



Lydia Field Emmet
American, 1866 - 1952

Harriet Lancashire White (Mrs. Edward Laurence White) and Her Children, Sarah and Laurence

1922

oil on canvas

overall: 137.3 x 117.3 cm (54 1/16 x 46 3/16 in.)

framed: 151.8 x 131.4 x 5.1 cm (59 3/4 x 51 3/4 x 2 in.)

Inscription: upper left: Lydia Field Emmet

Gift of Mrs. E. Laurence White 1961.15.1

ENTRY

This full-length group portrait represents Harriet W. Lancashire White and her two children, Sarah Lancashire White and E. Laurence White Jr. Harriet W. Lancashire was born in 1884 in Saratoga Springs, New York, the eldest daughter of Dr. and Mrs. James H. Lancashire. In 1911 she married the investment banker Edward Laurence White of Beverly Farms, Massachusetts, and New York City. [1] Their daughter, Sarah White, was a member of the Vincent Club and Junior League of Boston; according to the *New York Times* she was “well known in New England riding and hunt circles.” [2] Their son, E. Laurence White Jr., graduated from Harvard College in 1941 and became a partner at Bassinette & White, a New York advertising firm. The artist, Lydia Field Emmet, was part of a groundbreaking generation of professional women portraitists in the Emmet family that included her older sister, Rosina Emmet Sherwood, and her younger cousin Ellen Emmet Rand. After studying with the American impressionist painter William Merritt Chase, Lydia went on to a highly successful and lucrative career as a society portraitist and was honored with numerous awards at national and international exhibitions. [3]

In this work Emmet has portrayed Harriet White seated with her children on a red-cushioned bench. Harriet’s simple black dress is stark against the decorative floral screen behind the group. [4] Placed just off-center in the composition, she is

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positioned on a slightly diagonal axis relative to the picture plane with her figure oriented toward the right. White's daughter in her yellow dress and son in his sailor suit affectionately lean on and embrace their mother. The viewer seems to have intruded upon a quiet family gathering during which the mother was entertaining her children with the illustrated book that rests on her lap. Both mother and daughter look directly at the spectator, while the boy gazes off to the left as if something has momentarily captured his attention.

The painting is a not entirely resolved example of Emmet's family group society portraiture. The spatial relationships of the sitters to their surroundings and to each other are not defined precisely. Their slightly melancholy expressions also imbue the image with an elusive, self-conscious quality that is absent, for instance, from the less complex, more clearly articulated *Olivia*.

Robert Torchia

August 17, 2018

NOTES

- [1] For biographical information on White, see *Who Was Who in America*, vol. 5, 1969–1973 (Chicago, IL, 1973), 773–774.
 - [2] “McLennan–Houghton,” *New York Times*, Dec. 17, 1936.
 - [3] On Lydia and other women artists in the Emmet family, see Martha Hoppin, *The Emmets: A Family of Women Painters* (Pittsfield, MA, 1982). On these artists role in the broader context of American modernism, see Kirsten Swinth, *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870–1930* (Chapel Hill, 2001), as well as Marian Wardle, ed., *American Women Modernists: The Legacy of Robert Henri, 1910–1945* (New Brunswick, 2005).
 - [4] The screen and ornately carved bench appear in numerous other works. *The Four Daughters of Winthrop Aldrich* (1927, The Museum of the City of New York), for instance, presents a more complete rendering of the screen.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The unlined painting was executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave canvas which is still on its original stretcher, although an extra set of tack holes indicates

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that it was at some point removed and restretched. An evenly applied tan ground extends to the cut edges of the tacking margins, indicating that it was commercially applied. Infrared reflectography did not reveal a sketch beneath the painted surface but did show an artist change in the area of Mrs. White's proper right shoulder. No X-radiographic examination was conducted. The paint was built up in the background in washlike, translucent layers; two unexplainable vertical lines on the left side and one on the right side interrupt the background painting in a peculiar way. The sitters were modeled in medium thick layers of translucent color blended wet into wet with low impasto. Ultraviolet examination indicated that the thick layer of very discolored varnish is a natural resin. This varnish layer has significantly altered the tonal relationships of the painting. The painting is otherwise in excellent condition with no significant paint loss.

PROVENANCE

The sitter, Harriet Lancashire White [1884-1961, Mrs. Edward Laurence White], Beverly Farms, Massachusetts; gift 1961 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

2005 Extended loan for use by Secretary Margaret Spellings, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C., 2005-2008.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 156, repro.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 175, repro.
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