

Therapeutic Beauty: Abbott Thayer, Antimodernism, and the Fear of Disease¹

Introduction

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Paris, the capital of the art world at the time, was the most popular destination for young American artists to learn to paint. In classes at the Académie Julian and the École des Beaux-Arts, they studied the complexities of the human form by making detailed anatomical drawings, by copying Renaissance and classical sculpture and, eventually, by drawing and painting directly from the live nude model. With this emphasis on the mastery of the human form, students learned to paint multi-figure compositions featuring mythological and historical themes, typical of French academic painting at the time. The problem for American artists whose training focused on such subjects was the question of “what to paint” once they returned home. (Van Hook, Ch. 2) To be sure, American audiences were far less receptive to paintings of mythological and historical themes, especially as such subjects frequently featured the female nude, which was widely considered a taboo theme. Many American artists resolved this dilemma by focusing on a type of painting which instead featured women who were clothed, refined, and chaste. Depicted individually or in small groups, these women participate in quiet pursuits, such as reading and sewing, or are simply shown gazing dreamily. In any event, these pure white women avoid challenging Victorian American sensibilities. So prominent was this solution to the issue of “what to paint” for American artists returning from study abroad, the subject of the idealized woman became a dominant theme in painting at the time. (Van Hook) A good example of this type of image is Abbott Handerson Thayer’s *Angel* (1888), which represents the artist’s daughter, Mary (Fig. 1). What is interesting about this theme of female purity in art is not only that it exists, but that it was created within an environment completely at odds with the subject matter depicted. While the end of the nineteenth century is often referred to as the “Gilded Age,” a name which evokes the corporate wealth and cultural patronage which characterized the era, it was equally defined by massive immigration,

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working-class violence, overcrowded housing for the poor, garbage-filled streets, industrial pollution, and the spread of epidemic disease—all of which played a role in re-making America as a modern-day nation.

For the most part, scholars have assumed that the process of modernization unfolded independently of artists' depictions of idealized women. Suzanne La Follette, an early contributor to the field, noted in her survey of American art that the "Ideal Beauty" pursued near the turn of the century was "conceived as something tenuous and ethereal" with "as little relation as possible to the vulgar realities of the world" (1929, p. 209). Decades later, the same observation holds sway. In a more recent study on the same theme, art historian Bailey Van Hook commented that with these works artists "ignored the rapid scientific and industrial changes of the era; the conflicts between capital, monopoly, new wealth and the nascent labor movement; the tensions between the American self-image of a mixed yet largely homogeneous society and the acceleration of immigration from different, seemingly alien countries" (1996, p. 136). I argue here, however, that artists may not have been as disengaged from urban industrial modernity as their subject matter suggests. In Thayer's case, persistent references in his letters and other writings to disease, prostitution, garbage, excrement, and germs indicate that the chaste, angelic surfaces of his figures cloak profound concerns. Far from being detached from late-nineteenth-century experience, Thayer was overwrought with anxiety in response to the times in which he lived. In his depictions of female purity and raw nature, he used paint to work through his fears, which only increased with the illness and subsequent death of his first wife, Kate. Thayer sought to protect himself and his family from bodily disintegration by adopting a therapeutic, outdoors-oriented life in the shadow of New Hampshire's Mount Monadnock, his shrine to the pursuit of good health (Fig. 2). In this essay, I hope to show that Thayer's art was motivated by similar concerns: disease, in fact, becomes a defining interest through which his paintings take shape. By discussing some of his major works, I demonstrate how the life and art of a Gilded Age painter was embedded in matters of sickness and health. These connections are summarized in the chronology below, and developed in greater detail throughout the essay:

1850s and 1860s: Abbott Thayer exposed early on to issues of disease through his father, Dr. William Henry Thayer, a specialist in epidemic disease.

1870s: Abbott Thayer marries Kate Bloede. Studies in Paris at the *École des Beaux Arts*. The couple's first child, Mary, is born.

1880: Thayer establishes studio in New York City. Lives in Brooklyn with Kate and their children. They frequently travel around New England.

1888: Kate Thayer admitted to Bloomingdale Hospital to treat “melancholia” (the term then used for depression). Abbott Thayer and his children spend their first summer in Dublin, New Hampshire. Abbott paints *Angel*, the first of his idealized female figures.

1891: Kate Thayer diagnosed with tuberculosis, admitted to a sanatorium in Baldwinsville, Massachusetts, where health worsens; she dies May 3. Abbott Thayer and his children, Mary (age 15), Gerald (age 7) and Gladys (age 4) retreat to Dublin. Abbott paints them in *Virgin Enthroned*. Paints Dublin scenery intermittently in the 1890s.

1892-93: Thayer paints his children again in *A Virgin*.

1894-95: Thayer paints *Caritas* and *Woman in Grecian Gown*. Model for both is Elise Pumpelly, a Dublin neighbor.

1900s and 1910s: Thayer paints many of his Monadnock scenes, including *Monadnock No. 2*.

1920-21: Thayer paints *Monadnock Angel*. Dies May 29, 1921 in Dublin.

Germ and the City

From an early age, disease played a defining role in Thayer's life. He was born in Boston in 1849—the “cholera year”—to Ellen Handerson Thayer and William Henry Thayer, a graduate of Harvard Medical School who specialized in epidemic disease. Dr. Thayer began his medical practice at Boston's Temporary Home for Destitute Children shortly after Abbott's birth but left the institution following an outbreak of cholera. This episode, coupled with his mother's illness from dysentery, sent the young doctor off to Europe to restore his health following this exposure. On returning to America, Dr. Thayer insisted on moving his wife and four young children to a healthier environment outside the city. They lived in Woodstock, Vermont, and then in Ellen Thayer's hometown of Keene, New Hampshire. Many years later the family moved to New York City, where Dr. Thayer worked as a sanitary inspector for the city's Metropolitan Board of Health, promoting awareness of the link between urban sanitation and disease.

While his profession demanded a high level of awareness about disease, Dr. Thayer's concerns about his family's health were hardly unusual at the time. The phenomenal growth of American cities in the decades following the Civil War created a demand for resources beyond what any major metropolis could provide. Crowded housing, a limited supply of clean water, the lack of indoor plumbing and the absence of organized garbage removal contributed to making city life horrifically dirty. To complicate matters, this period also saw the emergence of germ theory. In contrast to an earlier notion of contagion,

based on odiferous miasmas, the new view proposed that invisible microorganisms—called germs—were the carriers of disease. The fact that germs were ubiquitous and impossible to detect generated intense anxiety among the middle and upper classes, who felt defenseless before their threat. As Harriette Plunkett noted in her work on household sanitation, "A man may live on the splendid 'avenue,' in a mansion plumbed in the latest and costliest style, but if, half a mile away, in range with his open window, there is a 'slum,' or even a neglected tenement house, the zephyrs will come along and pick up the disease germs and bear them onward, distributing them to whomsoever it meets, whether he be a millionaire or a shillingaire" (1897, p. 203). Beyond unavoidable contact with disease-causing germs, the degraded quality of urban life proved a further insidious threat. In *The Health of the City*, Hollis Godfrey described the lungs of urban residents, polluted by coal-burning factories, as "streaked and spotted with black lines which chart the blocked-up roads where breath of life once entered, where burned-out wastes once passed" (1910, p. 5). In response to this environment of uncontrollable filth, those with the means to do so—like Dr. Thayer's family—escaped to less toxic settings.

Abbott Thayer studied painting in Paris at the *École des Beaux Arts* in the late 1870s and then taught and worked in New York City. In the late 1880s, he began summering in rural Dublin, New Hampshire, near his childhood home in Keene. The area around Dublin had attracted artists and writers since the early nineteenth century. In particular, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau had viewed Dublin's Mount Monadnock as a kind of spiritual retreat. In a poem named after the mountain, Emerson wrote (as cited in *The Grand Monadnock*, p. 11):

Man in these crags a fastness find
To fight pollution of the mind;
In the wide thaw and ooze of wrong,
Adhere like this fountain strong,
The insanity of towns to stem
With simpleness for stratagem.

A devoted follower of Emerson, Thayer was a profoundly spiritual man. In his pantheistic reverence for nature, he found little of worth in the technological ethos of the modern-day world. Thayer believed that industrialization had "drugged" the nation's soul, creating a people "whose whole conscious existence has been absorbed by the sudden burst into existence of the 'modern conveniences,' one miracle succeeding another at breath-stopping speed—steam and then electricity, with all its revolutionings" (Thomas Brumbaugh Papers). Given its seeming numbness to any deeper truth,

American culture, in Thayer's mind, was destined to become one "glorious electric-lighted pavement, with no beauty anywhere except such as may be able to consist with 'modern enterprise'" (Thomas Brumbaugh Papers).

Dublin offered a setting far from the "insanity of towns" that could fight the "pollution of the mind," as Emerson observed. The very word "Monadnock" means "resistant rock," a sense of which comes through in Thayer's paintings of the mountain. Immutably stationed, Monadnock's monumental form quietly asserts its presence in time and space, absent of any concern with the current mechanical age. In his depictions of the mountain, Thayer typically shows Monadnock surrounded by a thicket of trees, which create a physical barrier between mountain and viewer, protecting it from unwanted company.

Monadnock No. 2 (1912) is typical of the way he represented the mountain on canvas (Fig. 2).

Monadnock's sunlit, snowcapped peak rises visibly above the trees, appearing at a considerable distance from the mountain's base, with no apparent link between them. Thayer's loosely rendered bank of trees limits human access; by preventing entry beyond the painting's open foreground, the mountain takes on a dark, foreboding quality.

As a relic of uncultivated nature, Monadnock functions in a similar way to the untamed wilderness of the nineteenth century which, as historian Roderick Nash explains, acted as an "antipode of civilization, of cities, and of machines" by embodying "the virtues these entities lacked" (1967, p. 157). According to Nash, in such settings "Americans detected the qualities of innocence, purity, cleanliness, and morality which seemed on the verge of succumbing to utilitarianism and the surge of progress"—the very qualities that attracted Thayer to Monadnock, both as a painter and an activist (1967, p. 157).

Insisting that the mountain's "virginity" belonged to individuals like himself, "accustomed to feed[ing] their souls by gazing at Monadnock," Thayer angrily protested efforts by seasonal residents of Dublin to use the mountain as a setting for private summer homes (Dublin Historical Society). Quoting Emerson, the artist wrote local property owners that "what the world needs is ... some proof that man can see without taking" (Dublin Historical Society). His painted depictions of Monadnock's snowcapped peak further underscore Thayer's interests, since winter was a time of year when summer residents were guaranteed to be absent. Snow also functions as a purifying agent, cleansing the mountain of any threats to its "primeval, wild nature-purity," so valued by Thayer.

Thayer was particularly concerned to keep the area around Monadnock clean, and he pleaded with his Dublin neighbors on the subject of trash removal. Given that "no town dump has yet been established here," he explained in a letter to fellow residents, it was critical that "any kind of rubbish" be carried away to avoid littering the roadways and surrounding land (Nelson White Papers). We know from Thayer's daughter Gladys that the artist had been concerned about trash since his youth: "I have heard him say," she once wrote, "that when he was [a] small boy, if, on some pleasant ramble through woods or along the brooks, he chanced upon an ugly dump of rubbish, all the rest of his day would seem clouded or depressed" (Nelson White Papers). During the family's regular treks up Monadnock, Thayer "never failed to pick up bits of paper or any disfiguring rubbish left about" (Nelson White Papers). In fact, Gladys recalled, "we enjoyed many rainy road walks with this special mission of gathering up and burning stray papers" (Nelson White Papers). From Thayer's perspective, any sign of a man-made presence threatened to destroy Monadnock's pristine beauty.

Angels and Madonnas

Thayer's shift to angels and Madonnas might seem a natural outgrowth of his Dublin experience, since Monadnock, purged of trash and covered in snow, is associated with purity, similar to the virginal women in paintings such as *Angel*. In truth, however, the two subjects stem from another common source: the disease and death of Thayer's wife, Kate Bloede. Over the years scholars have tended to treat Kate's death cursorily, as the result of melancholia and a "pulmonary complication," but recent recognition that she died from tuberculosis offers a new avenue of understanding (Murray). Diagnosed with severe melancholia in 1888 following the death of her father and her daughter's sickness from scarlet fever, Kate was initially hospitalized, then admitted to a Massachusetts asylum. Her already fragile condition was soon complicated by tuberculosis, a discovery that prompted doctors to move her to a healthier environment. Within a month of her arrival at a Baldwinsville, Massachusetts, sanatorium, however, Kate Thayer's condition rapidly declined. She died on May 3, 1891.

Tuberculosis was considered a disease of refinement in the early nineteenth century, the era of John Keats and Frédéric Chopin. But by 1882, in the wake of Robert Koch's discovery of the tubercle bacillus, a fear of contagion and germs had replaced the discourse of romantic genius (Dubos & Dubos,

1952; Ott, 1996; Rothman, 1994). No longer believed to be passed through family bloodlines, tuberculosis was reconfigured as a disease of the masses—a by-product of modernization or, as recent historians have called it, society's "price" for industrialization—and thus linked to the city and to Thayer's broader antimodernist concerns (Dubos & Dubos, 1952, p. 207; Ott, 1996; Rothman, 1994). Since the nature of modern life in the city made contact with the tubercle bacillus impossible to avoid, medical advice instead emphasized strengthening individual immunity. The best way to increase resistance was to limit one's exposure to the city, which was dense with contagion. While doctors debated what kind of setting—wooded, high altitude, desert, or seaside—proved the most beneficial, all agreed that the goal was to find an environment "uncontaminated by civilization" (Dubos & Dubos, 1952, p. 176; Ott, 1996; Rothman, 1994;).

By the end of the nineteenth century, such therapeutic settings had been institutionalized through the sanatorium movement. In the words of the renowned physician Edward Livingston Trudeau, the sanatorium was designed to "improve the patient's nutrition and increase his resistance to the disease, by placing him under the most favorable environment obtainable" (cited in Rothman, 1994, p.203). As Trudeau went on to explain, the "main elements of such an environment are an invigorating climate, an open-air life, rest, coupled with the careful regulation of the daily habits and an abundant supply of nutritious food" (cited in Rothman, 1994, p.203). Built far from polluted cities, sanatorium facilities featured structures like the lean-to pictured here at Loomis Sanatorium in the Adirondacks, which provided round-the-clock access to cleansing, therapeutic air (Fig. 3). Combined with other aspects of the experience, as described by Trudeau, it was hoped that the sanatorium stay would sufficiently fortify a patient's immunities to allow for a safe and healthy reintegration into modern metropolitan life.

In theory, the principles of "climate therapy," as it was often called, were beneficial even in the absence of manifest symptoms. Doctors such as Edward Otis, author of *The Great White Plague: Tuberculosis*, hoped that patients could return home following a sanatorium stay as "apostles of the fresh air life and wholesome living in the communities in which they reside," instructing those around them in its tenets. For the family and friends of a recovering patient such guidance was particularly important, since intimate contact with the disease inhibited a person's ability to fight it (Otis, 1909, p. 113).

Although Kate Thayer's sanatorium stay allowed for limited family contact, her husband and children nevertheless adopted what appears to have been their own version of a therapeutic regime. According to Dr. Thayer's diary, Abbott and his family retreated to Dublin on May 15, 1891, less than two weeks after Kate's death. While there, his father wrote, the artist intended "to paint no more portraits this summer, and to take no pupils—but to rest in landscapes," painting only on rainy days (Abbott Handerson Thayer and Thayer Family Papers).

Throughout his career, Abbott Thayer had struggled with his health. In a letter to patron Charles Freer, he acknowledged as much, admitting that his life had "always been different from that of most of the other men. St. Gaudens and Dewing and Tryon for instance know no particular limit to their bodily strength.... Whereas I have always been too tired to work over four hours a day and my life has been one steady fight to be fresh enough for continued labor" (Thomas Brumbaugh Papers). In addition to his health concerns, Thayer, who had already lost two sons as infants a decade earlier, was now charged with the care of his three remaining children—Mary, Gerald, and Gladys. In 1890, during Kate's illness, Abbott's father, Dr. Thayer, noted in his diary: "Abbott's children have been well and hearty these two years—thanks to his judicious management and their free outdoor life" (Abbott Handerson Thayer and Thayer Family Papers). Following Kate's death, Dublin continued to appeal to the artist as a setting well suited to the continued "management" of his family's health (Abbott Handerson Thayer and Thayer Family Papers).

Indeed, visitors to the Thayer homestead in Dublin often remarked on the family's unusual routine. The painter Rockwell Kent, who worked as a copyist for Thayer, once described the family as a bunch of "nature worshippers" (Kent, 1955, p. 102). More specifically, according to Barry Faulkner, the artist's nephew and student, Thayer "shaped his life and the life of his family on Emerson, Audubon and Monadnock" (1973, p. 23-24). If nature served as the family's religion, Mount Monadnock functioned as its shrine. In Faulkner's words, the Thayers viewed the mountain as "their totem, their fetish, the object of their adoration. They surrendered themselves to the sorcery of its primitive being" (1973, p. 28). On a typical day, Faulkner recalls, Thayer spent his morning painting, then "climbed the mountain" or took long trail walks with his family: with Gerald especially, he "prowled [Monadnock's] peaks and precipices, its

naked spine, and knew well the mysteries of the mountain brook and its groves of spruce and hemlock" (1973, p. 28).

These vigorous explorations encouraged the kind of deep breathing then believed to free toxins from contaminated lungs. According to nineteenth-century health writer Ella Adelia Fletcher, "breath is life, and ... the more air you breathe in the highest state of purity, the deeper your hold upon life will be and the more radiant your health" (Fletcher, 1901, p. 109). Mountain air was widely considered the best type of air, since a higher elevation all but guaranteed its purity. Many also felt that high-altitude air was particularly effective for tubercular patients. Physician Alfred Loomis attributed his recovery from the disease to the air of the Adirondacks, citing its "specially vitalized and purified atmosphere, free from germs and impurities of any kind, and laden with the resinous exhalations of myriads of evergreens" (cited in Rothman, 1994, p. 159). This sense of a purified atmosphere comes through in Thayer's paintings of Monadnock in winter, which highlight a time of year when freezing temperatures had killed disease-bearing mosquitoes and other sources of contagion. Thayer's emphasis on the trees surrounding the mountain further point to Dublin's therapeutic qualities in light of Loomis's comment about the salutary effects of the evergreen's "resinous exhalations."

In keeping with the sanatorium's fresh-air routine, the Thayers also slept outdoors year-round. According to Faulkner, at night they read aloud inside before bundling up and heading out to their individualized lean-tos, where they were then lulled to sleep by a classical violinist hired by the artist (Fig. 4). Among the many structures designed to increase exposure to fresh air during sleep, the three-sided lean-to was deemed a particularly good choice: as one sanatorium physician attested, it "met the requirements for open-air cure more completely and satisfactorily than most others" (Huber, 1906, p. 222). Thayer further enhanced its benefits by inventing a breath catcher, a device worn around the nose and mouth, which was intended to prevent the body's noxious exhalations from freezing onto bedding at night (White, 1951, p. 104). [The artist also wore a special kind of wool underwear marketed for its protective qualities against disease (Faulkner, 1973, p. 19)] Guests were apparently spared from taking part in this nighttime outdoor ritual. But owing to Thayer's belief in "all-out exposure to fresh air," windows in the family home were kept open throughout the year, "except during blizzards and thunderstorms," Faulkner said, making the cottage frigid in winter (1973, p. 20).

In addition to being raised in this open-air setting, Thayer's children were privately tutored at home on account of their father's "morbid fear of germs" (Faulkner, 1973, p. 24). Keeping his children within his immediate environment served the artist's emotional and psychological needs as well. As scholar Ross Anderson writes, Thayer relied on his family for "his sense of self-worth"; he "required the unconditional adulation that only members of his own household could provide" (1982, p. 70). Given the role of his children following Kate's death, it is perhaps not surprising that they inspired Thayer's earliest ideal figures. *Angel*, for instance, represents Mary, the artist's first daughter and eldest child. Since the timing of the painting roughly coincides with the onset of Kate's illness, Mary as angel symbolically marks the absence of the woman Thayer once wrote that he "utterly worshipped" and considered "more God-like than anybody else." The painting may also reference the "angel of death," a phrase commonly used in the nineteenth century to describe tuberculosis. Mary's pale, chalky skin, emphasized by the whiteness of her wings and robe, conveys a fragile appearance resembling the effects of consumption with her delicate stature and disembodied gaze (see Dubos & Dubos, 1952, pp. 53-57; Hirsh, 2004). Mary/Kate thus binds the contradictory tensions in Thayer's art between healthy daughter and sickly mother, collapsing the promise of wholesome youth with the horror of bodily disintegration.

A few years later all three children appear in *Virgin Enthroned*, which was completed in 1891, the year of Kate's death (Fig. 5). Using a format adopted from Italian Renaissance art, Thayer portrayed Mary as the seated central figure, assuming the role of her Christian namesake while at the same time stepping in as a substitute for her mother. Thayer had previously pictured his wife as a Madonna in *Mother and Child*, in which Kate holds Gerald, the couple's only surviving son, in a position traditionally assumed by the Christ Child. By the time Thayer painted *Virgin Enthroned*, Gerald and Gladys accompany Mary in a manner reminiscent of Renaissance Madonna groupings, such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks*, in which Christ and St. John the Baptist appear with the Virgin Mary. In *Virgin Enthroned*, Thayer's children provide their father with his own sacred trinity, while serving as reminders of Kate, the continued silent reference in all these paintings.

In *A Virgin*, of 1892–93, Thayer repeated his earlier format, albeit transferred to an outdoor setting and with all three figures standing (Fig. 6). The clouds emerging from Mary's shoulders as wings allude to Thayer's earlier depiction of her in *Angel*, and thus again to her role as a stand-in for Kate. Given

the way in which Kate's illness focused her family's attention on nature and health, it seems significant, too, that Gerald, Mary, and Gladys, shown barefoot and windswept, are depicted on a vigorous walk. The representation of nature, as seen in the rough, haphazard patches of grass, flowers, and foliage on the ground, may illustrate the "primeval, wild nature-purity" Thayer admired in Dublin and Monadnock. Immersed in this therapeutic environment while perhaps on one of their daily mountain walks, Thayer's children embody the life their father embraced. They, like their mother, are transformed into sacred figures.

Although he remarried four months after Kate's death, Thayer's second wife, Emma Beach, a longtime family friend, never appears in paint as one of these ideal women. Instead, Dublin neighbors with a similar investment in the area's therapeutic promise served as Thayer's models, in addition to his children. Clara May, the model for *Winged Figure* (1889, The Art Institute of Chicago) was one such neighbor. Clara, the daughter of a Brooklyn businessman, graduated from Radcliffe College and married an Episcopalian minister. Responding to her plans to leave the area, Thayer wrote to her that she was "the very symbol of all the joys and healths Dublin had given us." And he asked, "Why, why, why are the Mays breaking up the dear Dublin life for all of us?" (Thomas Brumbaugh Papers). Another neighbor, Elise Pumpelly, who appears in *Caritas* (1894–95, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) and *Woman in Grecian Gown* (ca. 1894, Addison Gallery of American Art), was the daughter of Harvard geologist Raphael Pumpelly, one of Dublin's first summer residents. Pumpelly significantly contributed to the area's sanitary health by establishing a bacteriological and clinical laboratory to safeguard local milk supplies. He also worked to drain farmland in the area of stagnant pools of water in an effort to minimize the presence of mosquitoes. Appropriately enough, his daughter appears in Thayer's painting wearing loose clothing that was prized as a model of hygiene and health.

Like other artists of the day who painted idealized young women—for example, Francis Millet's portrayal in *An Autumn Idyll* (1892, Brooklyn Museum)—Thayer draped his figures in classicizing dress. A late-nineteenth-century revival of classical culture, which included widespread civic interest in historical pageants, the growth of college fraternities, and the phenomenal popularity of the 1880 novel *Ben Hur*, set in ancient Rome, helps to account for the widespread use of Greek gowns in painting from this period. The fact that Thayer's generation learned to paint the figure from the study of Greek and Roman sculpture

offers another partial explanation for its repeated appearance in art. Yet in Thayer's case, as for other artists at the time, this reference to the Greeks was largely driven, again, by an interest in health.

Throughout the nineteenth century, medical professionals, women's rights supporters, and physical culture advocates were among those who challenged conventional wisdom on the subject of women's dress. According to health enthusiast Bernarr MacFadden in *The Power and Beauty of Superb Womanhood*, the contorted, "caged-in" look of modern-day fashion could be blamed for the "physical ugliness, weakness and sickness" that plagued American women (1901, pp. 32-33). More than any other garment, the corset "crushed, maltreated and distorted" the female form from an early age, leaving women physically "retarded" as adults, MacFadden said. In the words of one reformer, the tight-laced corset "hugs like a bear—crushing in the ribs, injuring the lungs and heart, the stomach, and many other internal organs" (Haweis, 1879, p. 48-49). "Before" and "after" drawings in books on women's health dramatized the difference over time between the body's natural contours and a tightly corseted waist (Fig. 7).

As a corrective, women were advised to rethink modern notions of beauty through the study of ancient Greek art. As described by Frances Steele and Elizabeth Adams in *Beauty of Form and Grace of Vesture*, ancient Greece represented "the period of the highest physical cultivation of the race known to history" (1892, p. 57). For a symposium on women's dress, Steele wrote that "the study of beautiful dress for women necessarily involves the admiration of classical standards; not an acquiescence in their fitness for sculpture, not a tolerance of them in famous pictures, but a love for them, a conviction in their rightness, a persuasion of their sweetness and majesty" (September 1892, p. 504). Among ancient works recommended for aesthetic contemplation, none received more praise than the *Venus de Milo*, celebrated as the embodiment of beauty defined by health. Born of a culture with respect for the body and an interest in physical fitness, the sculpture represented an aesthetic for modern-day women to embrace. For reformers like MacFadden, the *Venus de Milo* was the perfect model to promote a life of "good food with plenty of exercise, less art with more nature, less toilet artificialities with more robustness, less study with more play, less paint with more oxygen, and less fashionableness with more womanliness" (p. 45).

This vision of beauty directly informs Thayer's idealized figures. The artist knew the *Venus de Milo* from his student days in Paris, when it was a recent addition to the collections of the Louvre. He

painted an oil study of the *Venus* and spoke with pride of owning a reproduced fragment of the sculpture. In a letter to fellow artist Everton Sainsbury written at an early stage of his career, Thayer stated that he "owned nothing, except a cooking stove, the head of the *Venus de Milo*, Michaelangelo's 'Prisoner's Head,' a great many [of his own paintings] and a few clothes and warm hearts" (Nelson White Papers). Moreover, photographs of Thayer's models suggest an uncanny correspondence between his practice as an artist and the advice of contemporary beauty writers (Fig. 8). Just as writers Frances Steele and Elizabeth Adams encouraged women "to make pictures of themselves" by studying ancient statues and experimenting with classical dress, Thayer used paintbrush and canvas to turn his models into visions that were inspired by ancient example. In both cases, the Greek chiton enjoyed a privileged status. Though perhaps impractical as a form of modern dress, women were nonetheless encouraged to study its design, which "in no way contradicted the natural form, and probably interfered with healthful activity less than any other apparel ever worn" (p. 203). For Thayer, like Steele and Adams, the chiton appealed as a refreshingly healthy alternative to the highly controlled and contorted look promoted by current fashion.

While these differences in style might *seem* insignificant, they were in fact crucial for Thayer. As scholar Alexander Nemerov has shown, the artist was exceedingly sensitive to the subject of women and representation (1997). Having lived through a period of unparalleled growth in celebrity culture and mass-media entertainment, Thayer was attuned to the ways in which women in American culture were on display as never before. More often than not, such public exhibition violated his sense of propriety. In a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, he protested the newspaper's practice of publishing photographs of society women. Perceiving a breach in the rules of decorum that once separated public from private, Thayer said the *Times* was doing its "full share to make prostitutes of your nation's women" by picturing the city's socialites (Thomas Brumbaugh Papers).

A letter to the short-lived arts periodical *Bruno's Weekly* offered an even more revealing instance of what Thayer considered transgressive. In response to two of the journal's issues featuring cover illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley, Thayer asked how a publication with a "big-sterned, grown-up female cherub" and a "clawed hideosity" on the front could possibly include anything "sweet and wholesome" inside. Beardsley's notoriously flamboyant sexuality made his work an easy target for Thayer. Yet given

the painter's obsession with purity, the language he used to express his contempt for these drawings was striking in its vulgarity. Describing these issues of the journal as "systematically daubed outside with stinking shit," Thayer warned that future volumes would be taken "between thumb and finger as I would my hat if I had to fish it out of a country privy-vault" and burned (Nelson White Papers). Thayer ended his letter by stating that he "prayed" the journal's editor, as well as Beardsley himself, might find "help to climb out of the cesspool you are in" (Nelson White Papers).

Thayer's concern with the depiction of women as wholesome and pure comes through, too, in his attacks on the French academic art then celebrated at Parisian art schools. In a comment referring to the alabaster nudes painted by his former teacher, Jean-Léon Gérôme—a favorite French master among Gilded Age collectors—Thayer insisted that Gérôme belonged to "that raft of whore-painters" who specialized in pictures of the Parisian "demi-monde" and could scarcely be considered artists (Nelson White Papers). Continuing in a letter to collector John Gellatly, a patron of Thayer's work, he noted that in the end it made no difference if artists like Gérôme "can't tell a flower from a wax-flower" since "their sleek tin truck ultimately reaches our museums" (Nelson White Papers). Passionate in his warning, Thayer implored Gellatly to see that these so-called works of art were nothing more than pictures of "whores" painted by men who possess "mediocre, useless skills" and who are "stone blind to any attribute except fuckableness" (Nelson White Papers).

Thayer, by contrast, saw himself as "one of God's own tools." In a letter to Charles Freer, he explained that his paintings were "not made to sell" but instead served a "pure prophetic quality" with "an inestimable value to the nation" (Thomas Brumbaugh Papers). Indeed, through paintings of snowy mountain landscapes and healthy, natural women, Thayer worked to stem the tide of modernity's wholesale destruction. Toward the end of his career, these two key subjects literally merge in *Monadnock Angel*, in which one of Thayer's characteristically white-robed angels appears atop the mountain, addressing the viewer with open arms (Fig. 9). Thayer once explained that he believed in a "winged part of a people" who are like "great birds" standing as "the prophetic souls who strive against a national decadence" (Thomas Brumbaugh Papers). *Monadnock Angel* appears as one such guide. Completed just before the artist's death in 1921, the painting not only revisits his favorite themes but does so again with a haunting reminder of Kate, from whose death Thayer never fully recovered. One wonders if this angel,

modeled on Thayer's daughter Gladys, is intended as a resurrected Kate, returning to retrieve her aging husband. Following his death, Thayer's ashes were spread across Monadnock, an act that would seem to support this suggestion. In any event, with *Monadnock Angel* Thayer gives his viewer another chance—perhaps the last—to hear him out. Unlike the socially prominent "prostitutes" pictured in the *New York Times*, Beardsley's "clawed hideosity," and Gérôme's erotic nudes, the women in Thayer's paintings, like the angel in Figure 9, remain untainted by a contaminating urban milieu. Yet Thayer's angel, so easily interpreted as purity and innocence, is a complex, multilayered figure. While her outstretched arms suggest redemption from a toxic modern world, the ominous mountain on which she stands, combined with her mask of purity disguising disease and death, makes the image more ambiguous, suggesting "the prophetic souls" which Thayer hoped would bring national redemption were perhaps less promising than he imagined.

Conclusion

While Thayer's particular story is unique, similar issues of health and disease informed the lives of many other Gilded-Age artists. For instance, the most famous American sculptor in the late nineteenth-century, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, who was one of Thayer's colleagues and friends, lived with cancer for several years before his death from the disease in 1907. Like Thayer, Saint-Gaudens pursued his own version of a health regime. Following his diagnosis, Saint-Gaudens turned his summer home in Cornish, New Hampshire, into a year-round recreational retreat with tennis courts, a golf course, a pool, and a toboggan run, modeling his life on the physical culture of the ancient Greeks in an effort to save his health. George de Forest Brush, a painter who was a neighbor of Thayer's in Dublin, New Hampshire, built his own birch bark canoe, lived in a teepee, performed tribal dances, and otherwise pursued Native American practices as a way of deepening his ties to nature and distancing himself from modern ways of life. Moreover, at least one Gilded Age patron, Charles Freer, who suffered from congenital syphilis, developed his art collection around works he found personally reinvigorating given his fragile physical health. As Sharon Hirsh's essay in this volume shows, health and illness figured centrally in the life and work of late nineteenth century in Europe, as well. Indeed, as scholars in the field are now beginning to realize, the history of art intersects in many ways with issues of disease and health.

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Fig. 9. Abbott Handerson Thayer, *Monadnock Angel*, 1920–21. Oil, 91 1/8 × 60 in. Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, Gift of anonymous donor. Addison Gallery of American Art, All rights reserved