

Captivating Women from the Dijkstra Collection

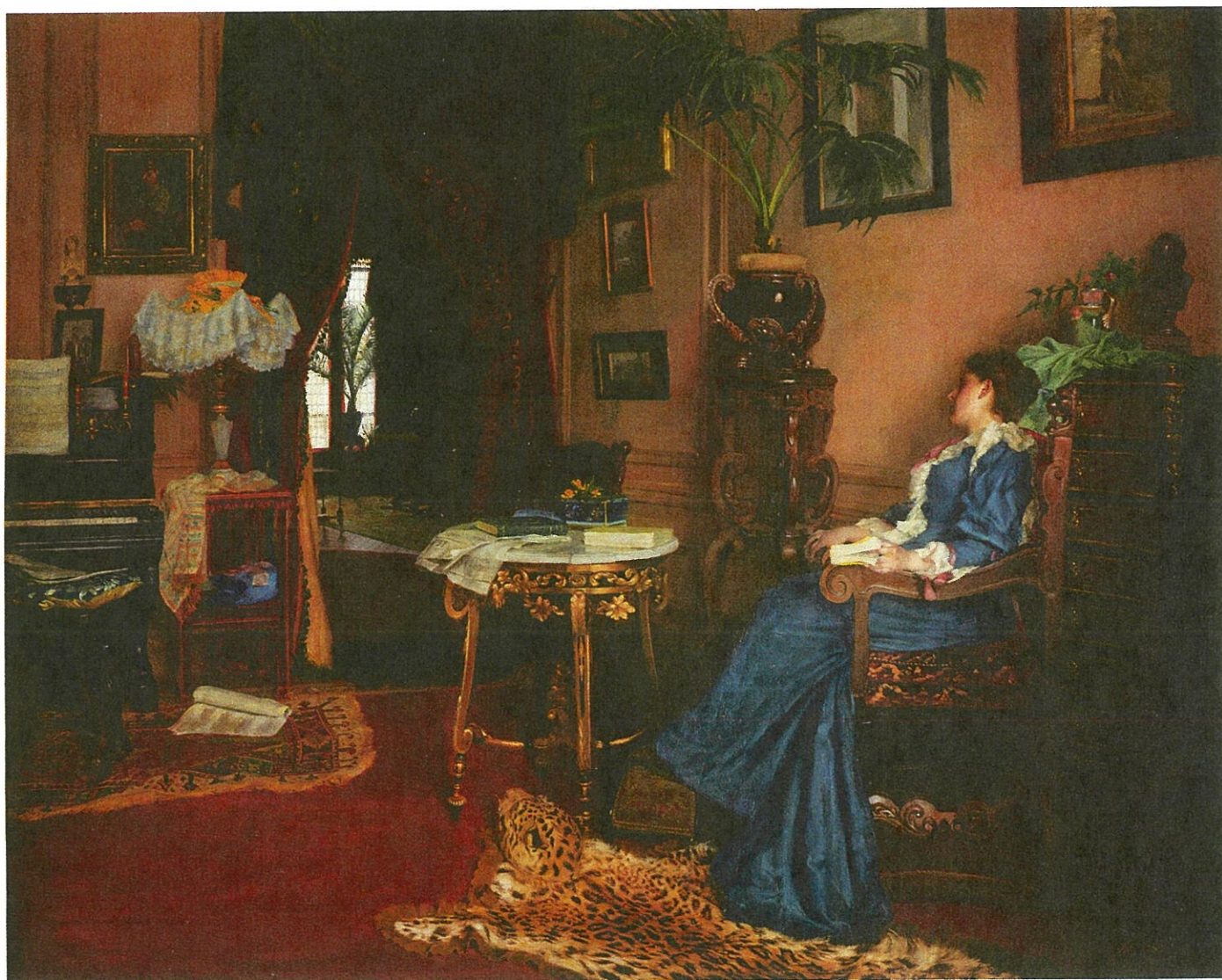
by Bram Dijkstra

*F*or most of Western history, men undoubtedly fantasized about “ideal images” of women far more than women bothered to try and idealize men. However, throughout the nineteenth century, and into the earlier twentieth, men came to consider what they habitually identified as “the battle of the sexes,” one of the basic laws of nature. When, during the second half of the nineteenth century, the theory of evolution began to take center stage

in the imagination of most progressive intellectuals, this phrase came to be seen as justifying “man’s” struggle against the forces of “degeneration” (a counterforce to evolution widely thought to be generated by those women who proved unwilling to be shaped by men’s fantasies about them).

Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, British and American men seem to have come to feel harried by the demands placed upon them as providers within the framework of the rise of the middle classes. Goaded by what were seen as the brutal ne-

cessities of the Hobbesian marketplace, they felt called upon to acquire wealth by whatever means possible. Sarah Stickney Ellis, one of the leading “moral” voices of that time, maintained that these men, their souls ravaged by economic necessity, needed to find wives so exceptionally pure and virtuous that they could serve as their husbands’ “soul keepers,” moral sponges able to absorb—and thereby absolve—the necessary everyday sins their husbands were forced to commit in order to provide for their wives and children.



Captivating Women from the Dijkstra Collection is on view from February 11 through May 10, 2020, at the Timken Museum of Art, Balboa Park, 1500 El Prado, San Diego, California, 92101, 619-239-5548, www.timkenmuseum.org. The exhibition travels to the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California, in June 2020.

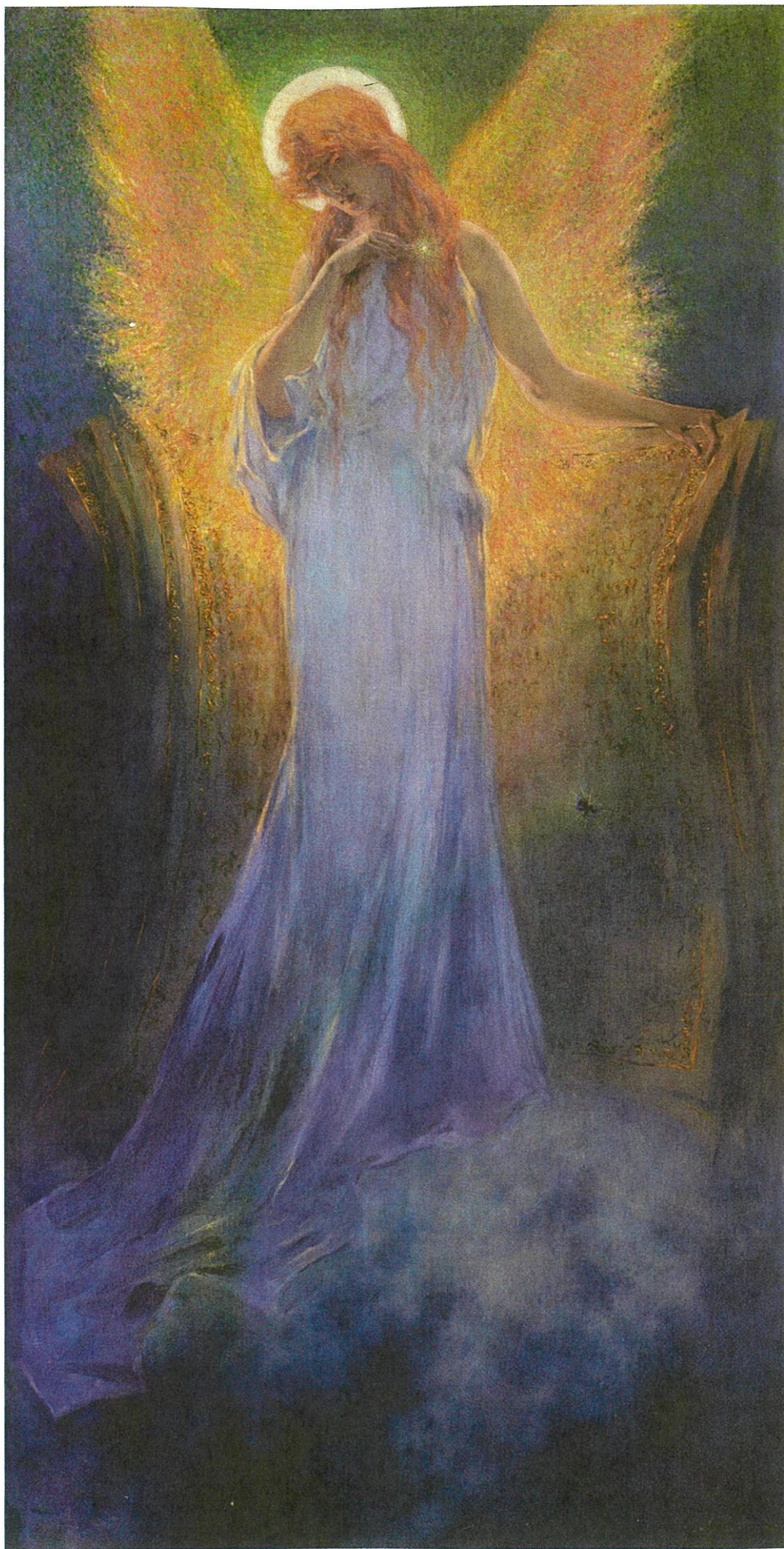
RIGHT: Eric Pape, *Angel and the Book of Life*, 1897, o/c, 76 x 41.

LEFT: Maximilien Colin, *Souvenirs*, c. 1890, o/c, 29 x 36 1/4.

During most of the Victorian era and the Gilded Age, this ideal of the immaculate wife whose primary function in society it was to be ready to wash away her husband's sins with the radiant soap of her unshakable moral virtue and impeccable physical and mental purity, ruled British and American culture far more than it did the rest of the Western world, where more antiquated—and far looser—aristocratic ideas about gender relationships tended to continue to compete for at least the attention of the ruling classes. However, in the English-speaking world in particular, the woman whose virtue was so absolute that guarding it dominated her life to such an extent that it would leave her exhausted and a virtual invalid, came to be the dominant model for ideal womanhood.

Inevitably, by the dawn of the twentieth century, men's attempts to turn women into goddesses of meek and compliant, hyper-pure domesticity had begun to fall apart. This was certainly in part due to the effect of the English-speaking world's increasingly intensive interaction with mainland Europe, where cynicism about the likelihood of the wife's purity had never waned and where, especially during the 1890s, obsessive eroticism was beginning to engulf much of official culture in the form of symbolic representations of the good, the bad, and the ugly in womanhood. Even in Britain and the United States disappointment with the inability of women in general to serve as men's immaculate soul keepers became rampant.

It was clear that the men of the Gilded Age had been given a perfect formula for their spiritual absolution from blame for whatever came to obstruct their mandated evolutionary struggle in search of transcendent superman status. Woman, with her perverse, primitive lack of adaptability to modernity, clearly forced men to succumb



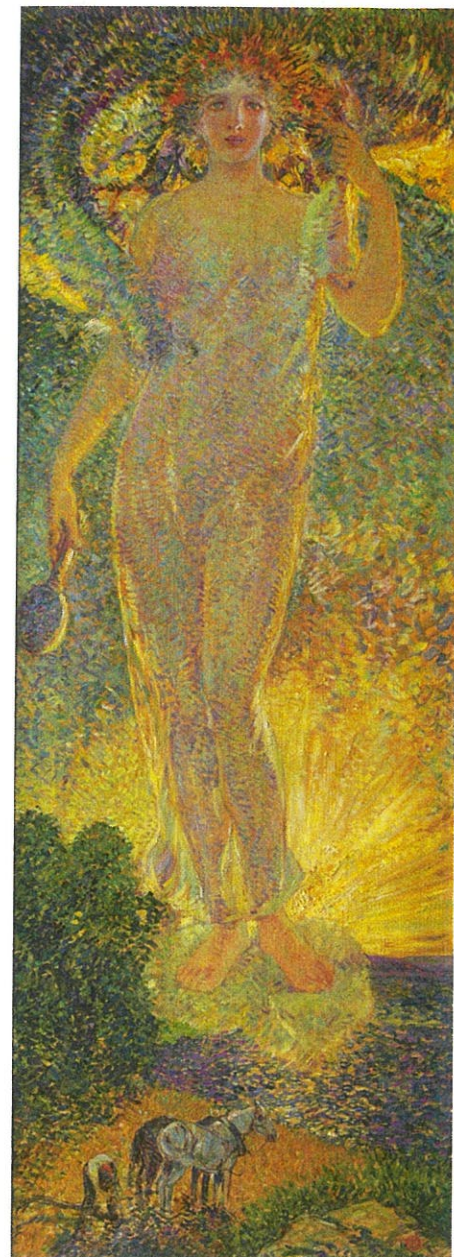


to evil, and if she refused to recognize her position of “natural inferiority” to the evolving male, she inevitably became a “monster” who caused men to slide into various cycles of “devolution.”

During the period between 1875 and 1925 there were relatively few middle-class men, intellectuals or men of wealth and leisure whose minds had not been addled by one or another version of this widespread, cultural prejudice against women. If a woman did not allow herself to be elevated to saintly motherhood or at the very least accept to remain passive in domestic quietude, she must of necessity be a perverse, backsliding creature, an emasculating vampire, determined to destroy the men

around her. European artists were unquestionably especially eager to show women as collectively representative of this latter phase of “degenerative” feminine behavior, while Americans, during this same period, were more likely to stick with idealized images of “wholesome” female passivity, or to feature not-so-terribly-dangerous “symbolic” representations of the “inherent feminine tendency” to bring men to distraction.

Even so, the realities of life were, among the vast majority of men and women who had to work hard to survive, inevitably very different from the elaborate gender fantasies spun by the artists and writers serving the leisure class. Poverty was, as it always had been, a powerful



equalizer of the practical realities involved in the relationships between men and women. For many centuries women and men had worked side by side in the fields—and in the nineteenth century they were often forced to engage in similar back-breaking work under brutal factory conditions as well. If the dominant cultural push of the Gilded Age was to portray women as either angels or devils, there were still a good many artists who were acutely aware of the ravages of poverty—often through personal experience. During the 1870s, before the age became truly gilded, these artists chose to portray the travails of the poor with remarkable candor.

The American painter Gilbert Gaul



ABOVE: Gilbert Gaul, *Waiting*, 1876, o/c, 22 x 28.

RIGHT: Robert McGregor, *Till Eve Again Recalls Them Loaded Home*, c. 1891, o/c, 24 x 36.

ABOVE LEFT: Hugo Ballin, *Goddess of Harvest or Ceres aka Lake Monona*, 1913, o/c, 77 x 28.

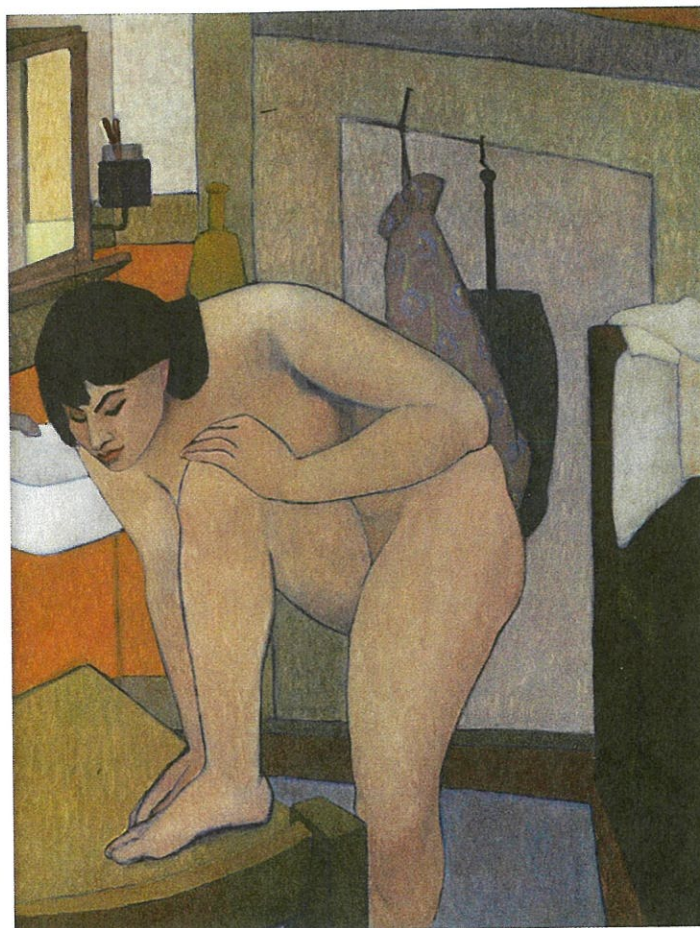
ABOVE FAR LEFT: Maurice Molarsky, *Portrait of a Young Woman Holding a Red Book*, c. 1915, o/c, 50 1/2 x 35.



(1855-1919) was only twenty-one in 1876, when he painted *Waiting*, his strikingly realistic and unsentimental portrait of a hard-scrabble scullery maid. He showed the emotional predicament of an anything-but-idealized young woman who has just been fired from her position, or has just arrived at a new one. In either case—and the artist leaves it to the viewer to decide which is the most likely—the young woman finds

herself, during the most festive time of the year (the mistletoe stuck under her bonnet), her life in upheaval, sitting patiently

in her battered shoes with her worn footlocker nearby, anxiously in wait of an uncertain, and potentially disastrous future.



What is striking about this portrayal of a working woman is that it is highly unconventional within the context of the dominant ideological assumptions of the period during which it was painted, and seems directly in conflict with the dominant social conventions of the time. Imagery such as this, expressive of an unusually independent conception of narrative on the part of the artist, together with a determined emphasis on the emotive realities of circumstance, represents a distinctive critique of the manner in which female subjects were portrayed in the more traditional imagery of the period.

This is also true of a painting such as Walter Shirlaw's (1839-1909) dramatic 1886 *Dawn*. The woman is presented in an almost casual manner. He has painted her very loosely, and, indeed, truly flamboyantly: his work is a tour-de-force of motion-capturing brush strokes, animated by what, during this period, would have been considered an almost reckless use of paint. Even in slumber with doves fluttering in fierce agitation around her head, Shirlaw conveys to the viewer a memory of very



immediate physical warmth and movement. The artist's painterly approach in this work clearly belies the often heard art-historical wisdom maintaining that, before the 1890s, Americans were able to do little in the realm of figure painting except produce slavish copies of the work of their European counterparts.

Maximilien Colin (1862-1894) was born in Bromberg, Prussia, and emigrated with his parents to the United States in 1869. Colin rapidly developed a thriving career for himself as an artist, exhibiting frequently, both in the United States and in Paris, but his life was tragically cut short at thirty-one, when he drowned in Long Island Sound in 1894. He was a brilliant painter of genre scenes. In *Souvenirs*, which he exhibited at the National Academy of Design in New York, he approached the common theme of a well-to-do woman in a luxurious interior quite differently from his European contemporaries. For while they habitually emphasized these women's life of privilege, Colin, in a quite subtle manner, points to the element of isolation and loneliness that often became so acute in

RIGHT: Enrico Lionne, *La Trasteverina* or *Return from the [Feast of] Divine Love*, 1914, o/c, 48 x 32.

LEFT: Belle Baranceanu, *Lee*, c. 1928, o/c, 44 x 34.

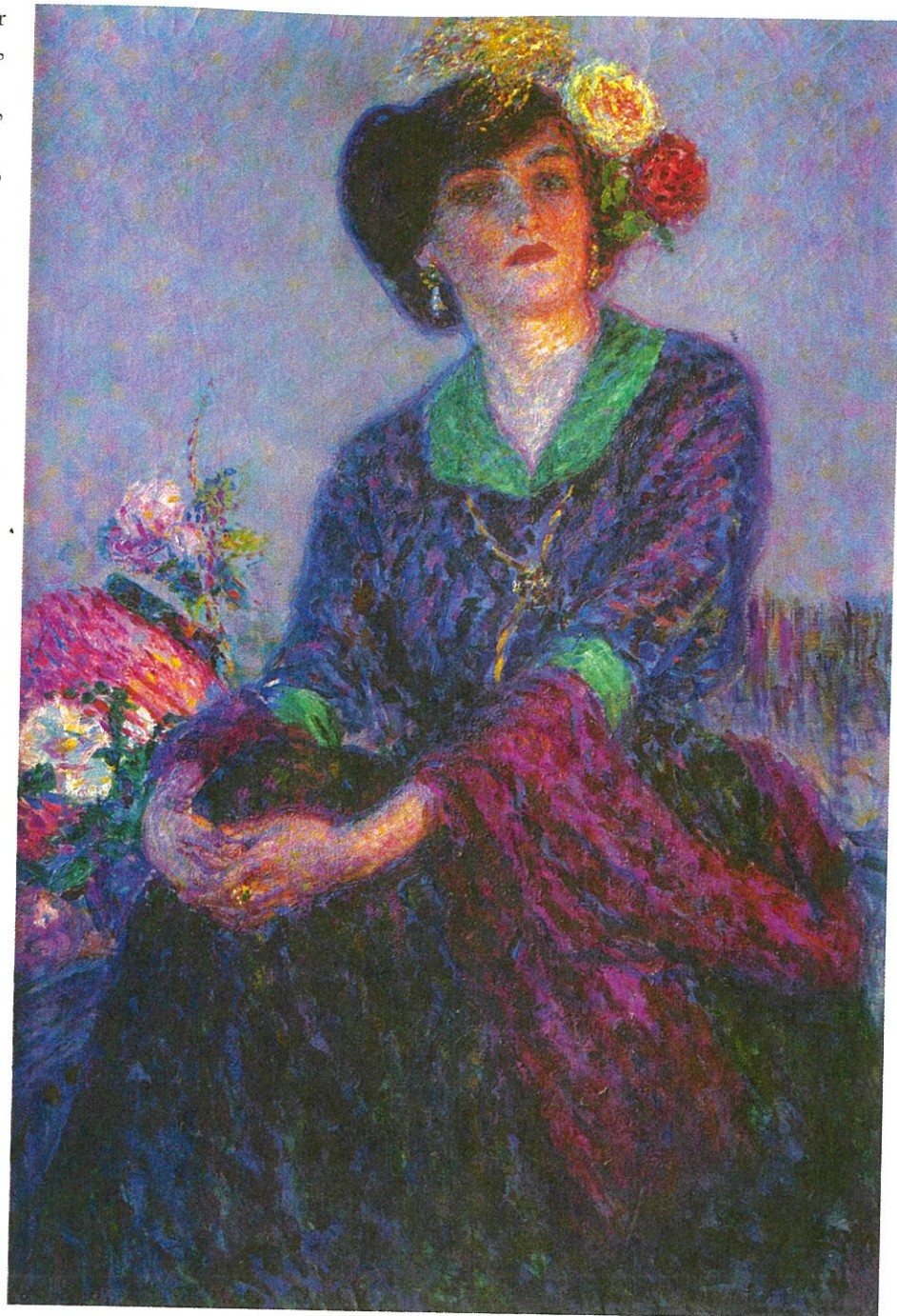
FAR LEFT: Ella Ferris Pell, *Salome*, 1890, o/c, 52 x 34.

BELOW LEFT: Walter Shirlaw, *Dawn*, c. 1886, o/c, 66 x 33.

their lives that they could easily be driven to desperation.

The woman in *Souvenirs* may indeed be surrounded by the trappings of wealth and leisure, but, on closer examination we begin to realize that something is drastically awry in her life: having ceased to read the substantial tome she is holding in her hand, she leans back to rummage through her memories, as the title tells us. Under another book, not even properly folded, but draped over the edge of the table, is a copy of *Le Figaro*, the kind of newspaper whose contents could only serve to poison a good woman's mind, and make her inattentive to her proper duties. "Messy" is the key word here: it clearly identifies this woman's state of domestic discontent. Gilded Age viewers would quickly have noted that the carpet near the piano is in disarray, partially kicked over in a way no proper wife would have tolerated in her house. One of the piano scores has fallen down onto the floor—clearly this woman is by no means an exemplary member of the upper middle-class auxiliary brigade of sacrificial wives ready to serve as the soul keeper to her capital-accumulating husband as she was supposed to. This woman, instead, seems lost, sad, perhaps overcome with regret.

The period's fear of the dangers of "feminization" fortunately did not extend to the women of the working classes, who lived in a social environment that could not afford even to contemplate championing the presumably "higher" standards of the "intellectual" males looking for evolutionary transcendence. No doubt the real world of working women was in some ways as starkly constricted as that of their wealthy sisters, but at least work, harsh as it might be, allowed them to move out into the simple beauties of the everyday world, as the Scottish painter Robert McGregor (1847-1922) was able to show in *Till Eve Again Recalls Them Loaded Home*, his delightful take on the role of women in the management of everyday life on rural farms.



McGregor, who specialized in depicting episodes from the lives of ordinary working people had been heavily influenced by the work of Jules Bastien-Lepage. He was among the relatively few painters of the later nineteenth century who were seriously committed to the representation of working people. *Till Eve Again Recalls Them Loaded Home* refers to the time near sundown when the cows had to be herded back to their stalls to be milked—not a subject that had been much sought after by artists. What is particularly striking about McGregor's rendering of the figures is the

straightforward, yet affectionate, realism of their presentation: on encountering them we instantly warm to the simple humanity of this young mother with her barely-out-of-swaddling baby and a tomboyish older daughter, who is determined to keep her clod-throwing stick at the ready in case the cow they are guarding on her path to the barn might be tempted to stray. As they tramp through the mud, we are certainly expected to recognize that their life is hard, but McGregor also wants us to be aware, by surrounding them with the soft, impres-
(continued on page 95)