



September 2012

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Recommended Citation

Wasserman, Dash (2012) "Reconstructing Violet Paget," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 101 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol101/iss3/9>

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Reconstructing Violet Paget

BY DASH WASSERMAN '12 ✿ PHOTOS BY SEAN ALONZO HARRIS

As she has for the past 35 years, English Professor Phyllis Mannocchi headed into Special Collections in Miller Library one recent afternoon and settled at one of the wooden tables in the hushed Edwin Arlington Robinson Memorial Room. ✿ Surrounded by notebooks and folders, Mannocchi examined a plastic archival envelope, looking at the scrap of paper it protects. On the paper's pale brown surface, watercolors blur against gray and red smears, and a blushing, delicate face emerges from the cloudy brush strokes. It is a tiny portrait of a young blonde girl, and clearly the work of a skilled artist. ✿ "This is a John Singer Sargent," Mannocchi said, explaining that she found the miniature painting while working with letters in the Special Collections archive. ✿ Such are the discoveries that Mannocchi has made as she's works to restore the reputation of a largely forgotten writer, Violet Paget.

Paget is an enigmatic and largely forgotten British literary figure better known as Vernon Lee, the pseudonym she used when she was at the heart of the European literary and artistic social scene in Italy, France, and England at the dawn of the 20th century.

Lee's personal papers have been housed in Colby's Special Collections since 1952, when Irene Cooper Willis, Lee's secretary, assistant, and executor, gave one of two gifts of Lee's papers to Colby, fearing that another World War

might break out in Europe.

Having met the then curator of Special Collections at a Thomas Hardy convention, Cooper Willis believed the College would be a safe location and donated Lee's papers shortly afterward. A second gift of Lee's papers arrived in 1974.

Along with Cooper Willis's gift to Colby came one strict condition: that Lee's papers remain sealed until 1980—nearly 50 years after the writer's death.

During the time Lee's papers sat in limbo, Mannocchi was busy earning her

doctorate from Columbia University and then teaching at nearby Queens College.

When Mannocchi came to Mayflower Hill in 1977 to found the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program, she knew little about Vernon Lee. One of Mannocchi's colleagues at Queens mentioned that the young professor—a medievalist specializing in love poetry—might find Vernon Lee's work on love and gender of interest and that Mannocchi should try to see Lee's papers when they became unsealed.



Left, a portrait believed to be by John Singer Sargent, from the archival papers of British writer Violet Paget in Colby's Special Collections. For a video of Phyllis Mannocchi discussing her work on Paget go to colby.edu/mag, keyword: Mannocchi



Her interest piqued, Mannocchi waited patiently to be the first to examine the Vernon Lee Papers—an enormous collection that gave Colby an important connection to one of the world's most prestigious universities. Founded in 1879 as one of the first women's colleges at Oxford University,

wave of women in England that we don't know about in America.”

What academics have lingered upon is Lee's friendship with Clementina Anstruther-Thomson (known as “Kit” in Lee's letters), which has been misinterpreted as a lesbian relationship because of Lee's uncon-

part of the fabric of Lee's social sphere from early childhood: John Singer Sargent, the renowned artist and creator of the discovered watercolor.

Mannocchi found the portrait while uncovering Lee and Sargent's friendship expressed through Lee's correspondence with his family and other artists, writers, and activists in the early 1900s.

“Lee and Sargent spent all of their time together as kids in Italy and France,” Mannocchi said. “They painted together, discussed art, and went to museums. He even called her his twin.”

According to Mannocchi, the watercolor is of Sargent's sister Violet, who gave the portrait to Lee, her godmother. On the back of the paper, written in faint and elegant cursive, is a dedication: *Dresden [18]’71. My venerated godmother.*

By patiently parsing the Victorian script of Lee's correspondence, Mannocchi was able to verify that Lee and the famed artist did watercolors together on the very type of brown paper as the portrait of Violet Sargent.

Mannocchi says the Vernon Lee collection also includes sketches by Cassatt and early modern Italian painters who moved in Lee's social circle.

“Vernon Lee's house was filled with art by young Florentine painters, but we can't find [the artwork],” Mannocchi said. “It's like suddenly a lifetime's worth of art-collecting went missing.”

There is more to be discovered, she said, gesturing toward the glass-fronted cabinets and floor-to-ceiling bookcases of the Robinson Room. “It's just stunning. Stuff like this shows us that old, faraway stuff—like locked-away correspondence—can be valuable in the present.”

Though the art is a relatively new and exciting discovery for Mannocchi, an English professor, art and archives have a rich and complementary relationship, said Lauren Lessing, Mirken Curator of Education at the Colby Museum of Art. “It seems there's always artwork in special collections [at various institutions],” she said. “Often there are items that go along with correspondence, ... and that context really affects the way scholars can read a work of art.”

“The kind of work that Phyllis is doing on

“It's just stunning. This shows us that old, faraway stuff can be valuable in the present.”

Somerville College houses the other half of Lee's collection. Lee frequented the institution and admired Oxford, though she had no formal education herself.

With more than 2,700 papers, the Somerville collection is a largely unexplored treasure trove. However, according to Mannocchi, Cooper Willis went through Lee's collection before the gift was made to Oxford and took out letters on private subjects—many of which made it to Colby.

“Vernon Lee was a very private person,” Mannocchi said. “She was not always one to embrace controversy.” The nearly 50-year ban on opening her letters to public scrutiny was intended to encourage scholars to look more broadly at Lee's contributions to literature and art—not Lee's personal life, which was considered radical for the post-Victorian era.

Lee was “a woman of letters” who wrote novels, short stories, plays, and art criticism under a male pseudonym. “She wrote on politics and was very progressive for her time,” Mannocchi said. “She was a supporter of women's suffrage, she was antivivisectionist and antiwar, and she belonged to a group investigating the psychology of sex.”

And Lee's involvement in important movements put her in contact with key women of the time.

“She was surrounded by two generations of women writers and artists, and she was in their circle,” Mannocchi said, noting Lee's friendships with impressionist painter Mary Cassatt and writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman. “The important thing about these women is that they're really radical not only in terms of their views but in terms of their lives,” she said. “What I'm doing is taking this writer, Vernon Lee, as an example of this important



Professor of English Phyllis Mannocchi

ventional lifestyle.

After reviewing Lee's correspondence with Anstruther-Thomson (many letters were removed from the collection at Somerville College due to their intensely romantic sentiment), Mannocchi suggests that Lee was horrified of being mislabeled as a lesbian by her peers, and that she wanted people to focus on her writing and contributions to a more progressive society.

According to Mannocchi, Lee's relationship with Anstruther-Thomson was “an intense, emotional friendship between women,” the kind described by women's studies scholar Caroll Smith-Rosenberg: “the long-lived, intimate, loving friendship between two women.” Yet, working with Lee's letters in Special Collections, Mannocchi has revealed a man who was very much



Vernon Lee is really important to understanding John Singer Sargent and other major artists of the time,” Lessing said. “The things that [Mannocchi] writes have the potential to shine a light on their artwork. And it’s amazing how a little sketch like the one in the Vernon Lee collection says so much about that collection.”

In fact, through her research, Mannocchi has reestablished Vernon Lee’s work, compiling in 1983 a long-needed bibliography of Lee’s writings. “Once it became available, she became a hot topic,” Mannocchi said.

Colby Special Collections Librarian Pat Burdick said researchers have come to Colby from the U.K. and around the world to see the Lee papers. “There have been so many angles people find to Vernon Lee,” Burdick said. “I keep thinking they must run out, but she relates to so many areas. It’s amazing.”

Mannocchi said the Colby’s collection has broad appeal because it “opens up the lives of these incredible women [in Lee’s social circle].”

“These women weren’t just gossiping together,” she said. “They were talking about aesthetics and other topics. It’s exciting to see the development of their ideas and how they contribute to what feminists, artists, and political theorists are doing today.”

And, after 35 years, Mannocchi continues to track that development, parsing Lee’s elegantly cryptic Victorian handwriting.

“I keep finding things... One thing leads



Professor Phyllis Mannocchi with Patricia Burdick, director of Special Collections.

tercolor portrait, in 1980, she cast it aside, not knowing what it was. It was years later that she realized its significance, after an Italian scholar at Oxford contacted her about works of art in Colby’s Vernon Lee collection.

According to Mannocchi, Lee’s correspondence with artists, friends, and family indicates the presence of valuable works of art, several of which seem to be unaccounted for since her death in 1935. Through careful

famous art collection under a different name. ... It’s all a part of this ongoing scholarly dialogue on the nature of culture.”

Though much of Mannocchi’s work on Lee has been done during the school year and summer breaks, she is devoting her fall sabbatical to her research.

She has intensified her investigation of Lee’s enigmatic social circle and is deepening her connections with the emerging international community of Lee scholars. She presented a paper on Lee’s political development at a conference held at Florenceto L’Associazione Culturale Il Palmerino, a heritage institution based in the Lee family’s villa in Florence. Afterwards she spent a few days working on Lee’s Italian-language correspondence and publications that have yet to be located by scholars.

Her enthusiasm for the shadowy literary figure hasn’t waned. She echoes a sentiment that Lee penned more than a century ago in *Hortus Vitae: Essays on the Gardening of Life* (1903): “The greatest pleasure of reading consists in re-reading. Sometimes almost in not reading at all, but just thinking or feeling what there is inside the book, or what has come out of it, long ago, and passed into one’s mind or heart, as the case may be.”

“It’s one of the incredible things about working in archives. [The collection] is just a treasure chest of women’s literature and art.”

to another, which leads to another. It’s one of the incredible things about working in archives,” Mannocchi said. “[The collection] is just a treasure chest of women’s literature and art.”

Since 1980 Mannocchi has painted a colorful portrait of Lee’s lost legacy and the women with whom she surrounded herself, contributing a biographical essay on Lee for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

The missing art is a more recent development. When Mannocchi found the tiny wa-

archival detective work, Mannocchi has suggested the existence of 15 works of art based on Lee’s letters, and she speculates that there are works by at least 10 other artists that have yet to be located.

Lessing, at the museum, says the lives of artworks are complex.

“Because artwork changes hands many times, it outlives us all and can be very hard work to track,” she said. “Just because you don’t know where a work is doesn’t mean it’s been lost to history. It might even be in a