

Museum of American Architecture and Decorative Arts

When Wax Distracts from Your Impact

Portrait of Emma Richardson Cherry

Lillian Clardy, Freshman

H#01277720

clardyla@hbu.edu

Word Count: 1031

When Wax Distracts from Your Impact

She stares into the distance, capturing the entire mind with her still, horrible beauty. Her face is haunting, her eyes pierce the empty, stale air. Her yellow dress compliments her surroundings but cries to be the center of attention. She is so terrifyingly close to human, but she is nothing but wax and plastic; she captivates the eyes of anyone nearby, but she is not the subject of the display.

Emma Richardson Cherry's portrait hides three yards behind the statue. A light is pointed at its lower half, intended to be helpful, but the protective finish on the painting reflects it and makes any fine details lost in a shiny haze. Her face is not bothered by this effect, fortunately, so she continues her eternal, stern stare unobstructed. She looks withdrawn and wise, almost looking down at the viewer. Cherry was an Illinois artist and a preservationist, born in 1859. She worked as an art teacher and moved to New York to further her education (Texas State Historical Association). She moved to Kansas City and met and married her husband, Dillon Cherry, and within the same year traveled to Paris to attend more art school (Heritage Society). Everywhere she went, she helped to establish several institutions for art and architecture, from the Kansas City Art Association and School of Design to the Denver Art Museum (Heritage Society).

The statue in front of the portrait sparks fear in the unsuspecting museum guest. Seeing a person where there should not be one is startling enough. Seeing a person inanimately still activates every subconscious instinct that says, "This is wrong, people do not do that, why is this so wrong," only to dispel a moment later after realizing that the person is not real, that it's nothing but a statue. The perfect, delicate construction of this statue's face continues to burn into the eyes, crawling deep inside. Her skin is just too smooth, her makeup just too pleasing, her eyes just too soulless; but she's pleading with her realism, begging, saying that she's real, she's

thinking, she's alive. Nothing about her is organic, but her inorganic being is so horribly close to humanity that she stays in the viewer's mind longer than the portrait she is meant to illuminate.

Cherry had her only daughter in 1892, and a year later the family moved to Houston. She bid for and bought the home of William Rice and had it moved out of the downtown area, likely the reason the home is still preserved to this day (Heritage Society). She helped found the Houston Art League in 1900 (txarchives.org, MFAH). The Houston Art league progressed into building a museum, creating and opening the Museum of Fine Arts Houston in 1924 (Heritage Society). Her art was featured in the MFAH several times throughout her career, as well as in other museums and collections. She continued starting and leading art associations her entire life, and she painted until she died in 1954 (TSHA).

The portrait of Cherry was made by Dawson Dawson-Watson, an English painter who had recently come to Texas in 1917 (Art in Embassies). He trained in London and Paris, spent time in Germany, and ultimately moved to San Antonio, where he became notable for his paintings of cactus and native plants (Art in Embassies). This portrait is in an impressionist style, placing Cherry in a plain brown background and leaving her clothes mostly uninteresting to draw the viewer up to her face. Her hair is clean and brushed back, equally as simply elegant as her makeup. Her black cloak lets her yellow dress peak out ever so slightly, enough to catch the eye but not enough to distract it. Her expression is prying yet at rest, intimidating yet serene.

The display does not clarify who the eerie statue is. Her dress is tremendously constructed and tailored to her body with precision. The hand-sewn lace directs the eyes to look at the entirety of it, its V-shape leading the gaze up and down to marvel at every inch of its handiwork. She looks upwards, a Mona Lisa smile resting on her face as she gracefully remains frozen in her one moment of life. Cherry's portrait behind her contrasts her immensely. While

the statue's eyes look aimlessly to the sky without a touch of humanity, Cherry's piercing, thoughtful eyes are painted with soul and heart behind them.

Cherry is lost in this display. Her impact in the painting is subdued by nature, but it emanates an aura of significance. She looks accomplished, she looks important. In comparison to the human figure placed in front of her, though, she seems like an afterthought. The wax figure is bedazzled and elegant, its face is just two degrees away from being convincingly human, it is life sized and magnificent and inspires primal fear and awe. Cherry becomes nothing but a decoration, placed above a cabinet in the ornate room than the statue's scenery. The statue demands attention at the front of the stage, and the portrait of Cherry, the actual display featured, awkwardly rests in the very back – not even centered, slightly off-kilter in the stage right. The statue gets all the initial reaction, as negative of a reaction as it might be, and most lingering eyes will want to navigate its quasi-humanity. The viewer only learns about Cherry through the display on the side. It is almost an insult, to un-emphasize such an important woman in Houston's art preservation history, to replace her impact with someone else's portrait and someone else's haunting wax creation. Cherry is disgraced here, but her legacy continues in spite of it.

Works Cited

- "Dawson Dawson-Watson." *U.S. Department of State – Art in Embassies*,
art.state.gov/personnel/dawson_dawson-watson/. Accessed 25 Mar. 2022.
- "Emma Richardson Cherry." *The Heritage Society*, www.heritagesociety.org/emma-richardson-cherry. Accessed 25 Mar. 2022.
- Henson, Margaret S. "Cherry, Emma Richardson." *Texas State Historical Association Online*,
www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/cherry-emma-richardson. Accessed 25 Mar. 2022.
- Museum of Fine Arts Houston. "Emma Richardson Cherry Papers." *Texas Archival Resources Online*, txarchives.org/mfah/finding_aids/00002.xml. Accessed 25 Mar. 2022.