

# ART, GENTILITY, AND FAMILY MEMORY: WILLBUR REASER'S PAINTINGS FOR CARROLLCROFT\*

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## Abstract

In 1905, American artist Willbur Reaser (1860–1942) came to Stanstead to paint a cycle of portraits of the Colby family. An affinity quickly grew between the artist and the two generations of Colbys that inhabited Carrollcroft. Over the course of the next two decades, Reaser returned to Stanstead numerous times and made at least seventeen paintings that capture the particular sensibility and culture of the Colby family at an important moment in their collective lives. Using archival material from the Colby family archives, this paper examines the role and creation of art in a domestic context and the way paintings could express ideals of gentility and the cultivation of family memory.

## Résumé

*En 1905, l'artiste états-unien Willbur Reaser (1860–1942) se rend à Stanstead afin de créer une série de portraits des membres de la famille Colby. Une grande amitié se développe rapidement entre l'artiste et les deux générations de la famille Colby qui habitaient le domaine Carrollcroft. Au cours des deux prochaines décennies, Reaser reviendra à de nombreuses reprises à Carrollcroft et réalisera au moins dix-sept œuvres d'art qui illustrent bien la culture et la sensibilité particulières de la famille Colby lors d'une période charnière de leur histoire familiale. Ayant recours aux archives de la famille Colby, l'auteur de cet article se propose d'étudier le rôle de l'art et de sa création dans un contexte domestique, ainsi que la façon dont des tableaux peuvent effectivement exprimer les idéaux de la haute bourgeoisie et contribuer à la création d'un patrimoine familial.*

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Willbur Reaser's paintings for the Colby family constitute a distinctive and under-explored cultural resource. The seventeen paintings at Carrollcroft (and one in a private collection) include portraits, landscapes, figures-in-landscape, and interior genre scenes.

Reaser's association with the family—Charles Carroll (1827–1907), Hattie (1838–1932), and their four adult children, Abby (1859–1943), Jessie (1861–1958), Charles William (1867–1955), and John (1873–1926)—began in 1905 when he came to Stanstead, Québec for the summer. Reaser's son, Robert, noted that it was Jessie Colby—unmarried and already serving as lady of the house to her then aging parents—who “by her orders for portraits and landscapes, supported the Reasers through many a long and pleasant summer.”<sup>1</sup> Between 1905 and 1921 the artist, his wife and their family would sojourn in Stanstead and later at summer camps along nearby Lake Memphremagog, frequently joining the Colbys in their perpetual round of social activities. A cycle of formal portraits (Plates 1–4) constituted the first set of commissions. As the years went on and Reaser's sympathy with the family increased, he created works of remarkable intimacy that reflected the particular atmosphere of the Colby household and the sensibility of its inhabitants. Together with rich archival material, including Jessie Colby's 1905 diary, correspondence, and photographs, Reaser's paintings for Carrollcroft offer a remarkable example of the relationship between art and life in a domestic context in the Edwardian era.

A multi-generational home built around the middle of the nineteenth century, Carrollcroft had become by 1905 a kind of “micro-culture,” a space dynamically connected to the world around it through social, religious, and political affiliations, and yet uniquely its own.<sup>2</sup> The Colbys imbued Carrollcroft with cultural associations and the material of family memory in a way that was characteristic of people of means in the nineteenth century. As Peter Fritzsche has suggested, Romanticism had changed ideas about history and the expanding category of appropriate historical subjects, thus allowing individuals to think about their own lives in historical terms. In the nineteenth century, the home became a suitable place in which to imagine personal and family histories unfolding: “Henceforth families would not only recognize themselves as cultural agents and cultivate particular cultural identities, but value the stories and souvenirs of their lives. The historicization [*sic*] of private life went hand-in-hand with the celebration of home and the cultivation of domesticity.”<sup>3</sup> Art could play a part in fashioning this reality.

Reaser's paintings for the Colby family allow us to consider the role of art in reflecting back an ideal image of family, home, and lineage. Through a close reading of archival material in relation to the paintings and attention to the artistic styles and pictorial conventions Reaser employed, this essay seeks to reconstruct the way art voiced one family's aspirations for a cultural identity of shared gentility and a unique sense of historical memory. The formal portraits, examples of that most bourgeois of nineteenth-century art forms, represent the Colbys' sense of status and lineage. Reaser's landscapes and figures-in-landscape embody the picturesque as a mark of distinction and leisure. Two paintings of interior genre scenes memorialize an ideal of life at Carrollcroft by rendering daily reality into art. Before discussing Reaser's career as an artist, I will examine the "micro-culture" Carrollcroft had become when the artist arrived in Stanstead in 1905.

In her study of the Colbys' religious, family, and community life, Marguerite van Die has noted a curious echo between Carrollcroft's particular culture at the end of the nineteenth century and the style of gentility of late-eighteenth century England.<sup>4</sup> Like other members of Stanstead's wealthy elite, the Colbys would have understood themselves not in stratified terms of 'middle-' or 'upper-middle class' but as members of 'polite society,' a category which had taken shape in Britain in the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> They were 'genteel,' 'well-bred,' 'polished,' and 'respectable'. Like British polite society they were well-off but not extravagantly wealthy, capable of liberality but not magnificent expenditure. They engaged in honorable professions and cultivated accomplishments in their leisure time. Theirs was not the cosmopolitan world of diversions and amusements, but the life of the neighbourhood, the Church, and the rituals of social life that tied private and civic realms into one self-reflective social order. They decorated their home to create an air of settled respectability with a few well-chosen embellishments, but not in a way that would awe or alienate the daily round of social visitors with whom they composed polite society. Examining the lives of the Colbys in the period between 1890 and 1920, and those of their friends and neighbours, suggests that Stanstead was something of a genteel town. The mid-nineteenth century history of sweeping religious revival gave way to refined middle-class life in Stanstead which resembled closely that of such New England towns as Amherst, Northampton, and Williamstown, Massachusetts. As Canada became increasingly Anglophile during the final years of British Imperial ascendancy, Stanstead, not surprisingly, came to

resemble in many respects the well-to-do provincial towns scattered throughout the English countryside. As Van Die has shown, the two principal generations of Colbys that inhabited Carrollcroft exemplified well this evolution in their politics, religion, and cultural sensibility.

While life for the Colbys was determined by local religious, economic, familial, and social concerns, the family's cultural outlook was shaped in large part by British Romanticism's long afterlife, much like refined middle-class Victorian culture elsewhere. In the context of the sentimental domestic culture of the 1840s and 1850s, post-Romanticism can be seen most significantly in Carrollcroft itself, an architectural expression of the lasting vogue for the *picturesque*.

As is well known, Carrollcroft was based on a design from Andrew Jackson Downing's seminal 1842 *Cottages Residences*. A close variant of the "cottage-villa in the Bracketted mode," it was the most Italianate of designs amongst the many neo-Gothic homes in *Cottage Residences*.<sup>6</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing (1815–1852) profoundly shaped North American life during the second half of the nineteenth century through his many books on landscape and Gothic revival and neo-Renaissance 'villa' architecture. In his designs for houses and accompanying landscape programs, Downing repackaged a Romantic-style vision of the English countryside for a North American audience and offered a concept of domestic architecture and landscape that subsumed both natural and built environments into a single aesthetic ideal. Carrollcroft is a remarkably intact surviving example of a Downing villa. The house was designed to be surrounded on three sides by a picturesque 'aesthetic landscape' of cultivated wildness with the back corner of the property given over to the 'domestic landscape' of a carriage house and what was once a kitchen garden. In the rear, the house gave onto an expanse of field called "the croft," bounded on each side by lines of trees that framed a vista of the rolling hills and mountains bordering Lake Memphremagog to the west. While the croft served a practical function in supplying hay for the carriage horses, it gave the landscape an evocative pastoral quality. Downing's landscape program for the cottage-villa in the "bracketted mode" called for a lot with a vista in the rear. Two surviving photographs from the late 1890s in the manner of the eighteenth-century "conversation piece" (Figure 1) show members of the Colby family outdoors engaged in genteel pursuits: reading, arranging flowers, and drinking tea.<sup>7</sup> Furniture and rugs have been moved out

of doors as if the whole world was a kind of expansive parlour. In both cases, the subjects are facing towards the west, admiring the view. In these photographs, the Colbys show themselves willing to recreate for the camera what must have been the makings of daily reality, and thus to record, if even in idealized fashion, the picturesque dimension of life at Carrollcroft that was literally prescribed by the home's original design.



Fig. 1. Unknown Photographer,  
Hattie and Charles Carroll Colby at Carrollcroft,  
ca. 1890, Colby-Curtis Museum

The picturesque was a cultural movement of deep and lasting significance that, I suggest, had a profound impact on the Colby family's cultural identity. Originating in Britain in the late eighteenth century as part of the Romantic movement, what came to be called the picturesque was first expressed in landscape design for country houses that transformed the countryside into an ideal found in landscape painting. Theorized as a third aesthetic category in relationship to the 'beautiful' and 'sublime' landscape, it became a literary movement and a worldview for the emerging middle-class: choosing to see the world through an aesthetic lens adhering to the picturesque signaled leisure.<sup>8</sup> The cultivation of the picturesque in North America in the mid-nineteenth century was a mark of distinction for a newly affluent middle class and an elevating allusion to European culture. Soon the term broadened to include any number of cultural expressions. Life, in addition to landscape, could be 'picturesque'. As such, the picturesque came to be an expression of Victorian 'moral culture'. In Downing's *Architecture of Country Houses* published first in 1850, the villa is defined as a fitting place for moral development:

Amid the serenity and peace of sylvan scenes, surrounded by the perennial freshness of nature, enriched without and within by objects of universal beauty and interest—objects that touch the heart and awaken the understanding—it is in such houses that we should look for the happiest social and moral development of our people.<sup>9</sup>

Such a house was to be the proper setting for “beauty, taste, and moral culture.”<sup>10</sup> In a further passage, Downing lists characteristic architectural details and interior appointments, such as “a library or cabinet sacred to books” that form an ordered plan “indicative of the inner domestic life.” Here is where the “most cultivated families” would seek their rightful “moral and intellectual nature.” The Downing villa that Carrollcroft so perfectly exemplifies was “pre-coded” as a place where approved cultural pursuits and leisurely activities were to be understood as morally beneficial, not only for the inhabitants but also for society at large. The “domesticated romanticism” of the picturesque in architecture, landscape, and lived experience was the sign of moral standing. If Carrollcroft announced this ideal by its very design, the reality of life, as the Colby family was to learn, could often be quite different.

Once the home was complete in 1859, Charles Carroll Colby and his wife moved in, along with his brother William Colby (1833–1884) and his wife, Melvina (1832–1899), and their aging parents, Moses French Colby (1795–1863) and his wife, Lemira (1806–1889). Despite the commodious nature of the new house, life for the Colbys was not that different from many of their less well-housed neighbors. There were difficult financial times and stringent economies. William’s alcoholism was a constant strain on domestic felicity, and Charles was frequently absent in search of business opportunities. After a decade in the house, Charles Colby’s business dealings and financial speculation led to bankruptcy. In 1872 the house was sold, its entire contents auctioned by bailiffs for a paltry sum, and the eight hundred acre farm carefully amassed by Moses French Colby liquidated.<sup>11</sup> With the family living next door in a smaller frame house, Colby began a parliamentary career that would last until 1891. He supplemented his modest government salary with scattered but increasingly successful business dealings and in 1887 the family repurchased the home; it was at this time that it was named Carrollcroft. Shortly after retiring from politics, Colby turned his attention fully to business affairs. From 1891 to 1893, Charles and Hattie accompanied by Jessie lived in London where Colby secured the rights to market the Empire Typewriter in Britain, the Dominions, and Europe, one of the very first truly successful mass-market typewriters. Once returned to Stanstead, Colby ran the prosperous Imperial Writing Machine Co., with headquarters in London and branches in Brussels and Frankfurt, from his library at Carrollcroft with Jessie acting as secretary. He amassed a modest fortune which he used to make further investments in a dizzying array

of newfangled Edwardian inventions.<sup>12</sup> A new liberality pervaded the family's spending. Increased opportunities for travel and leisure throughout the 1890s made Carrollcroft the repository for decorative objects, furniture, and works of art purchased abroad. Despite this new level of comfort, the household's dissolution in 1872 must have been a persistent memory and may have made family members all the more aware of the home's potential to commemorate and celebrate family legacy.

Jessie Colby's 1905 diary captures a picture of the charming life at Carrollcroft in these years, its endless round of neighborhood socializing and religious and philanthropic pursuits. The first decade of the century can be seen as a culmination in the very refinement and respectability to which the Colbys had always aspired, but which they had not actually realized until the late-1890s. It was as if the family was finally able to live up to the lifestyle that had been announced decades before by the construction of the imposing, picturesque cottage-villa.

By 1905 Carrollcroft may already have been considered the embodiment of an earlier era. Though Charles Carroll Colby's latter-day business interests were those of the speedy Edwardian period, the life of the home encapsulated the sentimental domestic culture of mid-Victorian society in which Charles and Hattie Colby had come of age. Reaser's background, artistic inclinations, and personal disposition were well suited to perceive and meet the particular needs of the Colbys for art that reflected their family's particular identity and refined cultural aspirations.

### **Willbur Reaser and the Late-Victorian Art World**

Willbur Reaser (1860–1942) was a well-known landscape painter and portraitist in Gilded Age New York and Washington when he came to Stanstead for the first time.<sup>13</sup> Born in Ohio but raised in Fort Dodge, Iowa, the artist maintained close ties to the mid-western state throughout his life and was an important figure there in artistic circles.<sup>14</sup> In 1880, when his family relocated to Oakland, California, Reaser enrolled at the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art in San Francisco and like many artists of the period found work as an illustrator.<sup>15</sup> He worked as a "black and white artist" at the *San Francisco Examiner* and contributed to such California periodicals as *Overland Monthly*.<sup>16</sup> By 1888 he was contributing illustrations to accompany Seventh Day Adventist publications, his family having had a long association with the denomination.<sup>17</sup> In that year, the Adventist Pacific Press, based in Oakland, sent Reaser—now married



to Cora Conlee of Fort Dodge—to Europe and furnished him with a stipend of \$40 a month to look for artists to illustrate Pacific Press publications and, presumably, to gain further training to create illustrations himself.<sup>18</sup> He and his wife settled in Paris where they would remain for seven years. The artist joined the flood of American painters in the French capital, enrolling in the Académie Julian, and later at the Delecluse and Colarossi academies.<sup>19</sup> He showed three times at the Paris *Salon* between 1890 and 1893.<sup>20</sup> One summer was spent in Auvers-sur-Oise where the Reasers rented the studio of the famous Barbizon painter Charles-François Daubigny.<sup>21</sup> Another summer was spent in the village of Barbizon itself.

In 1892, the Reasers spent their first of many summers in Holland. Over the next several years, Reaser became a fixture of the “art village” of Rijsoord, a small town near Dordrecht that had been colonized by American artists based in Paris who fled the summer heat and sought out picturesque material in the Dutch countryside.<sup>22</sup> Reaser was profoundly influenced by the Hague School and many of his paintings are so close to the models he admired that they can be confused with examples by Dutch artists. Reaser’s painting of an elderly Dutch woman (Plate 5) knitting by a window is typical of the vogue for such interior genre scenes amongst both Dutch and American artists.

Reaser’s experience in Holland and emulation of the Hague School can be seen against the backdrop of the so-called “Dutch mania.” In the 1880s and 1890s an American vogue for all things Dutch created a demand for Dutch art (both old masters and the modern Hague School), and the emergence of “Dutch Revival” architecture.<sup>23</sup> Holland—still possessed of its primitive, charming village life, remnants of its Puritan past, and pristine landscape—was invoked to contrast the evils of modern America and to act as a picturesque surrogate for America’s lost Puritan heritage.

“Willbur Reaser of California,” the feature of an 1892 travel sketch by the writer and moral reformer, Isabel C. Barrows, highlights many of the themes of “Dutch mania,” including the allure of picturesque landscape.<sup>24</sup> Travelers and artists alike would “watch the sun sink in grandeur in golden clouds, and the purple twilight steal down through the willows and clothe all the land in royal colors.” The countryside possessed primal qualities in the form of biblical associations: the “gentle wind” is the same as that which “Moses heard [...] in the papyrus rushes of the Nile.” There is an allusion to American Independence: one of the village houses, the author noted, bore the coincidental date of 1776. Barrows mixed



aesthetic and sanitary rhetoric as she contrasted urban America to the Dutch countryside: "It is not strange that the fascination of such a place is attractive [to Reaser] after the fever and hurry of San Francisco life—an air that to artists is pestilential." Reaser lingered, Barrows writes, "loth [*sic*] to tear himself away from scenes which last April furnished scores of charming studies to his facile and industrious brush. He catches the spirit of the place with wonderful success, and his sympathy with the life of the people is delightfully reproduced in his peasant sketches." For Barrows the landscape and its inhabitants exuded a healthy quality that could be communicated through paintings: "Happy those who can see it all and transfer to canvas the delights of the bit of Holland for the benefit of those who cannot come hither!" Landscape in the picturesque tradition could be morally beneficial, an antidote to the corruption of modern urban life, an element of taste that reflected an ideal natural world, aestheticized and therefore sanitized by an accepted canon of beauty.

After returning from Europe to California, Reaser began to exhibit widely. In 1897 he showed *Mother and Child* at the National Academy of Design in New York and won the prestigious Hallgarten Award. The painting was soon after purchased by Andrew Carnegie.<sup>25</sup> With this initial success, Reaser moved to New York in 1899. He came to the attention of the art world through the paintings "in the Dutch manner" he had produced in Holland and developed a friendship with the gallery owner William Macbeth, an important advocate of American art. After exhibiting individual paintings there and at the Babcock Gallery, he was awarded a one-man show at Macbeth in 1899. Macbeth promoted Reaser's art by highlighting his affinity to Dutch painting: "his growing love for the works of the Dutch masters, both ancient and modern, strengthened his early convictions and saved him from being wrecked on the dangerous seas of modern French art."<sup>26</sup> In keeping with the associations of Dutch art, Reaser's paintings were marketed as possessing moral qualities. "[An] exhibition so very wholesome in direction. [...] Genuinely healthy work like Mr. Reaser's, built on old lines, and yet so thoroughly modern, cannot fail to exert an influence for good."<sup>27</sup> Reviews were positive, especially with regards to the landscapes.<sup>28</sup> However, Reaser's sales were modest. By 1899, the vogue for Hague School painting and "art in the Dutch mode" was coming to an end in New York to be replaced by Impressionism and the stirrings of early American avant-gardism.

In 1903 the artist established himself in Washington as a por-

traitist. By using his connections with prominent Iowans such as Senator Jonathan Dolliver, Reaser gained important commissions.<sup>29</sup> The highlight of this phase of his career came in the form of a commission to paint Iowa Senator William Allison (1906), who, as the then longest serving member of Congress, was commemorated with a portrait hung in the United States Senate lobby.<sup>30</sup>

Reaser's easy manner and genial personality made it possible for him to maintain close social ties with his clients, often for decades. He and his wife appear to have had a special gift for cultivating friendships. Fused with their love of travel, their musical talents and artistic abilities made them ideal house-guests in prominent circles from Iowa to Washington to New York.

In 1919, after the end of World War One, Reaser and his wife moved to Florence, Italy to stay with the wealthy and cultivated American couple, Mr. and Mrs. Timothy Spelman. Mrs. Spelman (Leolyn Louise Everett) was an accomplished historian and poet who had inherited a sizable fortune from her father, a Cleveland rail baron. In 1919, she and her husband, a prominent composer, were in the process of moving their permanent residence from Paris to Florence where the couple had purchased Villa Razzolini, a fourteenth-century villa overlooking the Arno. Reaser and his wife became the Spelmans' permanent guests for many years during the 1920s, which resulted in a new body of work, a large series of pastels including views of Villa Razzolini-Spelman and its gardens, as well as landscapes throughout Italy. Many of the works were titled with evocative lines from Mrs. Spelman's poems.<sup>31</sup> The Italian pastels, in loose Impressionist style, were exhibited in Florence, in New York and in 1933 at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington.<sup>32</sup> In this latter phase of his career, Reaser became well known for painting fashionable overmantels, large landscapes in oil or pastels which he executed for prominent clients such as Mrs. E. H. Harriman.<sup>33</sup>

With his ties to Gilded Age patrons and institutions (he was a member of several artistic and social clubs in Manhattan), Reaser was precisely that type of late-Victorian artist the emerging American avant-garde reacted against during the stirrings of early modernism in New York after 1900. Reaser's taste can be discerned in an editorial he contributed to the *New York Times* in 1912 in which he described an idea for a museum with a more domestic atmosphere.<sup>34</sup> The famous works he desired to see under such intimate conditions, works by La Farge, Rodin, Millet, Rousseau, Whistler, Watts, and Sargent, are redolent of by now conservative

late-Victorian taste. Reaser's artistic identity resembled John Singer Sargent's. As the leading portrait artist of his generation (born four years before Reaser), Sargent provided the indispensable model for success as a society portraitist. Like Reaser, Sargent also had a penchant for landscape which complemented income-generating commissions and allowed for artistic expression and experimentation, all within the boundaries of traditional artistic practice.

Reaser's *New York Times* obituary of 1942 identified the artist as a "portrait painter who was widely known at the turn of the century."<sup>35</sup> It was as a portrait painter that Reaser came to the attention of Jessie Colby. One of Reaser's early portrait patrons in Washington was a fellow Iowan, Ellen Foster, who, as a pioneering female lawyer was a founder of and chief litigator for the Women's Christian Temperance Movement.<sup>36</sup> Foster was a friend and correspondent of Jessie Colby's, also a fervent Temperance activist. In 1905, Jessie and Reaser were evidently in correspondence. Robert Alden Reaser describes how his father came to Stanstead:

When Father complained [to Jessie] that he could not work in the summer heat of Washington, Miss Colby said we must come to Stanstead, Quebec, just over the Vermont line where the air was cool and dry; she might even have some portrait-work for father. So began a series of long summer seasons in the most charming rural community I have ever known. Charming because of the village itself, because of its lyrical vistas on every side, and because of its gentle, well-bred people.<sup>37</sup>

### The Colby Portraits

Reaser, his wife, and two young children, Dorothy and Robert, arrived in Stanstead on June 8<sup>th</sup> 1905 and initially stayed at Carrollcroft.<sup>38</sup> After several weeks the family moved into a cottage on the campus of Stanstead College, amusingly dubbed "Reaser's Rest."<sup>39</sup> On June 15<sup>th</sup> the artist began work on the first of the two portraits, of Charles Carroll (Plate 1) and Hattie (Plate 2).<sup>40</sup> Reaser's wife was at the painter's side during each session, reading magazine articles to Charles Carroll and to the ladies, novels and verse: Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and Robert Lewis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* were particular favorites.<sup>41</sup> If the weather was poor and the light inadequate the sittings could be replaced by, as on one occasion, "Beethoven duets and visiting."<sup>42</sup> Reaser also gave art lectures to the Colbys and their guests about modern French and Dutch painting.<sup>43</sup> The artist pre-

pared a talk about his sojourn in Barbizon which Jessie recorded in her diary: "Reading Club met here and Mrs. Reaser read Mr. Reaser's paper 'Our summer in the footsteps of Daubigny' delightfully. His account of their life in the picturesque old studio and lovely country with account of Barbizon school and its spirit."<sup>44</sup> By this means, Reaser also functioned as a cultural ambassador, capitalizing on his experience in Europe and conveying the picturesque life of the artist to an eager audience of middle-class cultural consumers. Whether dining with the family, joining them at church, visiting neighbours, or playing music, Reaser and his wife engaged in the Colbys' daily itinerary. An entry in Jessie's diary from July provides a good example: "Four Reasers to dinner. Good roast beef, cream and strawberry shortcake with plenty of extra berries. Robert had a genuine "shortcake smile". John read Kipling. Mr. Reaser and I played two movements of Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony. Broadview after evening Church."<sup>45</sup>

Reaser's portraits were not the first portraits the Colbys commissioned. Indeed, for the three generations that inhabited Carrollcroft, portraiture was an important mode of self- and family-commemoration. The wedding of Charles William and Emma (Kitty) Cobb in 1897 was occasioned by portraits from the fashionable Montreal artist, Alphonse Jongsers. Portraits could also record travel. Like eighteenth-century aristocrats who commissioned portraits on their Grand Tours, Abby had herself photographed as a lady of fashion by Eugène Piron (Figure 2) during her visit to Paris in 1900. Portraiture could also be a mode of historical make-believe. In a delicately drawn portrait of Hattie made later in life (Figure 3), the Montreal



Fig. 2. Eugène Piron,  
Abby Colby Aikins, ca. 1900,  
Colby-Curtis Museum

artist Andrew Dickson Patterson evoked the spare style of Hans Holbein the Younger (1498–1543) to re-imagine Hattie in Renaissance attire. The likeness was based on an earlier daguerreotype.<sup>46</sup>

As a cycle of formal portraits, Reaser's Colby portraits are best understood as a statement of prestige. They made a claim about the sitters at a particular moment in their respective and collective lives. Their elaborate matching gilded frames, imposing scale, formal seated poses, and life-sized figures were well proportioned for Carrollcroft's front parlour in which at least three of them were

installed (Figure 4). Charles Colby's portrait (Plate 1) shows the family patriarch as a man of character, energy, and lineage. His wife, Hattie (Plate 2), and daughters, Abby (Plate 3), and Jessie (Plate 4), are portrayed as ladies of respectability, fashion, and accomplishment.

Formal portraits serve two primary functions, to proclaim the sitter's exemplary status and to perpetuate memory. Formal portraiture combines these two impulses in a single moment to commemorate (or create) for posterity the individual's exemplary self. The illustrious life was worthy of the illustrious record in the form of a befitting likeness. A portrait pronounces the answer to the question: is the subject worthy of commemoration in this impressive form? Reaser did not make a portrait of John Colby, the youngest child of Charles and Hattie. Certainly it was thought that a formal portrait of the young man was not suitable. Though he had completed his medical training at McGill, John had yet to make his mark in the world, only recently having returned to Stanstead where he would become a practicing country doctor and later mayor of the town. In 1923, Reaser's son, Robert, who was also an artist, made a seated portrait of John. According to John H.E. Colby, Robert Reaser's portrait of his father was meant to allow John in essence to join the family pantheon.<sup>47</sup>



*Fig. 3. Andrew Dickson Patterson, Hattie Colby, ca. 1910, pencil on paper, Colby-Curtis Museum*



*Fig. 4. Front Parlour at Carrollcroft, ca. 1992.*

As was befitting the man of the house, Charles Carroll's portrait was painted in the library, the room that also functioned as his office. The female portraits were painted in the music room, the western-most room of the double parlour with good light coming in from the rear of the house.<sup>48</sup> The division between the masculine and feminine spaces in the house as the sites where the sitters' commemorative likenesses would be fashioned paralleled the different conventions that governed male and female portraiture.

Reaser portrayed Charles Carroll (Plate 1) seated in the library with a lamp illuminating his reading material. A portrait of Charles' father, Moses French Colby, can be seen in the background. These accessories to the portrait evoke the library (where the portrait of Moses still hangs) but the muted background removes the portrayal from precise temporality. This is typical of nineteenth century male portraits which allowed for a limited pictorial syntax: sober attire of dark suit and white collar, the sitter positioned in an undetermined environment. This spare style effectively eliminates rank and status as qualifications for portrayal in favour of individual character. Reaser's portrait of Charles Carroll was judged a success according to this reigning convention. Jessie recorded a comment by a visiting clergyman: the "Rev. Dr. Moore ... thinks father's [portrait] 'a triumph': particularly the eyes—'force of character'."<sup>49</sup> This reception of the portrait echoes the currency of reputation in which portraiture was meant to transact and the location of that reputation in character. Since antiquity, portraiture had been seen as an expression of reputation. In his introduction to his *Life of Alexander the Great*, Plutarch located the exemplar's *ethos* in the expression of the eyes and drew a parallel between biography and portraiture:

Therefore, as painters in their portraits labor the likeness in the face, and particularly about the eyes, in which the peculiar turn of mind most appears, and run over the rest with a more careless hand; so we must be permitted to strike off the features of the soul, in order to give a real likeness to these great men, and leave to others the circumstantial detail of their labors and achievements.<sup>50</sup>

Plutarch was an important inspiration for Renaissance collections of his "Lives" of famous men which had their corollary in portrait cycles. Refracted through the Renaissance, Plutarch was culturally significant in nineteenth-century North America. Victorian notions of education were shaped by concepts of ethical formation with roots in ancient moral philosophy. In the second half of the nine-



teenth century, Plutarch was offered to readers of all ages as a source of illustrious lives worthy of emulation. In his response to Charles Carroll's portrait, Rev. Dr. Moore was affirming the significance of portraiture's ability to convey reputation. The painting was "a triumph," a word that was meant to reflect upon both the artist and sitter, establishing for posterity the subject's good character and the artist's ability to convey good fame.

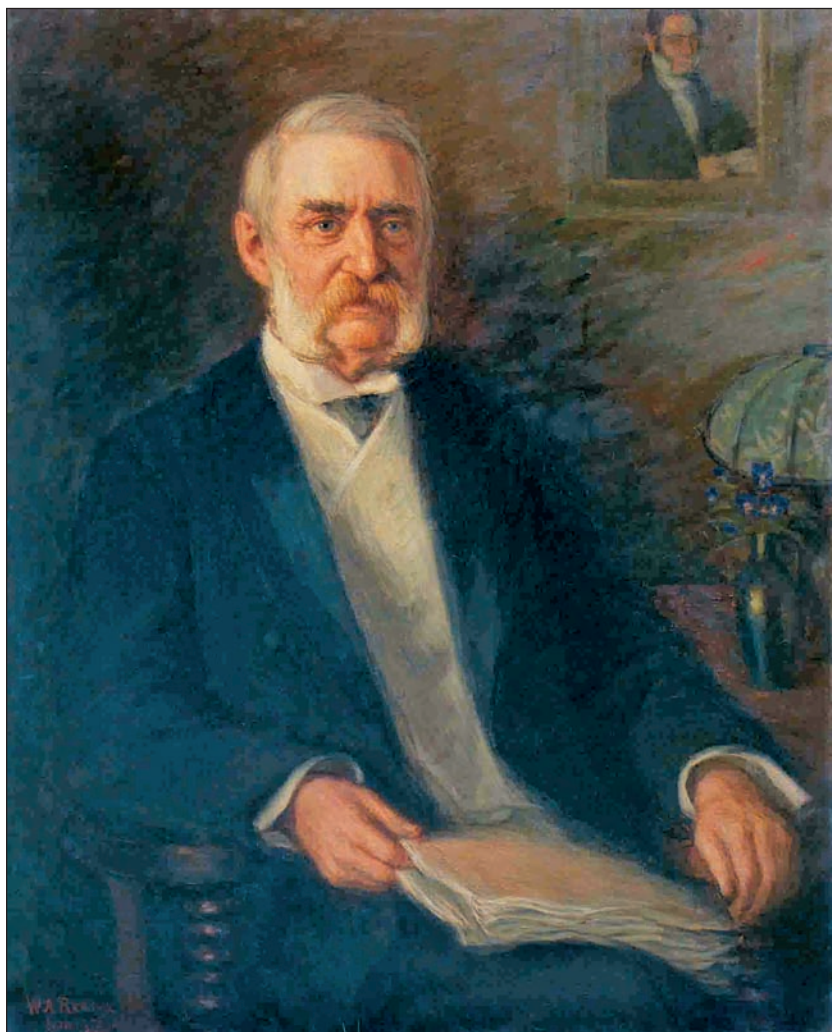
Portraiture's commemorative function could be tempered with incidental details meant to enhance believable likeness. Reaser shows Charles Carroll as if he has momentarily looked up from papers gathered in his lap. Such papers, possibly a newspaper, show Colby as a man of affairs actively engaged in the world. In the background, Moses French Colby is also portrayed holding paperwork. The inclusion of the father's portrait and the sympathetic echo between the two serve to remind the viewer of the importance of lineage and underscore the value of the portrait to future generations: to possess the ancestor's portrait is also a form of prestige. While Charles Carroll is portrayed as a man of achievement and character, he also shows himself as part of a lineage of excellence.

If the male portrait revolved around depiction of character, for women, exemplarity was figured as beauty, evidence of taste, and signs of accomplishment. The choice of clothes, poses and surroundings were read as markers of female status. The painter's role here was to delicately flatter the female sitter, to draw out compelling features and to obscure unattractive qualities, though never so much as to call into question the reality of portrayal. In Hattie's portrait (Plate 2), begun around the same time as her husband's, the sitter is posed against a French tapestry, one of the family's treasured possessions purchased on a recent trip abroad. Using a tapestry, a much sought-after object around the turn of the century, as the background would signal the status of the sitter and imply luxurious surroundings. She is set in near-profile; a pose that lends her a remote dignity. The portrait includes still-life elements in the form of flowers which lends the painting a decorative quality. The attention to surface detail, tapestry, flowers, elaborate attire, and the sitter's disengagement with the viewer are aesthetic embellishments which added together exceed portraiture's requirement for mere likeness. Hattie's pose and placement in the composition echoed one of Reaser's favourite paintings, Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black: The Artist's Mother*.<sup>51</sup> The aesthetic quality of the painting, the 'artistic' embellishments that transcended the genre of portraiture, may explain Reaser's conclusion about the painting as Jessie

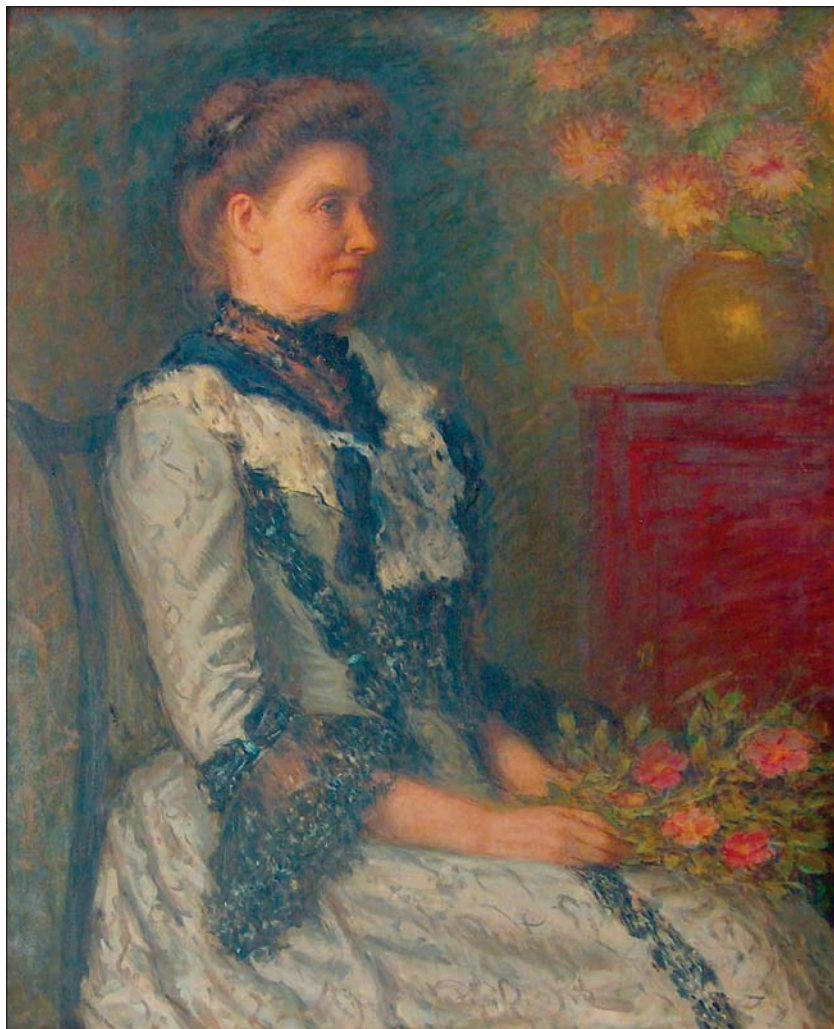


recorded it in her diary: "an artist's picture which he could exhibit anywhere."<sup>52</sup>

Reaser portrayed Abby Colby Aikins (Plate 3) and Jessie Colby (Plate 4) as mature, elegant and cultivated Edwardian ladies. Abby's portrait was undertaken after her mother's and is the most formal of the entire group. Reaser employed an aristocratic three-quarter format to frame Abby seated regally in an armchair with her fan falling at her side. The elegant but natural pose shows the sitter adept at posing for formal portraits, a skill that was thought to be the mark of the aristocrat, but more difficult for the bourgeoisie who were unaccustomed to the practice.<sup>53</sup> The eldest child of Charles and Hattie, Abby had married Somerset Aikins, a member of one of Manitoba's prominent political families, in a lavish wedding in 1887. She was the most social member of the Colby family, fashionable and sophisticated. As a photographic portrait (Figure 2) taken in Paris around 1900 suggests, Abby cultivated the air of a lady of fashion: her pose highlights her elegant neck and shoulders and shows her up-to-the-minute Paris fashion to good effect. The imposing and formal qualities of Reaser's portrait of Abby are balanced by the sitter's warm smile and the slight angle of the head that gives her a subtle animation. Her fashionable dress reveals her bare shoulders. In her diary, Jessie writes how Reaser chose the gown and lighting that was suitable for it. "Mr. Reaser posed Abby in her Felix gown and found the music room light good for the lace and the light good for the gown."<sup>54</sup> The Felix couture house was one of the prominent Parisian dressmakers that set fashion trends during the Belle Époque. Abby had probably purchased the gown during one of her previous visits to Paris. While not representing the latest fashion in 1905, the elaborate gown was of a type that was suitable for such aristocratic-style portraiture. The composition of the painting owes much to the eighteenth-century portrait painter, Thomas Gainsborough: the large format of figure against picturesque landscape (showing Owl's Head in the distance), the suggestive background in bitumen-like brown pigment, and the emphasis on elaborate attire. As discussed above, the 'polite' culture cultivated by members of the Colby family bore a curious resemblance to the forms of gentility found amongst eighteenth-century English gentry. Reaser's painting of Abby may have reflected this fact as embodied by the sitter herself.



*Plate 1. Willbur A. Reaser, Charles Carroll Colby, 1905,  
oil on canvas, Colby-Curtis Museum, Stanstead, Québec*



*Plate 2. Willbur A. Reaser, Harriet (Hattie) Colby, 1905,  
oil on canvas, Colby-Curtis Museum, Stanstead, Québec*



*Plate 3. Willbur A. Reaser, Abby Colby Aikins, 1905,  
oil on canvas, Colby-Curtis Museum, Stanstead, Québec*





*Plate 4. Willbur A. Reaser, Jessie Maud Colby, 1905,  
oil on canvas, Colby-Curtis Museum, Stanstead, Québec*



*Plate 5. Willbur A. Reaser, Woman Knitting by Window, 1895, oil on canvas, Blanden Memorial Art Museum, Fort Dodge, Iowa*



*Plate 6. Willbur A. Reaser, Landscape, ca. 1905,  
oil on canvas, Colby-Curtis Museum, Stanstead, Québec*

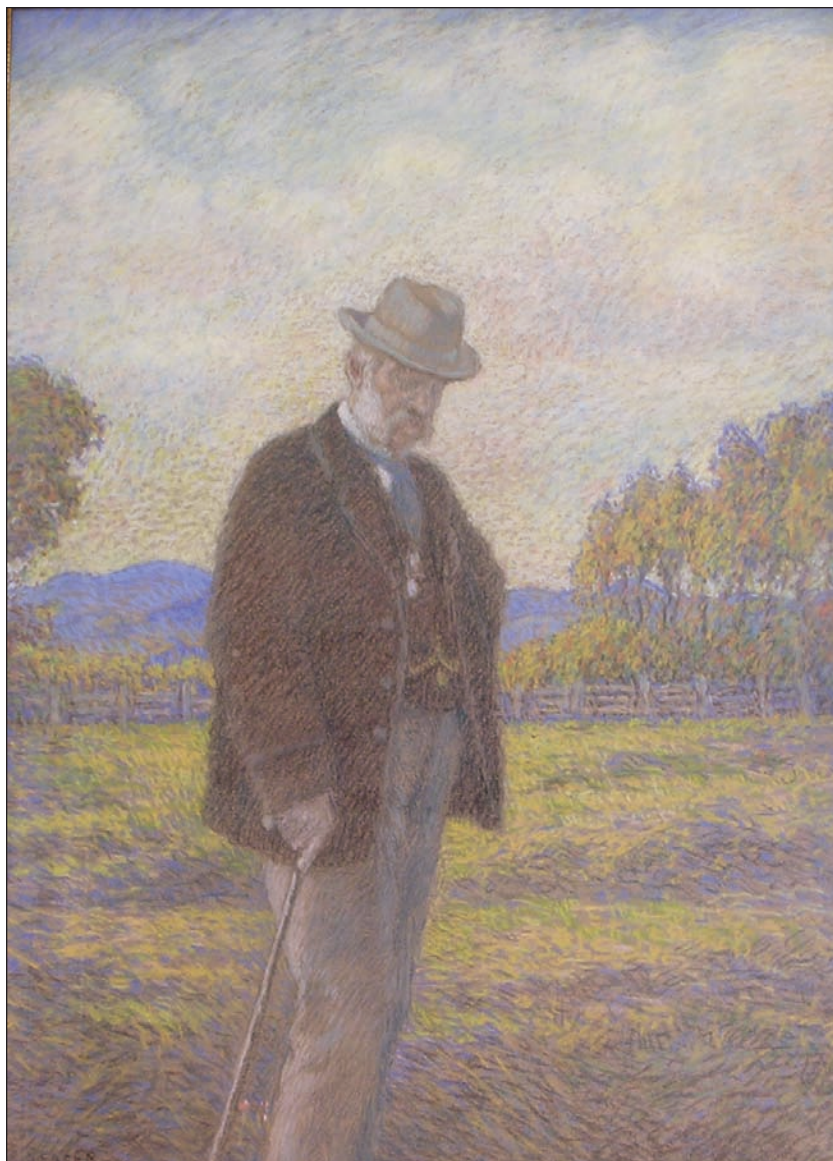




*Plate 7. Willbur A. Reaser, Landscape with view of Lake Memphremagog, 1905, oil on canvas, Colby-Curtis Museum, Stanstead, Québec*



*Plate 8. Willbur A. Reaser, Garden at Carrollcroft, 1913,  
oil on canvas, Colby-Curtis Museum, Stanstead, Québec*



*Plate 9. Willbur A. Reaser, Charles Carroll Colby, 1911,  
pastel on paper, Colby-Curtis Museum, Stanstead, Québec*

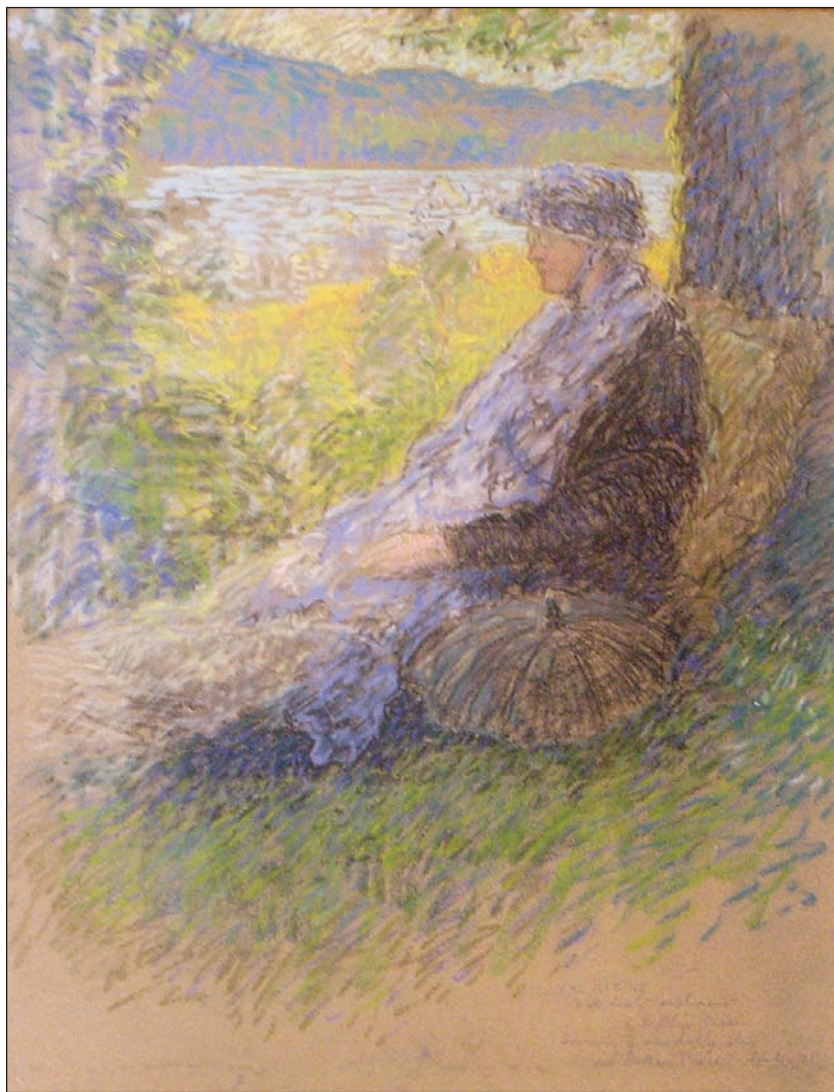
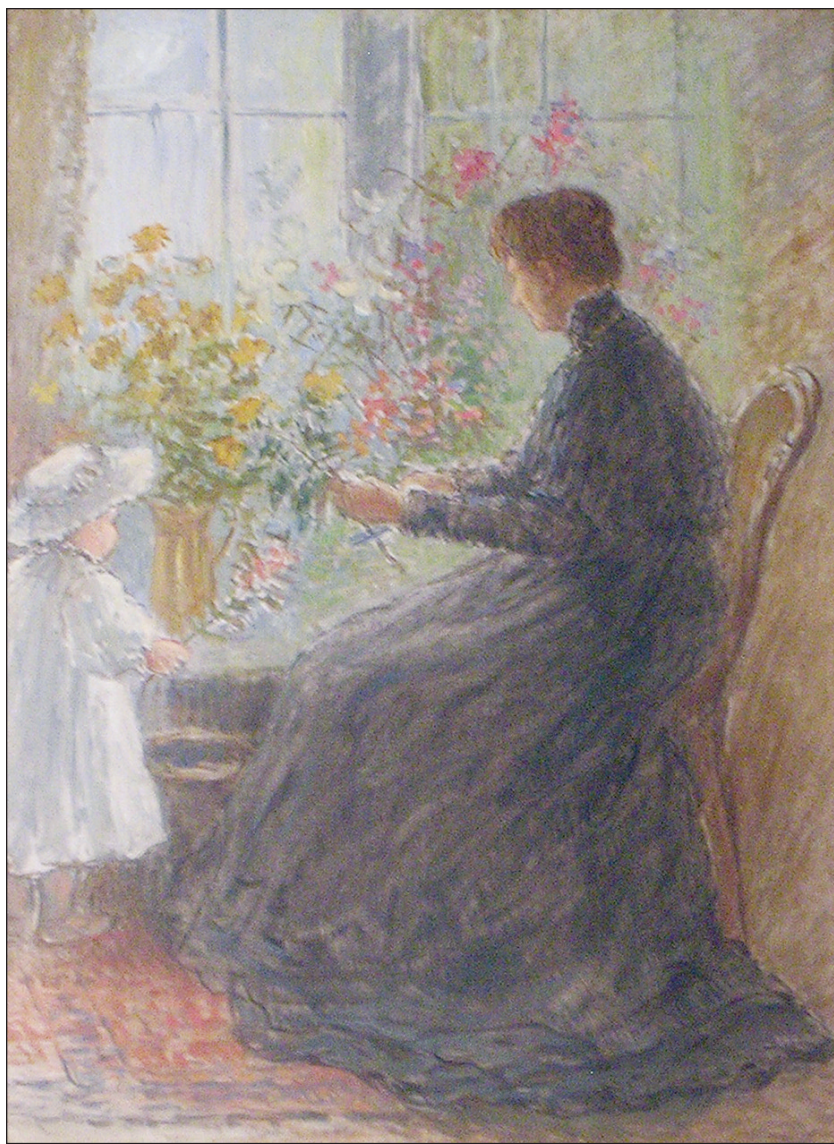


Plate 10. Willbur A. Reaser, Harriet Colby, 1921,  
pastel on paper, Colby-Curtis Museum, Stanstead, Québec





*Plate 11. Willbur A. Reaser, Arranging Flowers, ca. 1907,  
oil on canvas, Colby-Curtis Museum, Stanstead, Québec*



*Plate 12. Willbur A. Reaser, Reading, 1910,  
oil on canvas, Colby-Curtis Museum, Stanstead, Québec*

Compared to Abby's, Jessie's portrait (Plate 4) is less formal. It is smaller in size, half-length, and shows the sitter at her beloved piano turning to engage the viewer. Indeed, Jessie described the candid nature of the pose as "sitting toward [Reaser] as if speaking."<sup>55</sup> Her gaze is direct and possesses none of the softness of Abby's expression. The portrait conveys a strong physical presence as if the viewer shares her space. The placement of the sitter's head in the composition's upper register lends the portrait an imposing dignity that is complimented by her direct, forthright gaze. As he was working on the portrait, Reaser explained to Jessie how capturing a likeness "was more like modeling in clay than painting."<sup>56</sup> Jessie's is the least decorative and the least opaque of the three female portraits, as if Reaser's form of flattery here is frankness of portrayal.

Reaser's initial visit in 1905 was meant as a summer sojourn, but the artist and his family remained in Stanstead until Christmas, finding time to generate other portrait commissions such as one from Judge White in Sherbrooke and from Stewart Haskell and his mother, Martha Stewart Haskell, that still hang in the Haskell Free Library.<sup>57</sup> After spending the holiday with the Colbys, the artist and his family prepared to leave the following day. The portraits were still a preoccupation. "December 26<sup>th</sup> Mr. Reaser did final touches to Mother's chin—Mrs. R. busy packing... We all parted the best of friends with much regret but they quite expect to return in May or June."<sup>58</sup> In a notice in its social pages, the *Washington Post* recorded the Reasers arrival from Stanstead, "where Mr. Reaser had many engagements to paint portraits of prominent persons."<sup>59</sup> A mere four months later, the Reasers were on their way back to Stanstead for another summer in Québec.<sup>60</sup> This time, Reaser set to work on a smaller painting of Abby that could more conveniently be taken back to Winnipeg, as well as, presumably, the Haskell portraits that had been in discussion the previous November.

The three paintings of the female members of the family, Hattie, Abby and Jessie, were traditionally hung in the front room of the double parlour (Figure 4). In their essay in this current volume, Annmarie Adams and Silvia Spampinato identify the public function of the double parlour, specifically as it relates to the ritual of the afternoon social visit, a major activity for upper-middle class women whose days often revolved around a series of visits by friends and neighbours.<sup>61</sup> The choice to adorn the front parlour with flattering and decorative portraits of the ladies of the house would have served to dignify any social event in ways that reflected



well upon the hostesses. In one of her diary entries just after the portraits were completed, Jessie records a ladies' Reading Club event which concluded when "we drew [out] our portraits and quickly arranged our four portraits in the best light in the studio. Everyone delighted."<sup>62</sup>

### Reaser, Landscape, and the Picturesque

While the portrait commissions were the reason for Reaser's initial visit in 1905 the majority of his paintings for the Colbys were landscapes and figures-in-landscape. In addition to providing Reaser with a respite from the heat of Washington, the Eastern Townships appear to have offered the artist picturesque motifs and landscape subjects in much the same way as his Dutch summer sojourns in Europe. Robert Reaser described the appeal of the local countryside:

The Quebec hills are liquid as they flow into and around each other. Many of the roads refuse to seek protection in the valleys and go directly to their destination, uncovering at each rise a new panorama. Red barns, maple-groves, and wine-glass elms are tied together by criss-crossing rail fences seen against a backdrop of gray-green mountains bordering Lake Memphremagog to the west. Perhaps it was Owl's Head, a small Mount Fuji, that led Father to sometimes see landscape in the flat Japanese manner in his paintings.<sup>63</sup>

Robert speculated that the region's particular topography might have encouraged his father in his move towards Impressionism, the "flat Japanese manner" being a dimension of Impressionism which had been informed by imported Japanese prints.

Reaser's first documented landscape for the Colbys, *Owl's Head* (Figure 5), was done at Winlock, Charles William Colby's cottage on nearby Lake Memphremagog which was a frequent stop on the family's weekly itinerary. The painting shows the mountain looming up out of the water from the vantage point of the beach below the house, the tip of Long Island and the boathouse visible on the left. During a visit in mid-August 1905, the artist made an oil sketch of the scene to give to his hostess, Kitty Colby, and brought back a copy which he used as the model for the painting sent to Charles William and his wife the following year.<sup>64</sup> The glowing tones of the setting sun over Owl's Head throw the mountain into dark relief and create a moody atmosphere that mixes a quality of brooding sublime into the tranquil scene. The painting is picturesque in the technical sense of the word as a union between the beautiful and sublime



Fig. 5. Willbur A. Reaser, *Owl's Head*, 1906, oil on canvas, Private Collection

landscape, yet Reaser's ability to capture the fall of light on water with fluid brushstrokes that mirror the patterned ripple of the lake echoes Claude Monet's style. Another painting made at Winlock looking out over the lake from "Brown's Hill" (Plate 6) shows the artist working in a looser Impressionist idiom. The vibrant brushstrokes and spontaneous, sketch-like quality suggest it was painted *en plein air*. From these two paintings it can be surmised that Robert Reaser's observation about the transformation of his father's style did indeed occur in these years. If not due to the effect of the landscape alone, this evolution occurred by the same time the Hague School had been replaced by French Impressionism as the most popular and commercial art form in cosmopolitan art centers.

A landscape painting (Plate 7) at Carrollcroft shows Reaser's mastery of Impressionism. From an elevated vantage point the viewer looks down upon a brook that meanders through the countryside. The mountain range in the distance appears to be that bordering Lake Memphremagog suggesting a location in Stanstead. The luminosity of nocturnal effects was a legacy of the artist's Dutch sojourn but the broken brushstrokes and rich impasto of are typical of second generation Impressionism.<sup>65</sup> Reaser deftly combines warm and

cool tones to animate the landscape with a subtle vitality.

An early photograph of Reaser (dressed in remarkably formal attire for working out of doors) shows the artist painting *en plein air* from the back of Carrollcroft (Figure 6). A painting of the garden at Carrollcroft dated 1913 shows this view (Plate 8), the boisterous colours of the flower beds setting off the flat blue of Owl's Head in the distance. The painting bears an inscription to Jessie Colby that suggests it was a gift to his hostess, one of many such gifts that the artist made to the Colby family.

The full emergence of Reaser's Impressionist style can be seen in this painting. While not 'picturesque' in the technical sense of the term as an eighteenth century aesthetic category combining the 'sublime' and 'beautiful,' Reaser's Impressionist-style paintings can be seen as picturesque as the term had evolved in middle-class Victorian parlance: distinctive and demonstrably artistic, an expression of elevated moral and cultural aspirations. The suitability of Reaser's Impressionist style (which must have been novel in



Fig. 6. Unknown Photographer, Willbur Reaser at Carrollcroft, ca. 1905, Colby-Curtis Museum

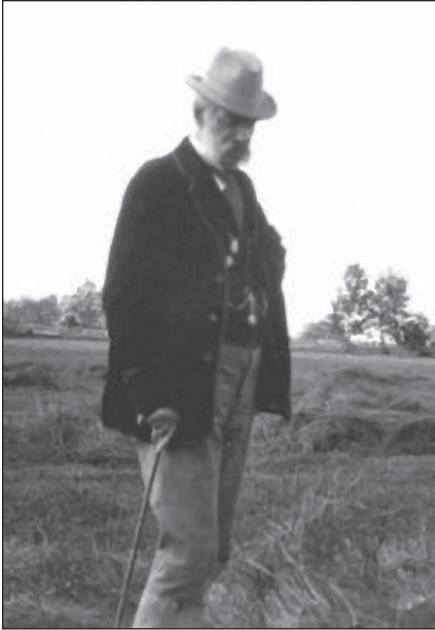


Fig. 7. *Unknown Photographer*, Charles Carroll Colby, ca. 1900, Colby-Curtis Museum

Stanstead ca. 1910) to the Colby family can be seen in two pastels of Charles and Hattie Colby, one made in 1911 and the other in 1921.

*Charles Carroll Colby* (Plate 9) shows the subject in the manner of the "gentleman in the landscape," a genre that was popular in Dutch Hague School painting, though the style here exemplifies Reaser's Impressionism. The subject is shown with his head angled down. In contrast to the formal portrait of 1905 where Colby's fixed, outward gaze suggests purpose and energy, here his lowered head and downcast glance betoken leisure and reflection. The pastel was made in 1911, several

years after Colby's death, but was based on a photograph taken in the final years of his life (Figure 7). The photograph effectively frames Colby and captures the mood embodied in the pose, but does not capture the landscape's particular qualities. Reaser's pastel amends this and makes the picturesque landscape the setting, as it often could be, for contemplation and reverie.

Another pastel dated 1921 shows Hattie reclining against a tree with a lake in the background (Plate 10), perhaps from one of many family outings to Winlock. Large swatches of warm-toned paper remain exposed suggesting its spontaneous quality. An inscription shows it was a gift from Reaser to Abby "To Mrs Aikins, with compliments of Willbur Reaser. Souvenir of our happy [time] in 'Patton Place' Sep. 21-1921."<sup>66</sup> The jostling strokes of the pastel form a stylistic analog to the light breeze which seems to animate the scene. As a landscape featuring a human subject, the pastel is very similar to the pastel of Charles Carroll discussed above. But instead of being a later version based on an earlier snapshot, the drawing itself functions like a snapshot.

Both the landscapes-with-figure capture members of the family enjoying moments of contemplation and relaxation. Landscape was

a suitable backdrop for such leisurely pursuits. In addition to the landscape, the domestic interior could also be a fitting place in which to depict members of the family at their 'picturesque' pastimes.

### Picturing the Domestic Interior

In one of her 1905 diary entries Jessie Colby records a telling sentiment about life at Carrollcroft. Reaser had just shown members of the family a portfolio of reproductions of masterpieces of European art: "It was a great pleasure to go through [the portfolio] with Mr. Reaser. I went out to see father in the hammock and saw our family group as a picture through the west window."<sup>67</sup> As if inspired by the works of European masters, Jessie cast an approving eye on her own domestic surroundings and found them worthy of representation.

When Jessie described the family scene as "like a picture" she was speaking as someone who saw the world in relation to pictorial models, not only the above-mentioned reproductions of European paintings, which may have included paintings of interior genre scenes, but also photographs. Indeed, Jessie took photographs herself.<sup>68</sup> What makes Jessie's observation worthy of report in her matter-of-fact diary was not simply that the window had acted as a frame to create a pictorial composition out of the parlour scene, but that the life of the home could be a subject for art. For the Colby women, reading, arranging flowers, visiting, and music had replaced material concerns as the focus of the family's daily life. Like picturesque landscape convention that informed the viewer of canons of taste that could then be read back against the world at large, images of domestic interiors and genteel pursuits suitable to them also created a picture against which reality could be measured. As evidenced by Jessie's diary entry describing the "picturesque old studio" the Reasers rented in Barbizon, the term had broadened by the late-Victorian period to mean generally artistic and therefore distinctive: now all of life could be picturesque. In a double mirroring between art and reality, pictures inform the viewer of the pictorial conventions, which train the eye to detect (or approximate) their existence in reality, and then compel the viewer to capture (or conjure) them in permanent form. The domestic interior became a subject in two of Reaser's most intimate paintings, *Arranging Flowers* (Plate 11) and *Reading* (Plate 12). Both were made in the rooms which, in self-reflective fashion, they would later adorn.

*Arranging Flowers*, dated 1911, shows a similar enactment of daily life as of one of the photographic "conversation pieces" (Figure 1)



of the family out of doors. The flower pot is the same in both the photograph and the painting, indicating that Reaser was capturing actual events even if enacted for the benefit of portrayal. The painting's light-filled quality suggests it was painted in the music room, the western-most room of the double parlor that had the best light. The flowers form a spray of color around the sitter's head and contrive a halo-like effect. Hattie's young grandson Charles Carroll Colby II (born in 1904) assists his grandmother, giving the painting the quality of a snapshot more natural than the photographic "conversation pieces" the family had made for themselves.

*Reading*, dated 1910, possesses a sketch-like, Impressionist quality. The figure, thought to be Hattie, reclines on a sofa absorbed in a book: Hattie was known to be an avid and sophisticated reader as well as a published poet in her early years. Above her head can be seen one of the distinctive frames of the Reaser portraits. *Arranging Flowers* and *Reading* show Hattie engaged in two of her favourite pastimes captured in a precise moment yet neither is a commemorative likeness; indeed, the exact identity of the subject is not assured by obvious likeness, one of the requisites of formal portraiture. The immediacy of the artist's impression is enhanced by the paintings' sketch-like and suggestive quality. As well as a fixed moment, the artist renders an atmosphere of genteel leisure that Hattie embodied.

*Reading* and *Arranging Flowers* represent well the complex relationship between art and life at Carrollcroft. Subjects of interior genre scenes including depictions of female readers were familiar subject in French and American Impressionist painting. Reaser had painted them before: In 1893 he exhibited *Une liseuse* at the Paris Salon.<sup>69</sup> The subject was also familiar to Jessie who took a snapshot of her cousin, Mary, reading a book in front of a particularly beautiful local landscape.<sup>70</sup> This suggests that both artist and client conceived of certain aspects of daily life as subjects suitable for art where pictorial modes and artistic conventions were bound up with lived experience.

Jessie appears to have played a central role in cultivating the family's image of itself, a role that would have complimented well her status as lady of the house. Not only was she the one who invited Reaser to Stanstead and commissioned the paintings from him, but she kept a record of his artistic activity in her diary. Her diary entries in 1905 show how art-making could be an integral part of domestic life. This integration of art and life attests to the role of self-representation in Marianne Hirsch's notion of "family

mythology," which she defines as "an image to live up to, an image shaping the desire of the individual living in a social group. This myth or image—whatever its content may be for a specific group—dominates lived reality, even though it can exist in conflict with it and can be ruled by different interests."<sup>71</sup> Images might be seen as a way to shape and mold a kind of family identity according to favoured models. For the well-to-do this often meant developing the skills of the amateur photographer or painter, as did Jessie and Kitty, respectively.<sup>72</sup> As we have observed in the case of Reaser's pastel of Charles Carroll based on an earlier family photograph (perhaps taken by Jessie herself), Reaser's paintings can be seen, in part, as an outgrowth of his patrons' self-fashioning. In addition to possibly taking the photos that later works of art were based on, they certainly provided the artist with the images. The Colbys were accustomed to the intimate act of self-portrayal and aware of governing aesthetic ideals to which life could be made to conform. Indeed, many of Reaser's representations of the Colby family have the quality of photographic snapshots. But for all their intimacy and immediacy they are finished paintings and pastels that further distinguish their subjects as material suitable for art.

In the years of Reaser's Stanstead sojourn, Jessie Colby and her siblings had reached advanced middle-age and may have perceived how art could function as memorials of their lives and the lives of their parents. Charles Carroll Colby's modest fortune and Charles William's increasing success as a financier kept Carrollcroft intact and its mostly female inhabitants generously provided for throughout their lives. Jessie's energy and her mother's exceptional longevity (she passed away in 1932 at the age of 94) assured a long afterglow for the unique culture Carrollcroft had come to embody.

By 1905 the Colbys' home would have been seen as the embodiment of an earlier era, built before the watershed of the American Civil War, the excesses of the Gilded Age, and the dazzling modernizations of the Edwardian period. By the time of Reaser's last visit to Stanstead, in the early-1920s, life in North America had registered another profound shift following World War I and the sweeping social changes that occurred in its wake. Despite such dramatic local events as the devastating Stanstead fire of 1915, life at Carrollcroft continued on much as it had in the decades before. For the Colbys, the material of their lives seen in historical context might well have come to be viewed as a suitable subject for art. In this light, Reaser's paintings commemorated a felicitous moment in the life of one family that would also serve well for lasting memory.

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## NOTES

- \* I would like to acknowledge a dept of gratitude to Marguerite van Die whose work on the Colby family provided the necessary historical framework in which to structure my argument about the culture of gentility in turn-of-the-century Stanstead. Willbur Reaser's descendents, Nancy Roberts, Shelley Roberts, and Doug Roberts among them, kindly provided significant archival material, including Robert Reaser's unpublished autobiography and images of Reaser paintings still in private hands that filled out the picture of Reaser's career and relationship with the Colbys. Annmarie Adams offered important suggestions on material related to Carrollcroft. Timothy Riggs' generous insights helped immeasurably to improve my argument about Reaser's artistic development. The comments of the anonymous reader were instrumental in helping to clarify important methodological questions. Janice Hewlitt Koelb's *Poetics of Description*, supplemented by her many thought-provoking insights in conversations, was vital to my conclusions about the core theme of the article, the relationship between art and life in the "long nineteenth century."
- 1. Robert Alden Reaser. *Highlights and Half-Tones* (unpublished, ca. 1970s), 35: author's private collection.
- 2. For the Colbys' religious, social, and political affiliations and how they shaped family life in Stanstead, see Marguerite van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community in Victorian Canada: The Colbys of Carrollcroft* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).
- 3. Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 161.
- 4. Van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community ...*, 123.
- 5. For an examination of eighteenth-century polite society in rural Britain see Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 13–39.
- 6. Andrew Jackson Downing, *Cottage Residences: or, A Series of Designs for Rural Cottages and Cottage Villas, and their Gardens and Grounds; Adapted to North America* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1842), 99–123.
- 7. The somewhat awkward enactment of these discreet, leisurely activities suggests that, while not a formal portrait or a spontaneous "snapshot," the photographs might belong to the genre of the "conversation-piece". The "conversation piece" became fashionable in mid-eighteenth century Britain and portrayed the gentry and their decorous pursuits. They were often set outside to show the park-like grounds and picturesque vistas of the family's estate.

8. For an expansive discussion of the picturesque in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century see, Janice Hewlett Koelb, *The Poetics of Description: Imagined Places in European Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 110–123.
9. Andrew Jackson Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1850), 258.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 259.
11. For the dissolution and its effects on the family, see Van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community ...*, 91–94.
12. Charles C. Colby's business dealings are discussed in his son's autobiography: Charles W. Colby, *Garrulities of an Octogenarian* (unpublished, ca. 1946), 17: author's collection.
13. For a biographical sketch of Reaser and his career, see Robert Colby, "Willbur Aaron Reaser," in *76 Years of Collecting: The Blanden Memorial Art Museum*, ed. Margaret Scove (Fort Dodge, Blanden Memorial Art Museum, 2009), 165–68.
14. Private conversation with Margaret Scove, Blanden Memorial Art Museum, October, 2007. There are over ten works by Reaser in the Blanden collection and more held in private collections in Fort Dodge and Des Moines.
15. Robert Alden Reaser, *Highlights and Half-Tones*, 3–5.
16. Reaser's career at the *San Francisco Examiner* is included in his *New York Times* obituary, December 11, 1942. For an example of Reaser's contribution to *Overland Monthly*, a major California publication, see "Gold Mining of Today" 18 (1891): pp. 113–131.
17. Reaser's earliest known illustrations for a Seventh-Day Adventist publication are found in the 1888 volume, E. J. Waggoner, *Prophetic Lights* (Oakland, CA, Pacific Press: 1888). I am grateful to Carolyn Curtis at Pacific Press Publishing Association for alerting me to this: correspondence of November 2007.
18. Robert Alden Reaser, *Highlights and Half-Tones*, 6. In an article from "The Observer" section of *The Art Interchange* announcing Reaser's success at the National Academy of Design in 1897, the artist is described as "engaged in illustrating a new 'Life of Christ' for a publishing company." The article, in the form of a clipping, can be found in the Reaser file in the Ball Clippings of the Fine Arts Department, Boston Public Library.
19. Robert Alden Reaser, *Highlights and Half-Tones*, 6.
20. Lois Marie Fink, *American Art at the Nineteenth Century Paris Salons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 383.
21. Robert Alden Reaser, *Highlights and Half-Tones*, 6.



22. Robert Alden Reaser's brief discussion of his father's artistic sojourn in Risjoord (*Highlights and Half-Tones*, 6) is amplified by two contemporary travel sketches featuring Reaser. In addition to Isabel C. Barrow's discussed below, Eliza Leypold Good, "A Holland Art Village " *Catholic World* 70 (1900): 514–526.
23. Annette Stott, *Holland Mania: The Unknown Dutch Period in American Art & Culture* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1998)
24. Isabel C. Barrows, "An Artists' Nook," *Christian Union*, Oct. 29, 1892, p. 781. Barrows is quoted throughout this paragraph.
25. According to reports at the time, (for example, a review that appeared in the *New York Advertiser*, January 10, 1899) the painting was purchased by the Carnegie Galleries in Pittsburg. But in fact, the painting was purchased by Mr. Carnegie himself and was sent to the Carnegie's Scottish castle, Skibo, which they had purchased in 1897. Mrs. Carnegie had only recently given birth to their only child, Margaret, and it is likely that the painting of a mother and daughter was meant to celebrate the event and that Skibo Castle, as the family's new main residence, was the best location for such a personal painting. The painting remained at Skibo after the castle was sold by the Carnegie estate, and remained there until its sale as lot 108 at Christie's East, New York, April 9, 1998.
26. Archives of American Art. Macbeth Papers. Microfilm: Nmc10, no.904.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, citing a review in the *Evening Sun*, January 7, 1899.
29. Robert Alden Reaser, *Highlights and Half-Tones*, 14.
30. *Ibid.* Through personal connections Reaser was encouraged to paint "on speculation" a portrait of the Iowan Senator. Upon completion, the work was purchased by an act of Congress for \$1,500. Reaser's portrait joined eight others, from Washington to Charles Sumner, in the Senate Lobby where it still hangs today.
31. Undated review. Reaser file, The Ball Clippings. Boston Public Library, Fine Arts Department.
32. The Corcoran exhibit was facilitated by a fortuitous connection with Dr. and Mrs. Lewis Morris: the artist was a frequent guest at Morris Manor in the early-1930s. Catherine Clark Morris was the daughter of copper magnate William Clark (a major donor of the Corcoran Gallery) and an important arts patron. Letters preserved in the archives of the Corcoran Gallery reveal the close connection between Reaser and the Morrises. See for example, letter dated February 24, 1931 from the museum's director, C. Powell Minnigerode to the artist. I am grateful to Nancy Swallow of the Corcoran Gallery for making copies of the letters available.

33. A Reaser exhibition pamphlet at Macbeth in 1930 lists many of Reaser's prominent clients including Harriman, Carnegie, Mrs. George Pullman, Dr. Lewis Morris, Mr. T. L. Maytag, Mr. George Grant-Mason, and Mr. C.C. Colby: Archives of American Art, Macbeth Papers. Microfilm: Nmc10. For an example of Reaser's overmantles, see Margaret Scove, ed., *76 Years of Collecting: The Blanden Memorial Art Museum* (Fort Dodge, 2009), 167.
34. Willbur A. Reaser, "Modern Art Set Perfectly," *New York Times*, October 7, 1912.
35. Obituary, "Willbur A. Reaser," *New York Times*, Dec. 11, 1942.
36. Robert Alden Reaser, *Highlights and Half-Tones*, 33.
37. Robert Alden Reaser, *Highlights and Half-Tones*, 34.
38. Jessie Colby, Diary, June 8, 1905. Archives, Stanstead Historical Society.
39. *Ibid.*, June 24, 1905.
40. *Ibid.*, June 8 and June 15, 1905.
41. *Ibid.*, October 22, November 14, 1905.
42. *Ibid.*, August 15, 1905.
43. On one occasion Reaser read "a charming paper on modern Dutch Art and artists." *Ibid.*, September 14, 1905.
44. *Ibid.*, November 14, 1905.
45. *Ibid.*, July 19, 1905. Broadview was a neighbouring house.
46. The framed drawing includes the artist's signature and inscription that notes the drawing was based on a daguerreotype.
47. Private conversation with John H. E. Colby, August 2006.
48. In a diary entry, Jessie Colby notes the locations of each of the sittings: see entries for July 15, August 25, and October 9, 1905.
49. *Ibid.*, 6 September, 1905.
50. I quote an edition frequently published in the nineteenth century. John Langhorne and William Langhorne, eds., *Plutarch's Lives Translated from the Original Greek: With Notes, Critical and Historical and a Life of Plutarch* (Cincinnati: Applegate and Co., 1860), 434.
51. Whistler's painting was included in an editorial Reaser wrote in 1912, "Modern Art Set Perfectly," *New York Times*, October 7, 1912.
52. Jessie Colby, Diary, August 9, 1905.
53. See for example the case of Henry James' reception of Ludwig Passini's unsuccessful portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner. Alan Chong, "Henry James, Isabella Stewart Gardner and Art," in *Letters to Isabella Stewart Gardner*, ed. Rosella Mamoli Zorzi (London: Pushkin Press, 2009), 35–36.

54. Jessie Colby, Diary, August 25, 1905.
55. *Ibid.*, October 9, 1905.
56. *Ibid.*, October 13, 1905.
57. *Ibid.*, November 18 and 23, 1905.
58. *Ibid.*, December 26, 1905.
59. "Society," *Washington Post*, January 14, 1906, p. E5, "Mr. and Mrs. W.A. Reaser and children have returned to the city for the Winter. They passed the summer in Stemstead [*sic*] Canada, where Mr. Reaser had many engagements to paint portraits of prominent persons."
60. "Society," *Washington Post*, April 29, 1906, p. E5. "Mr. and Mrs. Reaser left Friday for their summer vacation at Stanstead, Quebec, Canada, stopping en route at Rockland Lake, on the Hudson; for two weeks. Mr. Reaser has just finished a fine portrait of Senator Dolliver."
61. Annmarie Adams and Silvia Spampinato in this volume, p. 30.
62. Jessie Colby, Diary, November 14, 1905.
63. Robert Alden Reaser, *Highlights and Half-Tones*, 34.
64. Jessie records the genesis of the painting in her diary entry of August 14, 1905: "[Reaser's] visit [to Winlock] was delightful all round and he did Kitty a beautiful sketch in oils, of Owl's Head and Lake and a bit of island and boat house and for himself a little sketch in tracing paper." The inscription of the painting is dated 1906.
65. I am grateful to Timothy Riggs for this insight. Conversation with the author, August, 2010.
66. Patton Place was the house across the street from Carrollcroft that Abby purchased principally so her children could visit Stanstead during the summer.
67. Jessie Colby, Diary, Sept. 6, 1905.
68. In one of her diary entries Jessie mentions taking a posed snapshot of a friend. *Ibid.*, Oct. 4, 1905.
69. Fink, *American Art ...*, 383.
70. Jessie Colby, Diary, October 4, 1905. "The Reasers took me to the [illeg.] brook and we sat a long time at the spot where I took the snapshot of Mary reading then walked in the pasture and plunged down to the brook. The R.'s were delighted with the mildness and said it gave one all the feeling of the [illeg.]."
71. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 8.
72. Jessie's activity as a photographer has already been noted. Kitty was a painter and was influenced by Reaser. Many of her works are still in the Colby-Curtis Museum.