

## *Cupid and Psyche ca. 1848*

William Edward West (1788-1857) returned to the United States in 1837 after two decades in Europe—first on the Continent, and then in England—leaving behind a body of work in the hands of the sitters he painted, as well as with the American consul in London.<sup>1</sup> When he landed in Baltimore, West resumed his friendships with the city's well-connected merchants, and revived his fortunes painting likenesses of them and their families. In 1840, he opened a studio in New York, where he spent the next decade and a half working, and where he almost assuredly made this version of *Cupid and Psyche*.

His first version was painted in London in the mid-1820s, where it was exhibited in 1826 at the British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom as "Children with a Dove."<sup>2</sup> The subject came to the attention of Alaric A. Watts (1797-1864), editor of *The Literary Souvenir*, and one of England's Romantic poets; his editorial work connected him to Sir Walter Scott, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Letitia Hemans.<sup>3</sup> Engraved by William Humphreys, the painting was retitled *Cupid and Psyche* and appears as an illustration accompanying the poem of the same name by "L.E.L.," the initials used by Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-1838), another member of the circle of Romantic poets in Britain. In the introduction to the 1827 edition of *The Literary Souvenir*, Watts thanked West "for the loan of the beautiful subject entitled *Cupid and Psyche*."<sup>4</sup> It's unclear whether West gave or sold the painting to Watts, but in 1832, it was among the works sold by Watts at Sotheby's, almost undoubtedly to support his expensive and often un-remunerative literary publishing habit. The buyer was listed in the auction results only as "Tiffin," perhaps a descendant of the Tiffin brothers, brewers whose late 17<sup>th</sup>-century bequest formed the core of the endowment supporting the Tiffin School in Kingston, UK. There the trail of

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<sup>1</sup> Estill Curtis Pennington, *William Edward West, 1788-1857: Kentucky Painter*.

Washington, D. C.: National Portrait Gallery, 1985. 33

<sup>2</sup> Algernon Graves, F.S.A. *The British Institution 1806-1867*. London: George Bell and Sons, 1908. 578. This is referred to as "Two Children with a Dove" in Pennington's Catalog, but examination of Grave's catalog makes clear that the "2" before the title was the entry number of the painting in the 1826 exhibition.

<sup>3</sup> Garnett, Richard. Alaric Alexander Watts entry Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900, Volume 40. Accessed online at

[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Watts,\\_Alaric\\_Alexander\\_\(DNB00\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Watts,_Alaric_Alexander_(DNB00))

<sup>4</sup> Alaric A. Watts, editor. *The Literary Souvenir : or cabinet of poetry and romance*. London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, & Green, 1827. x.

this version goes cold, unlocated in England's public art collections and possibly lost.

That there were two versions seems undisputable: significant differences between the oil on canvas and the engraving point not only to two different compositions, but also to two different dates for the works.



Left: "Cupid and Psyche," painted by W. E. West, engraved by Wm. Humphreys, published in *The Literary Souvenir*, 1827. Right: *Cupid and Psyche*, oil on canvas, 1845-1848, signed lower left "W. E. West pinxt." Private Collection

At first glance, the images appear identical, but a closer look reveals differences not attributable to the engraver's whim. In the engraving of the earlier image (left), no bow and no quiver of arrows lie at the boy's feet, suggesting that the *Cupid and Psyche* designation was made later, for without Cupid's arrows, these truly are "Children with a Dove." The landscape of the engraving is wooded, without the distant seascape; indeed, the composition of the engraving's landscape is less sophisticated and flatter than the painting. The children in the painting, too, are more sophisticated, rendered with a more subtle hand in the painting. Once equal in height, Psyche is shorter than Cupid, more muscular, her body expressing greater tension as she curls away from the viewer to shelter the dove. Cupid, too, is closer to a classical ideal with his delineated abdomen, and the subtle tension in his proper right foot, turned inward and brought closer to the tensed toes of the left foot, which is rendered similarly in both images.

One key to the different dates—aside from the lack of bow and arrows which strongly suggests that the engraving was made from “Children with a Dove”—is the difference between the hairstyles of the girl and Psyche. On the left, she wears her hair in a neo-classical style that bares her ear in a manner similar to styles worn by women and girls in the 1810s and 1820s. The use of the neoclassical-styled band in her hair also suggests an earlier, mid-1820s date for the original image. In contrast, Psyche’s hair demurely covers her ear in the manner the mid-1840s.



Left: detail, *Petit Courier des Dames*, June 1826. Right: detail, *La Belle Assemblée*, May, 1848. Both, Los Angeles Public Library Casey Fashion Plate Collection.

West may well have been fond of the subject, and of “fancy” or story pictures in general, as he appears to have repainted several subjects he exhibited at the British Institution after re-establishing himself in the United States. Both paintings purchased by the American Art-Union in 1849 were subjects West had painted in England: *The Present*, exhibited at the British Institution in 1833, and *Cupid Psyche*, exhibited in 1826 as *Children with a Dove*. (The re-painted version of *The Present* is the 38 1/8” x 31” canvas now at the Speed Museum of Art in Louisville, Kentucky. West’s first version was shown in England in 1833, when the canvas measured 36” x 30”.)<sup>5</sup>

Founded in New York in 1839, the American Art-Union modeled itself on the Art Union of London as a subscription organization intended to promote and promulgate the arts in the United States. For an annual fee of \$5, subscribers

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<sup>5</sup>Graves, 578. Another included in the list of pictures shown is *A Domestic Affliction*, shown in 1832 as 58” x 70”; the version now owned the Munson-Proctor-Williams Institute is 44 3/8” x 56 1/8”.

received the monthly *Bulletin of the American Art-Union*, and were entitled to a share in the annual drawing of lots for the paintings purchased and exhibited by the Art-Union each year. Within a decade, membership had soared from 814 to 18,960 individuals across the United States, all people eager for culture, all wanting the chance to win a George Caleb Bingham or an Asher Durand of their own.<sup>6</sup> In 1849, of the 460 “pictures” distributed, 23 (or 5%) were distributed to Ohio, including *Cupid and Psyche*, to Mrs. G. P. Conrad, of Newark, Ohio.

Mrs. Conrad, born Henrietta Alexine Taylor, married George Peyton Conrad, in Coshocton County, Ohio in 1845. Conrad was the postmaster of Newark, Ohio, and the editor and proprietor of the *Newark Gazette*. Their daughter, Mary Louise, was born in 1849, the same year Mrs. Conrad’s ticket was drawn at the Art-Union for *Cupid and Psyche*. By 1870, widowed Mrs. Conrad and her daughter were living in Washington, D.C., where Mary Louise found work as a clerk in the Department of the Treasury. After the death of her mother in 1902, Mary Louise continued to work at the Treasury as a stenographer, retiring before her death in 1934.



*Distribution of the American Art-Union Prizes, 1848.* T. H. Matteson Del. Drawn on Stone by Davignon. Published by John P. Ridner, 297, Broadway, Art-Union Building, New York. National Gallery of Art, 2015.19.973

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<sup>6</sup> The Art-Union commissioned Asher Durand in 1845 to paint a second version of *The Capture of Major André*, a reworking of an 1834 composition (now at the Worcester Art Museum). The second version, thought lost, was won by Cornelius Van Horn of New York, and resurfaced in 2007, when it was acquired by the Birmingham (AL) Museum of Art. (Birmingham Museum of Art accession 2007.64, [artsbma.org/collection/the-capture-of-major-andre-2/](http://artsbma.org/collection/the-capture-of-major-andre-2/)) West may well have been commissioned to re-paint *Cupid and Psyche*, achieving the mature composition seen here.

But how did *Cupid and Psyche* get from Mary Louis Conrad to Lawrence Elliott, the great-uncle from whom the current owners inherited the painting? What connected the two? Sometime during Mary Louise's career, she almost certainly met Josephine Harrison Elliott (1848-1916), another clerk at the Department of the Treasury, and Lawrence Elliott's grandmother. Widowed in 1896, Josephine worked as a clerk in the Department of the Treasury, where Lawrence's mother, Irene (widowed in 1896), joined her by 1908.

Three women, two widowed and one never married, all worked at the Treasury Department in first decades of the twentieth century. One's son worked for the War Department, and eventually took a room in a boarding house managed by Henry Rhodes, father of Fredda Rhodes, whom he eventually married—and who also worked in the Treasury Department. These three women at the Treasury Department surely knew each other in overlapping years of employment, and, connected by widowhood and work, they must have formed a bond that probably inspired Mary Louise to present the painting to Fredda Rhodes and Lawrence Elliott when they married in the early 1930s. Another possibility is that the painting was bequeathed to Lawrence or Fredda, but what more romantic wedding present could there be than a large painting of two mythological but devoted married lovers?

*Cupid and Psyche* represents more than the classical myth. The painting won in a lottery 169 years ago tells a story about the importance of art and culture to people living in the American hinterlands to the degree that a widow and her daughter crated a painting to bring 400 miles east when they moved from Newark, Ohio to Washington, D. C.