Thomas Wilmer Dewing (1851 - 1938)

*Head of a Woman*, circa 1920 - 1924
signed “T.W Dewing” lower right
silverpoint on paper
22” x 16” s.s.

Thomas Wilmer Dewing was one of the few artists to use silverpoint before 1900. This medium, a refined method of drawing popular during the Italian Renaissance, enjoyed a revival in Europe around 1890 and in America during the second decade of the twentieth century. Of the fifty drawings in silverpoint that Dewing is believed to have executed, the locations of only a dozen are known (1). *Head of a Woman* is one of the artist’s larger existing examples of work in this medium, as the two largest known examples measure at 21 ½” x 18 7/8” (*Head of a Girl*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and 25” x 21 ¼” (*Portrait of a Woman*, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth).

The sitter for this drawing is a woman named Eleanor Knowles, who was Dewing’s model from 1920 to 1924. The woman was “known for her perfect oval face”, and is referred to in Dewing’s wife’s diary as a “good hearted girl” (2). With her elegant and elongated features, Knowles represents the standard aesthetic of female beauty with which Dewing is now identified. Soft diagonal lines, reinforced by cross-hatching, are used to indicate the shaded areas of her face, neck, and hair. The void created by the blank space focuses the viewer’s attention on the hauntingly beautiful portrait that emerges from the center of the paper. The image is flawlessly articulated. Susan Hobbs writes,

For Dewing, womanhood was the perfect artistic vehicle. Although many of his colleagues depicted women in their works, it was a subject over which he reigned supreme … When he depicted them, the results were not superficially physical or erotic, but suggestive and open to various interpretations (3).

Dewing was an excellent draftsman, and was able to employ silverpoint with little difficulty. He used a silver stylus on the surface of prepared paper, a technique which produces a delicate silver line as a result of gradual oxidation. The lines, once made, cannot be erased and therefore the method requires a great certainty of decision on the part of the illustrator (4).

Dewing was born in 1851 in Boston. At a young age, he apprenticed with a lithographer with whom he learned basic draftsmanship. Afterwards, he studied drawing and anatomy with Dr. William Rimmer (1816 - 1879) at the Lowell Institute. In 1876, he left for Europe to study at the Academie Julian in Paris with Gustave Boulanger (1824 - 1888) and Jules Lefebvre (1836 - 1911). This awarded him daily study from a live model, and he learned “the careful delineation of volumetric form and meticulous but subtle evocation of texture,” a prominent characteristic of *Head of a Woman* and a constant feature in his work (5). He returned the following year to Boston, and moved to New York in 1880 to teach at the Art Students League. In 1881 he married Maria Oakey (1845 - 1928), a well-known portrait and flower painter. He and his wife became associated with the Cornish Art Colony in New Hampshire as they lived there for eighteen summers before moving to a wooded retreat on the border of Maine.

He exhibited at the National Academy of Design (where he was elected to full Academician), Montross Gallery, the Carnegie Institute, Corcoran Gallery, and with the Society of American Artists. In 1897 he resigned from the Society to join the newly formed Ten American Painters, a group of artists who decried the overcrowded walls of the organization’s annual exhibitions. “The Ten” were the foremost American Impressionists of the day, and included Childe Hassam (1859 – 1935), John Twachtman (1853 - 1902), and Julian Alden Weir (1852 - 1919). After a trip to Europe in the mid-1890s, during which he was most likely exposed to the use of silverpoint, Dewing became more tonal in his approach and therefore distinct among his colleagues.
Dewing enjoyed considerable success in his career as a progressive and skilled artist of finely wrought pastels, exquisite silverpoints, and enigmatic oil paintings. *Head of a Woman* is a rare example of work from the last decades of Dewing’s life, as after 1920 he produced very little (6). He spent the last years of his life in New Hampshire and died in 1938.

**Provenance:**
- Macbeth Gallery, 1926
- Milch Gallery by 1962
- Nelson C. White by purchase from Robert Isaacson, 1963
- His son Henry Charles White, 1980
- The estate of Henry Charles White, 1990
- Martha Richardson Gallery, Boston
- The Cooley Gallery, 2009

**Exhibitions:**

**Notes:**
- The diary of Mrs. Maria Oakey Dewing, November 11, 1924, as referenced in an email from Susan A. Hobbs.
- Anderson.