

Helena de Kay: Apropos of Artistic Careers, Letters and Flowers

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Winslow Homer
Portrait of Helena de Kay, about 1872
(detail)
[\[+ info\]](#)

fig. 1

Winslow Homer
Portrait of Helena de Kay, about 1872
Oil on panel, 31 × 47 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, inv. 591 (1983.25)



fig. 2

Helena de Kay and her husband
Richard Watson Gilder

**1**

See the complete auction catalogue at [2023 February 10 The Gilded Age: Property from the Collection of Richard Watson Gilder and Helena de Kay Gilder American Art Signature® Auction #8106](#).

2

Helena de Kay, *Sketchbook, 'Raywood, Staten Island'*, 1880–93, pastels on onion paper in bound ledger book, 27.6 × 22.2 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Mary Lublin, 2023, 2023.284.1; and Anne Goddard Morse, *Helena de Kay Gilder Reading*, 1880s, watercolour on paper, 14 × 8.9 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Mary Lublin, 2023, 2023.284.2.

In 2023, a series of events shed new light on the universe of Helena de Kay (1846–1916), the model for a small oil painting by Winslow Homer (1836–1910) whose sources of inspiration and significance we are still exploring [fig. 1]. What did this painting mean to its creator, Winslow Homer, and its first owner, Helena de Kay? What makes it a portrait? Is it the resemblance to Helena? Or do we know that it is a portrait from the title given to it by the sitter and her family, or, alternatively, from piecing together the circumstances in which it was painted from the correspondence between Homer and De Kay?

The collection owned by Helena de Kay and her husband, Richard Watson Gilder (1844–1909), was put up for auction on 10 February 2023 [fig. 2].¹ The sale included personal objects and artworks that help contextualise the oil painting in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection. Two of the lots listed, a sketchbook belonging to Helena and a portrait of her reading painted by Anne Goddard Morse (1855–1938), were subsequently gifted to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.²



fig. 3
Helena de Kay
[Roses], n.d.
Watercolour and pencil on paper,
43.2 × 52.7 cm
Heritage Auctions, 10 February 2023,
lot 67138

Concurrently, the *New York Art Worlds, 1870–1890* exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum took a look at Helena de Kay.³ The show featured works executed by her and other pieces to which she is related in some way, be it as model, former owner or promotor of their creation.

In addition, the correspondence between Winslow Homer and Helena de Kay became accessible – eight letters dated between 1872 and 1886⁴ – bringing to the fore new information on their relationship around the time Homer painted this portrait, which he eventually gave to De Kay.

A Window on Helena de Kay's Private Life

More than a hundred years after Helena de Kay's death, the sale of her personal objects has opened a window on her family, artistic and social life. The lots put up for auction included many works by De Kay herself, mostly small and executed on paper. As little attention has been paid to her artistic side to date – possibly because of her greater dedication to illustration, for which she has not always been given due credit – the auction provided an excellent opportunity to learn about the pieces dating from her student days in New York in the late 1860s. These charcoal sketches and other drawings depicting biblical episodes, figure studies, landscapes and nudes were probably produced during her classes in life drawing at the National Academy of Design. Also notable are her many watercolours of the places where she lived or holidayed, as well as her studies of flowers [fig. 3], which later illustrated magazines and books such as Richard Watson Gilder's *The New Day* (1875). A poet, critic and editor of *Scribner's* and *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, Gilder became her husband in 1874 and, along with the couple's seven children, appears in many of the drawings put up for sale.

3
In gallery 773 of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, from 12 December 2022 to 21 July 2024.

4
We quote from the letters and reproduce a few of their pages courtesy of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, which acquired them in 1999 together with other manuscripts belonging to the De Kay-Gilder family.



fig. 4

Attributed to Winslow Homer
***Helena Lying on the Beach*, n.d.**
Pencil on paper, 8.6 × 14.3 cm
Heritage Auctions, 23 February 2023,
lot 67129

5

Sarah Burns, 'The Courtship of Winslow Homer', in *The Magazine Antiques*, New York, Brant Publications, vol. 165, February 2002, pp. 69–75.

6

Letter from Winslow Homer to Helena de Kay, 15 November [no year], Lilly Library, see note 4 above.

7

Lloyd Goodrich is thought to have visited Helena de Kay's daughter Rosamond Gilder once to see the portrait Helena had painted of Winslow Homer. See [Richard Watson and Helena de Kay Gilder papers, 1874-1878 | Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution](#) | [Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution \(si.edu\)](#).

Among the portraits of Helena de Kay is a drawing attributed to Winslow Homer showing her lying on the beach [fig. 4]. Authors such as Sarah Burns point out the possibility that De Kay may have posed for Homer on other occasions during the months before and after the creation of the Thyssen-Bornemisza portrait: for example, for *The Butterfly* and *Summer Afternoon*, both dated 1872 and owned by the Cooper Hewitt Museum.⁵ Although it is difficult to furnish documentary evidence that De Kay was the model, we do know that Homer relied on her to progress with his work:

My work this Winter will be good or very bad. The good work will depend on your coming to see me once a month at least. Is this asking too much?⁶

We also know that the roles were occasionally reversed and that it was Helena de Kay who portrayed Homer, according to the testimony of the author of the artist's catalogue raisonné, Lloyd Goodrich.⁷ Another object related to this friendship is a gold ring bearing the inscription 'AMI POUR LA VIE' [friend for life], which, as the catalogue of the 2023 auction stated, may have been a gift from Winslow Homer to Helena de Kay.



fig. 5
Mary Hallock Foote
Helena and Mary, n.d.
 Pencil and wash on paper laid
 on board, 18.7 x 14 cm
 Heritage Auctions, 10 February 2023,
 lot 67108

While De Kay's bond with Homer during those years has aroused interest due to a possible romantic attachment, the sale items have also highlighted her intense relationship with the writer and illustrator Mary Hallock (1847–1938), a classmate at the Cooper Union from 1867 to 1870. The women exchanged more than 600 letters that document their friendship and artistic development until De Kay's death in 1911.⁸ In one of these letters, Hallock refers to Homer's influence, appreciative of the fact that he does not succumb to triviality or 'prettiness':

What an advantage to have Winslow Homer around! You'll pick up arey [ever] so many crumbs of wisdom. I do think his pictures are very masterly looking and never trivial or 'pretty'.⁹

The relationship between the two women is also borne out by drawings such as the one Hallock entitled *Helena and Mary*, which was kept by the De Kay-Gilder family and has now come to light [fig. 5]. During these years Hallock confessed to Helena de Kay's future husband:

Do you know, sir, until you came, I believe [Helena] loved me almost as girls love their lovers. I know I loved her so.¹⁰

In 1876 Mary Hallock's life was turned around when she married a mining engineer whose work took the couple to California, Colorado and Idaho. There, encouraged by Helena and Richard, she became one of the most representative women writers of frontier stories, which she illustrated herself.¹¹ Hallock's tales, which were published in *Scribner's* and its successor, *The Century Magazine*, the leading illustrated monthly in the United States whose managing editor was Richard W. Gilder, earned her great renown. Together with the American painter Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), in 1893 she was chosen as a jury member for the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition.

8
 There are 613 letters, written between 1868 and 1916, and 65 from Mary Hallock Foote to Richard W. Gilder, in the Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, California.

9
 Letter no. 15, folio 14, box 6, Foote papers. Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, California.

10
 Letter from Mary Hallock to Richard W. Gilder, 13 December 1873. Quoted from Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America', in *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 1, autumn 1975, p. 7.

11
 The account of the experiences of a woman in the American West as a counterpoint to the views portrayed by the also highly popular Frederic Remington (1861–1909), which are dominated by figures of cowboys, Indians and soldiers and well represented in the Thyssen collections.

fig. 6

Helena de Kay
Paint box with nude study, about 1871
 Oil on wood, 5.7 × 23.8 × 13.7 cm
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift
 of Mary and William de Kay Pappenheimer,
 in celebration of the Museum's 150th anniversary,
 2019, 2019.442.1



Also prominent among the mementoes kept by the De Kay-Gilder family are the drawings and paintings made by another woman artist, Cecilia Beaux (1855–1942). Ten years Helena's junior, Cecilia studied in Philadelphia and Paris. When she returned to the United States in 1889, Helena became her mentor and protector and took her in for long periods. The many portraits Beaux painted of the couple and their children attest to their familiarity, and over the years she grew especially close to Dorothea (1882–1920), the eldest of Helena's daughters, who became her muse and close companion. The image we have of the mature Helena de Kay is the one captured in Beaux's 1911 portrait, on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art since 2019.

De Kay and the New York Art Scene

As pointed out earlier, there are few examples of Helena de Kay's art in public collections, though the extent of her activity as a cultural tastemaker is recurrently touched on in the abovementioned *New York Art Worlds, 1870–1890* show. The earliest testimonies date from her time as a student at the Cooper Union, a revolutionary institution in art teaching since 1859 inasmuch as it admitted both men and women. The paint box Helena used as a student there is featured in this show [fig. 6]. De Kay's descendants gifted it to the Metropolitan

Museum in 2019 on the institution's 150th anniversary. The museum was founded precisely during Helena's formative years and is the product of the progressive artistic and cultural vitality to which she also contributed.

What is distinctive about this paint box is that its lid displays a sketch of a nude figure, whose dating is consistent with the period women were admitted to life drawing classes at the National Academy of Design. Some of her closest female classmates at the time were Mary Hallock and Maria Oakey Dewing (1845–1927), sharing a studio with the latter. It was also around that time that Helena de Kay met Winslow Homer, possibly through her art critic brother, Charles de Kay, who had probably used Winslow Homer's studio in the University Building in New York while the artist was visiting Europe in 1867. Homer became Helena's mentor for a time when they both had ateliers in the Tenth Street Studio Building.¹² A letter from Homer dated 22 December 1872 hints at their close relationship and regular contact:

My dear Miss Helena

If you would like to give your mother a Christmas present of that sketch I painted from you I will give it to you with pleasure. Why won't you limp into my studio on your way up or down and take it.¹³

Homer does not appear to have been De Kay's master for long. In a letter that is dated 15 November but does not mention the year – though it was probably 1872 or 1873, as he calls her 'Miss Helena' – Homer expresses his disappointment at her choice of a new teacher:

So Mr Butler is teaching you, I was almost disappointed when he told me, but now think it's all right. And considering the good hands you are in you have no need of any advice from me.

Helena de Kay's artistic aspirations, even after marrying, are clearly attested by her involvement in the establishment of the Art Students League in 1875 and the Society of American Artists in 1877. As in other European countries, these associations were a reaction to the conservative nature of the National Academy of Design and a strategy for lending greater visibility to members' works through its own annual exhibitions.

12

According to Annette Blaugrund, Homer was a tenant from 1871 to 1881. See Annette Blaugrund, 'The Tenth Street Studio Building: A Roster, 1857–1895', in *The American Art Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2, spring 1982, pp. 64–71.

13

The eight letters from Winslow Homer to Helena de Kay are quoted and reproduced courtesy of the Lilly Library, see note 4 above.



fig. 7
Helena de Kay
***The Last Arrow*, 1874**
 Oil on canvas, 108 × 64.8 cm
 Eskenazi Museum of Art, Indiana
 University, Bloomington, gift
 of Rosemary and Charles Lanham,
 2018.³⁶

¹⁴
 This university's library is the same one that houses Homer's letters to De Kay.

¹⁵
Women Masters, on view at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza from 31 October 2023 to 4 February 2024, included works by Mary Cassatt and Cecilia Beaux.

¹⁶
 See Page Knox's lecture *Providing a Platform for Women Painters*, Malkin Lecture, 10 November 2020, available at [Malkin Lecture: Providing a Platform for Women Painters : Program & Events : Park Avenue Armory \(armoryonpark.org\)](https://www.armoryonpark.org/malkin-lecture-providing-a-platform-for-women-painters).

The Society of American Artists' first exhibition was held in 1878 and included three works by Helena de Kay. One of them, *The Last Arrow* [fig. 7], was listed in the catalogue with a selling price of 200 dollars. Aside from the fact she was now a professional artist and her painting had an economic value, its considerable size, 108 × 64.8 cm, and the subject matter, a female archer in a landscape setting, denote a certain amount of ambition. In 2018, 140 years later, this canvas joined a public collection, that of the Sidney and Lois Eskenazi Museum of Art, at Indiana University.¹⁴ Will Helena de Kay benefit from museums' growing interest in recovering forgotten women artists? No doubt her wish to gain more exposure for her oeuvre will be gradually fulfilled.

Mary Cassatt also took advantage of the exposure provided by the Society of American Artists, with which she had exhibited her work since 1879. Cassatt enjoyed success in Paris with the Impressionists but was barely known to the American public. She herself had joined the association by 1885, and another prominent woman artist belonging to De Kay's circle, Cecilia Beaux, became a member in 1893. As we have seen, Beaux came into contact with the De Kay-Gilders in 1889 and by the end of the nineteenth century she was regarded as one of the great American portraitists.¹⁵ Helena's prominent presence in the Art Students League, the Society of American Artists and *The Century Magazine* has been interpreted by some specialists in this period as an incentive to many women to become involved in these organisations and publications.¹⁶

In parallel with her participation in exhibitions, which gradually dwindled, De Kay developed her skills as an illustrator. In the early 1870s Homer offered to help her contribute, as he did, to the illustrated magazines of the period. In an undated letter, probably written in the autumn of 1871 or the winter of 1872, he proposed:

If you would like to see a large drawing on wood, and will come to my studio on Monday or Thursday, I shall have a chance to see you.

Why can't you make some designs and let me send them to Harper's for you, they will gladly take anything fresh and I will see that you draw them on the block all right.



fig. 8

Helena de Kay
Cover of Richard Watson Gilder's book
The New Day, published by Scribner,
Armstrong & Company, New York, 1875

As an illustrator, Helena de Kay enjoyed a fruitful collaboration with her husband Richard W. Gilder, for whom she designed the cover of his book *The New Day* (1875) [fig. 8]. She chose a dark blue ground, which she stamped in gold with a large peacock feather, in line with the aesthetic promoted by the couple's intellectual circle. As the title and other details of the publication appear only on the spine, all attention is focused on the luxuriant feather. The collection of poems inside reflects the beginning of the couple's romance and includes 'Love Grown Bold', in which Gilder describes the oil painting by Homer that they had received as a wedding present:

This is her picture painted ere mine eyes
Her ever holy face had looked upon.
She sitteth in a silence of her own;
Behind her, on the ground, a red rose lies:
Her thinking brow is bent, nor doth arise
Her gaze from that shut book whose word unknown
Her firm hands hide from her;— there all alone
She sitteth in thought-trouble, maidenwise.
And how her lover waiting wondereth
Whether the joy of all joys draweth near:
Shall his brave fingers like a tender breath
That shut book open for her, wide and clear?
From him who her sweet shadow worshipping
Now will she take the rose, and hold it dear?

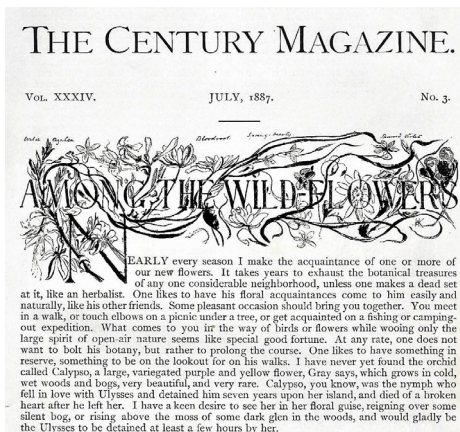


fig. 9

Illustration by Helena de Kay for
the article 'Among the Wild Flowers'
in *The Century Magazine*, vol. XXXIV,
no. 3, July 1887

Flowers played an important role in the illustrations for this book, just as they did in her subsequent contributions to *The Century Magazine*, such as the one she made for the article 'Among the Wild Flowers', in 1887 [fig. 9].

Aside from her artistic activities, at her 'Friday salon' Helena de Kay played hostess to artists and intellectuals such as Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Henry James, Winslow Homer, Cecilia Beaux and Grover Cleveland, twice president of the United States. De Kay also provided a link with Europe: she had spent a few years there during her teenage years and returned periodically following her marriage to Gilder. Her knowledge of Italian, German and French facilitated her role as a cultural mediator. In addition, in 1881 she translated from French into English Alfred Sensier's monograph on Jean-François Millet (1814–1875),¹⁷ a Barbizon School artist who had greatly influenced painters such as Homer and John La Farge (1835–1910), both mentors to De Kay.

Another publication on view at the Metropolitan Museum with which De Kay was connected is the *Book of American Figure Painters*¹⁸ written by Mariana Griswold van Rensselaer, a critic at *The Century Magazine*. We know of her involvement thanks to a letter that Winslow Homer wrote to her on 10 May 1886:

Dear Mrs Gilder

I have just received your letter in regard to the *Book of American Figure Painters* – I have a circular from J. B. Lippincott & Co. & I suppose that is what you refer to.

I will send immediately to them, proofs of negatives from three pictures (taken by Pack & Bro). They can choose any one of the three & I will hunt up 'a line in prose or poetry in the English language'.

I thank you for bringing this matter so forcibly upon me, also for your very kind appreciation of my work. Yours truly

Winslow Homer

The letter is no longer headed 'Miss Helena', as Homer had referred to De Kay in those written before she married Gilder, and it is written in a more formal tone to attend to the request from his former pupil, which finally materialised in the reproduction of his work *Lost on the Grand Banks* (1885, in a private collection).

17

Helena de Kay's translations appeared in *Scribner's Monthly* and in 1881 they were compiled and published in Alfred Sensier, *Jean-François Millet, Peasant and Painter*, Boston, J. R. Osgood and Company, 1881.

18

See the commentary on the copy owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art available at [Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer | Book of American figure painters | The Metropolitan Museum of Art \(metmuseum.org\)](#).

The Letters

As stated at the beginning of this article, most of the eight letters Homer wrote to De Kay appear to refer to the Thyssen painting, or to the circumstances in which it was painted or passed to her. Homer scholars' interpretations of them lead to very different conclusions: Sarah Burns,¹⁹ a professor at Indiana University, believes them to be proof of a romantic relationship between the two, whereas Lloyd Goodrich and Abigail Booth Gerdts,²⁰ the authors of Winslow Homer's catalogue raisonné, deny any sentimental attachment. Was Helena de Kay the object of Homer's unfulfilled love? Maybe not, though she did inspire Homer to make statements such as:

My dear Miss Helena,

Inclosed [*sic*] find photos, which are a failure.

I keep one for company this Summer.

You may think it will be dull music with so faint a resemblance and so dolorous but it's like a Beethoven symphony to me, as any remembrance of you will always be.

Was he referring to a portrait of her? And, if so, could it be a photo of the painting now housed in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza?

Abigail Booth Gerdts questions whether our oil painting, which De Kay eventually received as a wedding gift, is a portrait. As we have seen, it is probably this work Homer is talking about in his letter of 22 December 1872, in which he refers to it as a sketch 'from' Helena de Kay:

If you would like to give your mother a Christmas present of that sketch I painted from you I will give it to you with pleasure.

19
Burns 2002, see note 5 above.

20
Lloyd Goodrich, *Record of Works by Winslow Homer*, 5 vols, ed. Abigail Booth Gerdts, New York, Ira Spanierman Gallery, 2005–14, vol. 2 (1867–1876), pp. 162–65, no. 392.



fig. 10
Winslow Homer
Boy Reading, n.d.
 Oil on panel, 16.5 × 23.5 cm
 Private collection

Gerdt's emphasises the difference between a sketch made 'from' Helena (not intended to be a portrait of her although she was the model) and one 'of' Helena (where the intention would have been precisely that). We know that portraits did not abound in Homer's oeuvre, and that this one could simply be a compositional study, possibly of the kind produced by the American painter James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903). Whistler was very highly regarded among the circle of intellectuals to which Helena's brother Charles de Kay belonged together with Samuel Putnam Avery, also a collector of Homer's works. A very similar panel painting with the same divan and brown background, but more cropped, shows a boy reading [fig. 10]. As references to this painting are scarce, we have no context to help us interpret it, but its similarity to the Thyssen-Bornemisza work is considerable.

In the 1860s and 1870s Homer created archetypes of female figures – peasants, bourgeois women strolling or playing croquet – and even in cases where the facial features appear more individualised the titles refer to categories that shroud the subjects in anonymity. The only ones who seem to be clearly identified during these years are Helena de Kay and Eugenia Renee, the young schoolteacher Homer portrayed in 1871 (*The School Mistress*, Worcester Art Museum). Renee married Peter Burger in the summer of 1872, as the artist told De Kay in a letter of 19 June 1872:

Peter Burger has married the 'School Ma'am'. So I expect my heart line will shrink – you must look next October when you see me.



fig. 11
Winslow Homer
Girl with a Four-Leaf Clover, about 1875
 Oil on panel, 20.3 × 31.8 cm
 Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk,
 promised gift of Mr and Mrs Frank Batten,
 L2010.1.3

Aside from any possible romantic feelings, Homer appears to have valued De Kay's opinion on professional issues and sought her advice or approval in the letters he wrote to her. For instance, he stated in that of 28 May 1873:

Until then I shall be very busy, so I must say good bye and wish you all kinds of good luck. I shall paint for your approval.

Another of the letters that Sarah Burns links to the portrait of Helena de Kay is undated. She transcribes it as follows:

Go and see your clever picture.
 It was painted for you to look at.
 Respectfully yours
 Winslow Homer
 To my runaway apprentice

Gerdts disagrees with the transcription of the underlined word, which she believes reads 'clover' and not 'clever'. This leads her to think that the work in question is not the Thyssen-Bornemisza portrait but possibly one of the two paintings from this period of which clover is an important feature: *Girl with a Four-Leaf Clover* [fig. 11], now dated to about 1875, and *The Four-Leaf Clover*,²¹ executed around 1873. Did De Kay have a special interest in either of these two works? Neither belonged to her and in *The Four-Leaf Clover* in particular the figure appears to be a girl, and it would therefore not have been a portrait either.

21
 See a reproduction and commentary on the work on the website of the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum.

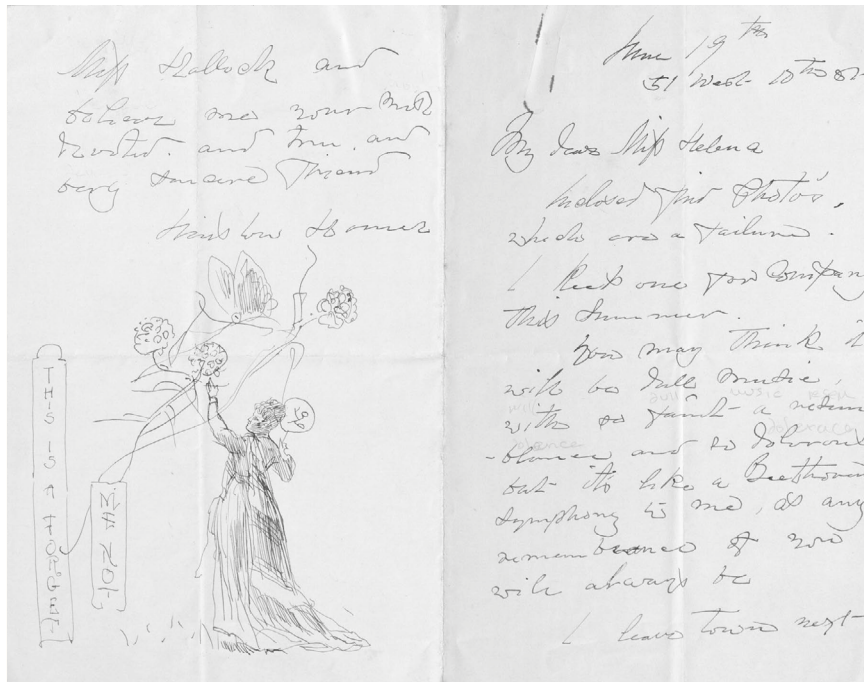


fig. 12
Letter from Winslow Homer
to Helena de Kay, 19 June [1872]

The last page of the abovementioned letter of 19 June 1872 includes a huge forget-me-not looming over a female figure [fig. 12]. One of her hands caresses a flower on which a butterfly has alighted and in the other she holds a fan. Could she be De Kay?

Clover leaves and flowers are a prominent feature of these early works by Winslow Homer and also of those of De Kay, who specialised in flower paintings. According to Judith Walsh,²² Homer used flowers throughout his career both as symbols and to add dashes of bright colour. The four-leaf clover means 'be mine' in the language of flowers, which was popular in the United States during the mid-1800s. Walsh also notes that holding a rose to one's lips means 'yes', and tearing off a petal and throwing it on the ground means 'no'. With respect to the Thyssen-Bornemisza painting, the presence of the petals on the floor in the foreground would thus indicate a negative answer. Can such a symbolic reading be applied to Homer's work? To what question could this gesture be a reply? Symbolism aside, roses were Helena de Kay's favourite flower, as Mary Hallock recalled in her memoirs on referring to her own wedding day in 1876: 'She [De Kay] sent me the red rose we called hers, her type and symbol, to wear inside my wedding dress'.²³

²² Judith Walsh, 'The Language of Flowers and Other Floral Symbolism Used by Winslow Homer', in *The Magazine Antiques*, New York, Brant Publications, vol. 156, no. 5, November 1999, p. 713.

²³ Rodman W. Paul, ed., *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West: The Reminiscences of Mary Hallock Foote*, San Marino, Huntington Library Press, 1992, p. 105.



fig. 13

Cecilia Beaux, *Helena de Kay Gilder*, 1911

Oil on canvas, 78.7 × 53.3 cm

**Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase,
Marguerite and Frank A. Cosgrove Jr. Fund
and Jonathan L. Cohen Gift, 2019, 2019.152**

As for the value the family attached to the painting once it was in their possession, apart from Richard W. Gilder's abovementioned poem, there is little more we can venture to say as there are hardly any written testimonies.

In 1894 the family loaned it to the *Portraits of Women: Loan Exhibition for the Benefit of St. John's Guild and the Orthopaedic Hospital* at the National Academy of Design in New York, where it was entitled *Portrait Study*. This is the first record of its showing and therefore its first known title.

In 1932 the painting was referred to as *Portrait of Helena de Kay* in an article surveying Homer's career. The author's commentary included a description of it supplied by Helena's son, Rodman Gilder: 'Seated figure of a young woman full length, in profile – pensive attitude. Property of my sister, Rosamond Gilder'.²⁴ The impersonal and generic nature of his words is striking bearing in mind it is a portrait of his mother.

The last portrait of Helena was painted by Cecilia Beaux in 1911 [fig. 13]. A widow since 1909, the sitter, once again with a meditative appearance, is portrayed dressed in black with a geranium, a symbol of faithfulness. Through memories of her, the works she produced, her relationships and the letters Winslow Homer wrote to her, the figure of Helena de Kay has grown and taken on many nuances, which we will carry on studying and adding to thanks to the new sources. ●

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Theodore Bolton, 'The Art of Winslow Homer: An Estimate in 1932', in *The Fine Arts*, New York, The Antiquarian Publishing Co., vol. 18, no. 3, February 1932, p. 53.