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book review of

*John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age* by  
Mary Anne Goley

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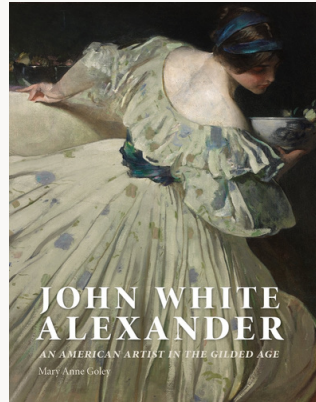
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Mary Anne Goley,  
*John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age*.  
London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2018.  
272 pp.; 17 b&w and 73 color illus.; chronology; bibliography; index.  
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In the whole history of art one looks in vain for anything approaching his inimitable skill in the arrangement and play of his figures. . . . [He is] pre-eminent as a delineator of feminine beauty and charm.

—John N. Laurvik, “John W. Alexander, an Analysis,” *Metropolitan Magazine*, 31 (Dec. 1909)

A very special sense of feminine grace, at once most decorative and intensely modern.

—Gabriel Mourey, “An American Painter in Paris: John W. Alexander,” *International Studio*, XL, no. 42 (Aug. 11, 1909)

Mary Anne Goley’s book, *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age*, is a well-researched, appreciative biography of a lesser-known, but once celebrated, decorative figure painter, and the product of over four decades of detective work and curated exhibitions. Goley had unfettered access to the previously untouched Alexander estate via the artist’s granddaughter beginning in 1973 and thereafter via his great-granddaughters. In an attractively designed book with thirty-four full-page color reproductions, Goley contextualizes Alexander’s peripatetic international career and his stylistic approach to painting, correcting misstatements and misperceptions; and she includes fresh (though a few rather minor) discoveries about social and artistic connections. Alexander was a prolific illustrator, landscape and still life painter, printmaker, muralist, society portraitist, and theatrical production designer (of posters, costumes, scenes, lighting, and *tableaux vivants*). Charming, non-judgmental and well liked, he served as a popular public speaker, a key player in various art world institutions, and president of the National Academy of Design,

although he never completed high school, before dying at the relatively young age of fifty-nine.

Just after his death in 1915, an anonymous writer for *The Literary Digest* ranked Alexander as one of “the big four [American artists],” along with Edwin Austin Abbey, John Singer Sargent, and James Abbott McNeill Whistler. He was at the center of turn-of-the-century American art. Today, however, few people recognize Alexander’s name or work, except Americanists familiar with his best known compositions, *Repos*, 1895 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and/or *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*, 1897 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Goley identifies the unique characteristics of Alexander’s figure painting as “the movement of the [female] figure, manipulated into twists and turns that are frankly unnatural, if not anatomically impossible” and argues that “he produced a body of work, primarily in France, that is startlingly original and like no other” (xiii). Although Goley admits that Alexander “was no Velázquez” she insists that he was a genius, echoing the hopeful prediction of Harrison S. Morris, former director of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, who wrote to the painter’s widow “you will be uplifted always by the radiance of his pure fame and the place he will hold in the Valhalla of our American genius” (29, 208). (The letter is dated June 2, 1915 on page 229, note 1, but dated 1916 on page vii.) Goley rather self-defensively repeats this quote twice in the text, and repeatedly calls him a genius. (See pp. vii, 1, and 208 for quote; see also pp. 78 and 156 for comments on Alexander’s genius.)

In the opening chapter, “A Huckleberry Original,” Goley traces Alexander’s modest beginnings as a boy in Pittsburgh, orphaned by age five, then raised by his maternal grandfather. Quitting school to work as a messenger boy, Alexander impressed Colonel Edward Jay Allen, the secretary/treasurer of the Pacific & Atlantic Telegraph Co., by identifying a customer with a sketch. Allen then assumed guardianship of the boy, and convinced him to attend high school for a year and a half. At age eighteen, Alexander and a friend navigated down the Ohio River, earning small change for sketching farmhouses and repairing daguerreotypes in December 1874. Mark Twain later said that Alexander’s tales from that trip informed the most important incidents of his novel, *Huckleberry Finn* (1884); Goley does not indicate how the men met, when, or where, except to say their “friendship began when Alexander was first employed by *Harper’s*” (11).

In early 1875, Alexander spent three months seeking a job in New York City, showing publishers his sketchbook, the title page of which featured anthropomorphic caricatures of a quill pen and inkwell. The latter figure is racist, with its oversized hands, lips, and ear, dark skin, pointed coiffure and too-short trousers. Without acknowledging race, Goley seems to excuse the physiognomic distortions by simply saying that the head “is as grotesque as any drawing by the celebrated cartoonist of the day, Thomas Nast” (4). Alexander began a lifetime association with *Harper’s* as an illustrator that May. After two years there, he and a friend sought further artistic training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, but left Paris within weeks for the less expensive city of Munich.

Along with about forty Americans, Alexander (financed by Allen) studied at the Royal Academy in Germany for a year, winning a bronze medal for drawing. He then relocated to the village of Polling, southwest of Munich, to focus on portraiture. It is surprising that Goley does not include Frank Duveneck’s oil portrait of Alexander (1879, Cincinnati Art Museum)

here. In the fall of 1879, Alexander followed Duveneck to Florence, Italy, to room with him and teach a private watercolor class in Duveneck's school, becoming part of the artistic group known as the "Duveneck boys" who used a tenebrist oil palette and bravura brushstrokes. A Boston woman, Mrs. Jackson, commissioned several watercolors from Alexander, one "a negro sentinel holding a gun" (15). Again, Goley seems insensitive to racial issues, this time by using outdated language.

Alexander followed Duveneck to Venice for the summer of 1880, where Duveneck produced two etched portraits of him. Goley mentions one, depicting Alexander in a broad brim hat, but does not analyze it or compare it with another etching of Alexander made the same year (both at the Cincinnati Art Museum), which differs in that the sitter's face alone, now bearded, emerges from a dark background in contrast to the light background of the other print.

Alexander met Whistler by chance as he was painting next to a canal. Whistler kindly suggested a higher tone of color in an area of the canvas. With no evidence, Goley suggests that *Venice Sketch* (1880) was the specific composition Whistler critiqued because "Whistler would have approved of the choice of a near view of a less trafficked waterway" (20).

The title of the next section, "New Friends, New Patrons, A New Wife," seems rather strange in that Alexander was married just once, so his only wife did not replace an "old" one. Without any elaboration, Goley states that the artist began an almost three-year engagement with Elizabeth (Bess) Swan Alexander (no previous relation) in December of 1884. She does not indicate where or how the couple met, nor does she reveal anything about their relationship. She does state that the artist's fiancé came from a more socially prominent family than his (her father became president of the Equitable Life Assurance Society in 1899), and such connections helped Alexander get portrait commissions (34, 40).

Goley begins the second chapter with a mention of commissions from *Harper's*. Travelling 2,100 miles along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in the spring of 1881, Alexander published sixteen drawings of the coal industry in the magazine. Goley neither describes the scenes nor reproduces any of the dozens (hundreds?) of images of current events, landscapes, and portraits Alexander produced for *Harper's* and *The Century* magazines (the latter, "a sizable assignment"), or the political cartoons for the *New York Evening Telegram* (work for the latter two publications beginning in 1886) (36). By 1883, he had published thirteen images of Yellowstone, and "a prodigious number of illustrations of distinguished men of letters and politics, this time for *Harper's*, beginning with his portrait of U.S. President Arthur . . . followed by the likes of Alexander H. Stephens, Daniel Webster, Longfellow, Emerson, and Peter Cooper" (32).

Oddly, Goley does include full-color reproductions of paintings by Peter Paul Rubens (*Rubens and His Wife*, 1609–10) and Diego Velázquez (*Mariana of Austria*, ca. 1652), only because Alexander bought postcards of them in Munich (1879) and Madrid (summer 1884), respectively. The former work, Goley says, is "notable for its undulating line," but she makes no comparisons between either of these compositions and those of Alexander until the third chapter, in which she mentions "the unfettered space, the Spanish profile and the exaggerated bouffant skirt" supposedly invoked in *Portrait Gris* (1892) (61). *Mariana*, however,

has cluttered space (witness the dominant drapery, chair, covered table and clock), it is a frontal portrait, and the horizontally wide skirt at the hips is supported by a Farthingale in dramatic contrast to the slender gray dress widened only at the hem by a crinoline petticoat.

A turning point in Alexander's career came when, during a summer European sojourn in 1884, he wrote to Colonel Allen of his aspiration to make a "subject picture" (31). His painting *Azalea (Portrait of Helen Abbe Howson)* (1885) is his first step in that direction. Inspired by Whistler's portrait of his mother on view in New York in 1882, it features Howson in a white dress seated on a sofa at left in a horizontally elongated canvas. The right side is balanced by a white-flowering azalea branch in a large celadon vase and a cropped, framed image. As Goley states, "It contained all the hallmarks of Alexander's mature work—harmony of tone, a decorative female, a symbolic flower, a divan, and the visual extension of space suggested by a framed picture" (34).

Occasionally, Goley makes assertions that lack written and/or visual evidence. For instance, she claims that Alexander's painting, *An Empty Canvas* (ca. 1884), though not listed in the National Academy Spring Annual, "was also on view," yet the note provided on page 232 gives no facts but says "For an image see Series 10" in the JWA papers although a photograph of the unlocated painting is reproduced on page 300. Inadequate documentation surrounding the construction of Alexander's proposed new studio also raises questions. His wife's extended family owned second homes in Seabright, New Jersey. There, Goley asserts, Alexander planned to build "one of the largest studios in America, at a cost of up to \$2,000" and later she states he "substituted the largest studio in America in Seabright for a New England-style farmhouse" in Cornish, New Hampshire, in the summer of 1890 (38, 45). Does cost alone indicate size? Since Alexander was never listed as a property owner, the existence of such a place (let alone a description of it) has not been verified. In another unsubstantiated example, Goley suggests that the sitter in *Girl with Teacup* (ca. 1884), whose features are obscured by shadow, represents "a new breed of thinking woman" even though the composition "is all about movement and gesture, and not about reading the facial expression" (43). How, then, can a viewer tell the subject is thinking?

Goley seems untroubled by Alexander's degrading depictions of black men and speaks about them in contradictory terms. In addition to the two previously mentioned, the artist produced at least two more such images, both portraits and caricatures based on models Alexander found "on the streets of New York" (48). One was *Brudder Bones* (ca. 1887–88), "a caricature of a destitute old man with white hair" and yet somehow, Goley says, the artist did not "overlook the nobleness of the man" (41). Since that painting is "known only by the printed word," the assertion is unsubstantiated (41). A reproduction of the other painting (location unknown) depicted the character of Ole Hanover in Thomas Page's novelette, "Plaski's Tunaments" and accompanied the publication of the story in *Harper's Weekly* 34 (December 1890). Even if Alexander "faithfully depicted Page's subject" with "an air of portentous dignity," the image was likely meant to be comic as Page wrote the narrative "in the American southern negro dialect" (47). Also, as Goley notes, the painting was the "outlier, hanging in the Fellowcraft Club along with notaries of the journalist profession" (48). Alexander's friend, Richard Watson Gilder, editor of *The Century* magazine, 1881–1909, had founded the New York club for journalists, artists, and illustrators in 1888. In the fifth chapter, Goley claims that Alexander "befriend[ed]" Old Hanover, but provides no citation; was this



wishful thinking? If the artist truly befriended a man on the street, would he not call him by his given name rather than that of a fictional character?

At about twelve full pages of text, the third chapter, “The First Sojourn in Paris,” is the second shortest one of the book. Diagnosed with the *grippe* (severe influenza) in 1889, Alexander moved to Cornish for the summer of 1890 because his physician advised “a change of scene for a year” (45). Eschewing portraiture, his landscapes “represent a bold leap forward in terms of composition and quality of light” with high horizon lines and a higher key palette. However, Alexander then ceased painting until the summer of 1892.

Still not well after a few months, Alexander traveled with his family and nurse to Paris in May 1891, welcomed there by his mother-in-law and brother-in-law, and rented an apartment on the Right Bank. Soon he frequented gatherings of the art community as well as the literati and expatriate groups. Convinced by English artist Arthur Studd to go to the coast, he spent five months in the Breton hamlet of Le Pouldu in the summer of 1892, where he began to paint again. His seascapes there demonstrate experimentation with tight compression of space, and he took up the silhouette. Influenced by the Nabis, Alexander adopted a coarsely woven jute canvas, eventually developing, with American craft artist Sanford B. Pomeroy, a coarse canvas called *Alexandre toile* (according to his widow in 1928, see 60, 235, note 42).

Alexander was determined to move from standard portraiture to representing a single figure that expressed a sentiment. He achieved this by exhibiting three subject pictures at the Salon of 1893, all of women in a new decorative style, *Portrait Noir*, *Portrait Gris*, and *Portrait Jaune*. These adhere to Whistler’s principles of harmonious variation of color and tone. The French critic, Louis de Fourcaud, called Alexander, Edmond Aman-Jean, de La Gándara, and Ary Renan “*les portraitists-tapisseurs*” (portraitists-tapestry designers) because the artists’ coarsely woven canvases looked like woven tapestry. Receiving critical acclaim within weeks of the exhibition, Alexander was named an Associate of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts. After two years in France, Alexander returned to Seabright and reverted to producing portraits in the Munich style because the commissions from his in-law’s family and his father-in-law’s business associates were lucrative. They were “his single most important source of income” (68).

Chapter 4, “Paris-New York-Paris-New York,” concerns the seven years Alexander was primarily based in France but made frequent trips to the United States between September 1893 and October 1900. While abroad, he exhibited regularly at the Salon (such as the portrait of his close friend, the Russian Ivan Pranshnikoff in 1894) and also shipped his work to New York and multiple European countries. He earned praise as “the painter of the flowing line” (quoted on 71; citation not given.) Productive summers took place in Étretat (1894), Seabright (1895), New York (1896), Saas-Fee, Switzerland (1897), Val-de-la-Haye, France (1898), and Murnau, Germany (1899).

The most important influence on the development of Alexander’s decorative figure painting was the artist’s employment of the French model, Juliette Very, from late 1894 to 1899. A beautiful woman with long dark hair, Very was able to contort her body to hold difficult poses. Alexander might have schooled her in the use of François Delsarte’s system of expression through movement, something about which he may have been aware as early as

the 1880s when he painted New York actors. In 1839, Delsarte had introduced a program of oratorical gestures that ministers, politicians, and stage performers used to communicate more effectively with audiences. In the 1880s, Steele MacKaye, an American disciple of Delsarte, championed this more natural system of gesture.

Alexander featured Very in such critically acclaimed works as *Portrait Jaune*, *Alethea*, and *Repos* (all 1895), *Peonies*, *Le Chat Noir*, *La Robe Jaune*, and *The Bronze Bowl* (all 1896), *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1897), *Le Bol Bleu* (1898, which adorns the book's jacket), *A Ray of Sunlight* (1898), and *A Flower* (1899). In his depictions of his new muse (who replaced his wife as a model, to Bess's relief), Alexander applied Whistler's principles of muted and harmonious coloration, as well as the bold abstract forms and flowing lines of the Nabis to his unique style. Very fills the frames with her billowing dresses (often floral-patterned) and mannered, "spring-loaded poses," in shallow space reclining on divans, twisting around on chairs, seen from above crouching, interacting with a black cat (the Alexander family pet), or leaning on tabletops or over a cello. Alexander and/or his wife often designed Very's loosely fitted gowns for at-home wear and to mask movement; though secured at the waist, they were uncorseted. He also excelled in the depiction of soft light through glass, water, and cloth, and was known for his manipulation of light for effect.

Goley argues that in *Le Bol Bleu*, the most daringly modern work of eight pieces Alexander submitted to the Salon of 1898, "movement is both frozen and dynamic as she [Very] is flattened and splayed like a butterfly" (96). She asserts that Very was "a quintessential artistic collaborator who infused his late Parisian compositions with a sensual *décadisme*" (110). The author uses the French term four times, but never defines it, calling Alexander's version of *décadisme* "more dreamy than demonic" and evident in "the drowsiness of a sensuous face, the showing of skin in the décolleté neckline, and the tension of the pointed fingers" (91, 75). She may have conflated aestheticism with *décadisme*, a term that more typically refers to the doctrine of decadence embraced in late-nineteenth-century French literary circles. Goley also discerns a kind of "atopia" or placelessness, a quality in Rodin's sculpture, in Alexander's images of Very in surprising orientations (83). Goley discovered that Very modeled for Rodin in 1912 and suggests she may have done so earlier, as well, perhaps at Alexander's suggestion (88). The painter produced a portrait of the sculptor in 1899.

While based abroad, Alexander became the politically savvy Paris agent for the Carnegie International exhibition which began in 1896 as the American version of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, with foreign artists among the jurors, exhibitors, and those eligible for awards. Alexander vetted American participants, and also served as an International Awards Juror for etching and engraving. As such administrative work increasingly took his time, Alexander's artistic output waned. In October, 1900, he moved back to the United States for the education of his only child, his son James (b. 1888).

The fifth chapter is the longest and an important one, despite the quite limited and unrevealing title, "A Much Anticipated Return." Here, Goley gives detailed accounts of Alexander's exhibitions (mostly of work produced in France), his many high-society portraits, his advocacy for art education in public schools and a National Museum of Art in America, and his teaching of drawing at the Art Students League (1902–03) and life classes at the Veltin Studio for Girls (1904–05). A remarkable late work is *Portrait of Mrs. John White*

*Alexander* (1902), “one of his finest decorative pictures since Paris”, notable for the grand manner of portraiture in the manner of Gainsborough (120). Another notable piece is a *Study (The Girl in the Green Gown)* (ca. 1903), featuring a new muse, Anne Raynor Ward, a family friend.

Alexander struggled with ill health since at least the age of thirty, battling an ongoing undiagnosed condition but one that involved occasional convulsions (36). In 1903, he had another debilitating setback and relied on previously exhibited work to represent him in annuals in Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Paris, and Boston. He was also sick for the first half of 1904 and had two throat operations in 1909.

Despite his weak physical constitution, Alexander was remarkably active, establishing a new studio in Onteora, New York, working on a mural commission for the Pennsylvania State Capitol, and earning a Gold medal from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (the institution’s highest professional achievement) for *Memories* (1904), a two-figure composition, one of his “last great decorative pictures” (127). In 1905, Alexander’s father-in-law lost his job after a very public and protracted scandal about a costume ball for 600 that the son of the insurance company’s founder had financed, and the artist sheltered him in his home. The same year, Alexander won a \$175,000 commission to execute murals for a Carnegie Institute extension, the “largest contract to cover the largest amount of space [5,100 square feet] ever in the short history of the American mural movement” (139). Goley provides an excellent explanation of Alexander’s design featuring Andrew Carnegie as spirit of labor in Pittsburgh (*The Apotheosis of Labor*), and the artist’s inspirations from the work of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Albert Besnard, and Henri Martin. For the project through February 1907, Alexander needed three studios, in Carnegie Hall, the Vanderbilt Gallery of the Fine Arts Building, and at a new place in Seabright. Working on murals for eighteen months without assistants, however, caused debilitating pain in Alexander’s lower torso.

From 1908 to 1913, Alexander produced *tableaux vivants* for the MacDowell Club of New York, as well as other private social clubs for women. In June, 1909, he also was part of a team for a jaw-dropping pageant at Harvard University Stadium in which Maude Adams appeared as Joan of Arc in a cast of 1,300 with 60 principals before an audience of 15,000. Working since March of 1908, he was responsible for costume design, color selection, groupings of tableaux and lighting. Also in 1909, Alexander had a major retrospective at the National Arts Club, was elected President of the National Academy of Art, received an honorary Doctor of Letters from Princeton University and painted a portrait of Mark Twain.

Chapter 6, “President of the National Academy of Design and Campaigner For Good Causes” concerns Alexander’s long-term quest to secure additional exhibition space for the Academy and his many commissions, exhibitions, travels, theater collaborations with Maude Adams, among other activities, such as selling high-quality reproductions of his art. Fighting a downhill health battle, he interspersed public statements with absences from Academy events. In 1910 he traveled to Europe to learn more about theater design, study exhibition buildings abroad, and consult doctors. Back in New York, he feared secession at the Academy and shifted strategy to seek a single building that would accommodate all artistic organizations in the city in one building, lobbying repeatedly and forming a federation called the National Academy Association. He also served as President of the progressive



MacDowell Club, signed contracts for other mural commissions (for projects that were never realized), published essays, and exhibited works in such diverse locations as Buenos Aires, Rome, and Terre Haute, Indiana, spending restorative summers in Onteora. Still, as Goley convincingly states, “The circumstances in which Alexander carried on with his work while fulfilling his public engagements were Herculean by any measure given the increasing fragility of his health” (178).

While continuing portraiture, in the summer of 1911, Alexander launched a new and final serialization of a favorite theme, that is of a dreamy atmospheric sunlight, depicting suffused interiors with light through curtained windows, as in *The Ring*, balancing vertical shapes and rounded forms in a new level of complexity. Alexander’s final model, Belle Edson, who worked for him for four years, was his most conventional, standing or sitting in ordinary poses.

At last, insurgency erupted at the Academy in December 1911 as the newly formed Association of American Painters and Sculptors (AAPS). It held just one exhibition in a leased building but that International Exhibition of Modern Art, or the Armory show, in 1913 led to seismic changes in the art world.

As Alexander’s health declined, he painted less but on larger canvases and resigned from the Pittsburgh Arts Commission in 1914. In March of 1915, he resigned from the Academy, then passed away on May 30, shortly after another convulsive attack. Goley did not provide a conclusion to this chapter.

The last section of the book, though numbered 7, is not a chapter but rather a three-and-a-half page collection of brief excerpts from twenty-seven tributes “from those who loved him,” sent to Alexander’s widow. Most express regret at the loss of a kind, gentle, tender, noble man, and his devoted leadership, but they do not enhance our understanding of the artist or his work. The subsequent eighteen-page, detailed chronology, with specific dates (not just years), is much more helpful. The index could be improved by grouping titles of Alexander’s work in one location.

This careful investigation of Alexander’s life and work is extensive and laudable but not comprehensive, and it has factual errors, unsupported assertions, and outdated information. The publication does not provide life dates for anyone other than Alexander nor any photographs of family members. Further, Goley leaves Alexander’s commercial illustrations, his still lifes, his wood engravings, his monotypes, and his relationships with his wife, son, and models wholly and inexplicably unexamined. Regrettably, the locations of dozens of paintings are still unknown. Yet Goley has done yeoman’s work in gathering a mountain of archival material, assiduously tracking down as many details as possible, and scrutinizing Alexander’s unique contributions to art. Aside from the Carnegie memorial exhibition catalogue (1916) and a dissertation at the City University of New York (Sarah J. Moore, 1992), this book is the only other lengthy monograph on Alexander (1856–1915), and it likely will remain the standard for a long time.

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