vertical and horizontal palette-knife work, bringing the background up to and around the figure. The autoradiograph indicates that the figure originally sat with her hands folded, her youthful face in profile and her body turned toward the viewer. Apparently seeking a more dynamic and sophisticated image, Dewing later reworked the canvas, shifting his sitter's pose away from the viewer, raising her arm, and giving her aquiline features. He

also altered her coiffure, dress, and the chair on which she sits.

Thomas Dewing's paintings fell out of fashion under the onslaught of modern art after the Armory Show of 1913. By the early 1920s audiences expected social commentary or bright colors and abstraction in works of art rather than uniform subjects distinguished only by highly refined subtleties. Even as recently as 1980 a prominent scholar commented, "Once the dominant subject and form of [Dewing's] art was determined, about 1890, little change or development seems discernable."²¹ Autoradiography and X-ray radiography reveal, however, that the form of Dewing's work embraced considerable variety. Not one to work routinely, Dewing applied paint differently from one picture to another, blending his individual style with a repertory of

images drawn from sources as diverse as Vermeer, Whistler, and the Old Masters.²² Throughout his career he recapitulated his artistic sources, reaching out to them as if to make contact with great works from the past. Sometimes he rendered his own version of traditional subjects, as he did in *Tobias and the Angel*. On other occasions, responding to new techniques and influences, he sought to update an earlier work. *Lady in White (No. 1)* and *Lady in White (No. 2)*, for example, look deceptively similar on the surface but are very different underneath, and they illustrate Dewing's versatility and control as an artist. Searching for fresh and new ways of creating his effects, Dewing employed different means of achieving what appear to be the same ends. This

sense of freedom also applied to his palette, for he was not bound by certain favored pigments. In reworking passages, he often used entirely different components, matching them by color rather than pigment.

Yet, despite this relative freedom in his work habits and his obvious love of experimentation, Dewing was a traditionalist both technically and stylistically. Adhering to the lessons of the Académie Julian throughout his career, he employed the classic *ébauche* to block in his paintings. As his works became looser and more thinly rendered, Dewing still maintained this fundamental mode of working, ultimately allowing the *ébauche* itself to be the finished painting.

Notes

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1 Other than autoradiography, techniques used included X-ray radiography, examination with ultraviolet light, infrared reflectography, X-ray fluorescence, cross-section analysis using the scanning electron microscope (SEM), and microscopic examination of the paintings. We determined that infrared reflectography did not reveal the underdrawings in Dewing's paintings.

Interest in applying autoradiography to Dewing's works first arose in 1975, when Brookhaven National Laboratory autographraphed *Tobias and the*

Angel, revealing that dramatic changes had occurred during execution.

2 [Charles H. Caffin], untitled clipping, [New York] *Sun*, 1 March 1907, scrapbook of exhibition reviews, Archives of the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. (hereafter cited as Freer scrapbook), p. 25, referred to Dewing's "prodigies of polished paint"; "Art and Artists," clipping, [New York] *Globe*, 5 January 1906, Freer scrapbook, p. 20, admired the artist as a colorist "who sweeps on his pigment . . . with a wizard's brush"; Ezra Tharp, "T. W. Dewing," *Art and Progress* 5 (March 1914): 155-61, claimed the artist could hide his technique, making his work appear as though it had been done "with the magic hand of chance." See also "The Ten Bolters," *New York Times*, 19 March 1901, p. 9, which envisions a "vista of pencil drawing and hours of absorbing labor" in Dewing's work.

3 For this quotation and a discussion of the *ébauche*, see Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1971), p. 88. Boime, p. 200, n. 12, indicates that there were two kinds of

- ébauches: one rubbed in thinly, the other more opaque in application.
- 4 Yu-tarng Cheng et al., "Modification of the National Bureau of Standards Research Reactor for Neutron-Induced Autoradiography of Paintings," in *Application of Science in Examination of Works of Art* (Boston: Research Laboratory, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1985), pp. 182–89; see table 1 for a typical series of films. See also Jacqueline S. Olin et al., "An Examination of Neutron Autoradiography and Gamma Spectroscopy for the Study of Paintings," *Materials Issues in Art and Archaeology* 123 (1988): 33–38.
 - 5 Undated, handwritten fragment by Dewing's unidentified studio mate, Elizabeth Dewing Kaup Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Tharp, "Dewing," pp. 160–61.
 - 6 Arthur Wesley Dow, diary, 5 November 1884, Archives of American Art, roll 1079, frame 691. See also the entry for 20 December 1884, frame 679, where Dow reported that LeFèbvre said to "make my shadows follow the outline." See also DeWitt McClellan Lockman's interview of Childe Hassam (1859–1935), Archives of American Art, roll 503, frame 330, for Hassam's account of the approach to painting taught at the Académie Julian.
 - 7 Philippe Grunchev, *The Grand Prix de Rome: Paintings from the École des Beaux-Arts, 1797–1863* (Washington, D.C.: International Exhibitions Foundation, 1984–85), p. 25.
 - 8 We are indebted to Albert Boime for proposing this concept in a discussion during August 1988. See also Boime, *Academy and French Painting*, pp. 40–41. It is not known when Dewing changed the ruff or why the paint wrinkled in this area.
 - 9 Dewing, quoted in Tharp, "Dewing," p. 159; Leni Potoff, "Conservation Treatment Report" (Intermuseum Conservation Laboratory, Oberlin, Ohio, 17 September 1981), unpaginated. Boime, *Academy and French Painting*, p. 40, elaborates: "The student began painting by massing in the shadows with the diluted earth colour to achieve the general effect. . . . The pupil was advised to begin immediately indicating the 'tint or value of the background.' The artist thus painted background and figure simultaneously while executing the ébauche."
 - 10 "Society of American Artists' Exhibition," *Art Age* 5 (June 1887): 68. Dewing called the painting *Tobit and the Angel* in his letter to Charles Lang Freer, [1899], no. 149, Archives of the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. It was recently retitled by Doreen Bolger Burke in *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980), 3:120–22, as it was Tobias who followed the angel, not his father, Tobit. Dewing may have made no distinction between the two names.
 - 11 "The Society of American Artists," *Art Amateur* 17 (June 1887): 5, indicates that the changes had occurred by the time Dewing exhibited *Tobias and the Angel*.
 - 12 Ibid.
 - 13 Boime, *Academy and French Painting*, p. 157.
 - 14 "Native Artists Lead in Carnegie Exhibit," clipping, *New York Times*, 3 May 1908, p. 8, Freer scrapbook, p. 27; Arthur Hoeber, "The Ten Americans," *International Studio* 35 (July 1908): xxiv.
 - 15 Clipping, *New York Times*, 19 April 1908, Freer scrapbook, p. 27.
 - 16 "M's New Gallery," clipping, unidentified newspaper, 3 February 1910, Freer scrapbook, p. 35.
 - 17 See Judith Elizabeth Lyczko, "Thomas Wilmer Dewing's Sources: Women in Interiors," *Arts Magazine* 54 (November 1979): 152–53. Hofstede de Groot's catalogue raisonné of Vermeer's oeuvre was published in 1905; Dewing's patron Charles Lang Freer sent him the three-volume work in installments over the next two years, so Dewing was undoubtedly familiar with reproductions of Vermeer's *Lady with a Pearl Necklace* (ca. 1665, Staatliche Museen Berlin Dahlem).
 - 18 "Rare Paintings in New Galleries," *New York Times*, 20 February 1910, p. 6, also included the following observation: "The refinement of the craftsmanship is so notable that the intense significance of his work, the classic quality persisting through the nervous elegance of modern technique, frequently is overlooked." "Art and Artists," clipping, [New York] *Globe*, 4 February 1909, Freer scrapbook, p. 30, also noted that "Mr. Dewing has of recent years paid great attention to surfaces and in some mysterious way of manipulating his pigment has secured astonishing textures."
 - 19 "Canvases of Dewing One of Exhibits Now Attracting Attention," clipping, *Pittsburgh Post*, 24 February 1924, scrapbook, Carnegie Museum of Art Library, Pittsburgh, Pa. On Tryon, see Henry C. White, *The Life and Art of Dwight William Tryon* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1930), pp. 171–72.
 - 20 Dewing worked extensively on prepared Winsor & Newton panels during the early part of his career. He continued to use a solid support often from 1900 to 1910, but according to Nelson C. White, whose father bought *Lady with a Rose*, Dewing became increasingly worried about the way the panels cracked. Consequently, throughout the later years of his career, he turned to canvas as a secure support. Nelson C. White, interview with author, 31 January 1989.
 - 21 William H. Gerdts, *American Impressionism* (Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, 1980), p. 23. In his own day Dewing received abundant praise for his exquisite use of color and the elegance of his subjects. Even so, otherwise admiring writers often mentioned "characteristic themes," which they sometimes found repetitive. See, for example, J.N.L., "The Ten Americans," *Boston Evening Transcript*, 18 March 1913, p. 11, regarding the monotony and repetitiveness of his "stippled stain of faded colors"; and "Art Notes," [New York] *Evening Post*, 20 March 1915, p. 8, discussing "the limitations the artist set for himself long ago."
 - 22 Lyczko, "Dewing's Sources," pp. 152–57.