

*An Adventurous Spirit: Julian Alden Weir*



OLIN LEVI WARNER  
(1844–1896)

*Bust of Julian Alden Weir*  
1880

signed *Olin Warner*, dated 1880, and inscribed  
*Alden Weir* on the reverse  
bronze  
22 × 11 × 11 inches

PROVENANCE

Julian Alden Weir  
Mrs. George Page Ely (née Caroline Weir),  
his daughter, 1919  
Mrs. Gregory Smith (née Anne Weir Ely),  
her daughter  
By descent in the family to private collection,  
California

During a long career lasting from the mid-1870s into the second decade of the Twentieth Century, Julian Alden Weir (1852–1919) was at the center of a cosmopolitan generation of American artists who were committed to high aesthetic standards, emphasizing artistry over description.<sup>1</sup> However, even among his peers, Weir stood out in his era for his innate artistic nature, which led him constantly to absorb new ideas and influences, seeking the most perfect means of matching subject and method. His objective, as noted by the artist and writer Eliot Clark in 1920, was to achieve “a consummation, the form in which to embody his artistic idea,” as evident in the works in this exhibition from different phases in Weir’s career.<sup>2</sup>

Art seemingly ran in Weir’s blood. His father Robert Walter Weir (1803–1889) was an esteemed professor of drawing at West Point, a position he held for forty-two years. His half-brother John Ferguson Weir (1841–1926)—also a successful artist and an important art teacher at the Yale Art School—mentored and encouraged him. In his youth, Weir was surrounded by the enormous collection of prints and books that his father had acquired on trips to Italy and by Hudson River School artists, including Frederic Church, Thomas Cole, and Asher B. Durand, who regularly visited the Weir household. His career path was facilitated by John, who upon leaving for Europe in 1868, turned over his studio in the Tenth Street Studio Building in New York—home to many of the day’s leading artists—to his younger sibling. In New York, Julian studied at the National Academy of Design (1870–1872), primarily under Lemuel Wilmarth.

With John’s urging and patronage provided by Mrs. Bradford Alden, a family friend, he continued his training in Paris in 1873, studying in the atelier of the noted Academician Jean-Léon Gérôme. He passed the entrance exam at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in the following year and

continued there under Gérôme, who took a special interest in him, providing advice and counseling him on painting excursions. Although Weir would abandon the high finish and ideality of Gérôme’s art, the legacy of his tutelage would live on in his dedication throughout his career to composing pictures meticulously, making use of many preliminary studies.

The French Realist Jules Bastien-Lepage was the other artist who profoundly impacted Weir during his formative years. He quickly absorbed the elder artist’s strong naturalism, which was influenced by the Old Masters—especially Flemish and Italian Renaissance painting. This impact surfaced in Weir’s work in the summer and fall of 1875, when he resided in the *Île-de-France* town of Cernay-la-Ville, 45 kilometers southwest of Paris. Whereas Weir had spent time during the previous summer in Pont-Aven, a popular artist’s colony of expatriates in Brittany, he selected Cernay-la-Ville because he believed he would “learn more and be more serious” there, if he “remained with the Frenchmen.”<sup>3</sup>

Among the results of this visit is *Jeune Fille*, a small bust-length rendering of a peasant girl. Here, Weir adhered to the *tête d’expression* (reflection or thought in the study of a head) exercises given in classes at the *École*, while his exposure to Bastien-Lepage’s work is evident in his tonal palette and sensitive modulation of light and shadow. Weir’s treatment reflected traditional peasant imagery, in which the subjects were portrayed with expressions conveying religious sentiments or psychological states. By choosing a closely cropped portrait and vertical format, he elevated his subject to a role traditionally reserved for the wealthy elite, endowing her with nobility, while conveying spiritual essence in the soft light glowing across her face. The sidelong view gives her a sense of animation, enhanced by her pensive expression.

In a letter Weir sent to his mother from Cernay-la-Ville in October 1875,



he reported that he was working on three large paintings.<sup>4</sup> However, he appears to have chosen the small *Jeune Fille* as one of his two contributions to the 1876 Paris Salon—under the title *Tête de jeune fille, étude*. On seeing his works in the Salon, Weir wrote to his mother that his large portrait was badly hung, but the “head of the little child, however is pretty well, and I have already received a great compliment from Mr. [Frank] Duveneck, who I am told is the best portrait painter in Munich. He on his second visit walked all over to find this head, not knowing by whom it was.”<sup>5</sup> Weir’s “small study of a head” was also noticed by a reviewer of the exhibition for the *Baltimore Sun*, and in 1920, Clark praised it as having “much of the intensity of an early Flemish master.”<sup>6</sup> When the painting was included in Weir’s 1924 Memorial show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Frederic Newlin Price took notice of “that little head of a French peasant girl, so exquisitely beautiful that it might well have been an upturned face of an angel from some dream.”<sup>7</sup>

In April 1877, Weir was one of only a few American artists to visit the third French Impressionist exhibition—*La Troisième Exposition des Impressionnistes*—held at 6 rue Le Peletier in Paris, across the street from Durand-Ruel’s galleries, where the artists had held their first exhibition in 1874.<sup>8</sup> Steeped in the Academic tradition, Weir was bewildered and revulsed by the art he saw, writing home that it “was worse than the chamber of Horrors.”<sup>9</sup> That September, he returned to New York, where he established a leading role in a community of similarly foreign-trained artists, showed his work at the National Academy of Design and the newly formed Society of American Artists, and taught at the Cooper Union School of Design for Women. However, he returned to Europe every summer, renewing his acquaintances with artist friends and absorbing new influences. While abroad, he also acted

as an art advisor, purchasing works for the New York art collector Erwin Davis, among them Bastien-Lepage’s *Joan of Arc*, 1879 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).<sup>10</sup>

In the summer of 1881, Weir selected two works by Édouard Manet for Davis, *A Boy with a Sword*, circa 1861, and *Woman with a Parrot*, 1866 (both, Metropolitan Museum of Art), and one by Edgar Degas, *Dancers in Pink*, 1876 (Hill-Stead Museum, Farmington, Connecticut). He also began to derive influence from Manet as well as from the Spanish Baroque sources of which Manet was enamored, including Diego Velázquez and Bartolomé Estegán Murillo.

A result of this influence is demonstrated in *Boy Polishing a Brass Jug*, rendered in the late 1870s or early 1880s. Using a frontal composition, dark palette, and painterly brush handling, Weir represented the contemporary daily life of a household servant. He emulated Manet in his use of white impasto for reflective surfaces—such as the gleam of the jug and the small bowl of polish on the table. His image

also parallels the dark-toned paintings of street boys and apprentices by the Munich-trained artists William Merritt Chase and Duveneck.

In the early 1880s, Weir became more expansive, as seen in *Flowers*, 1882, where he united his increased attention to both still life and watercolor. Although in the late 1870s, he used oil to create many large-scale, detailed images of floral arrangements, often in vertical formats, here, he selected a more intimate composition and a spontaneous method in watercolor and gouache. In his casual array of bright red and delicate white flowers strewn on the ground, he united light and color effects.

On April 24, 1883, Weir married Anna Dwight Baker (1862–1892), who had accompanied a friend to a class he was teaching, leading to their engagement after just three weeks. She joined Weir in establishing a feeling of domestic bliss at their home in New York at 11 East 12th Street and in Branchville, Connecticut, where Weir had acquired a farm in 1882. After marrying, Weir intended to



Anna Dwight Baker and Julian Alden Weir on their honeymoon, 1883  
NPS PHOTO

“hammer at portraits,” but few portrait commissions were forthcoming due to the competition from “artistic” photography, and he focused instead on paintings of his family, especially Anna and Caroline (1884–1973)—their first child, whom they affectionately called Caro.<sup>11</sup> Weir featured Caro in some of his most acclaimed works, including *Idle Hours*, 1888 (Metropolitan Museum of Art) and *The Christmas Tree*, 1890 (Terra Foundation for American Art). *Caro with an Orange (Portrait of Caro)*, 1887, which Weir exhibited at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1889, belongs among them. Reviewing American art at the Exposition, one critic called the painting a “refined composition,” while another commented that, along with works by Thomas Dewing and Benjamin Curtis Porter, Weir’s “grey-misty portrait of a child lent distinction” to the American painting display.<sup>12</sup>

Weir depicted Caro at age three in a full-length standing pose, a mode associated with images of royalty. In the orange in Caro’s hand—a focal point of the composition—Weir perhaps intended to bring to mind the orbs in paintings of princes and kings. The figure in a white dress was no doubt a reference to James



Caro and Gippy at Weir Farm, Branchville circa 1887

NPS PHOTO

McNeill Whistler’s *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, 1862 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC), shown in New York in 1881, which spawned so many American artists’ interest in predominantly white pictures that demonstrated subtle tonal gradations.<sup>13</sup>

Weir gave careful attention to the brilliant whites of Caro’s lace-trimmed dress and its high collar which called to mind the ruffs in Dutch paintings, such as those by Frans Hals.

Another work that inspired him was Velázquez’s famed *Las Meninas*, 1656 (Museo del Prado, Madrid), in which the Infanta (princess) in a white dress is admired by her parents whose reflections are in a mirror on the back wall. Weir, too, implied the loving and supportive presence of himself and Anna in the painting. Behind Caro is a high-backed, gold-studded armchair that was probably a Weir family heirloom.<sup>14</sup> In the left background is an open roll-top writing desk, evoking the presence of Anna, a conscientious letter writer. On top of the desk are items related to Weir’s work: a ceramic pot holding brushes, a vase of flowers typically used for still lifes, and a silver chalice found in several of his paintings. On the back wall are Weir’s paintings set in gold frames, reflecting the glowing light in the room.

Such artificial light fascinated many Impressionists for the opportunity it provided to explore coloristic effects different from those of sunlight. In *Anna by Lamplight*, late 1880s, Weir depicted Anna and Caro at a table in an interior (probably in their 12th Street home). In late nineteenth-century American art, portraiture became an inventive medium rather than one intended mainly to present a likeness, and Weir, like many leading artists of the era—including Chase and John Singer Sargent—expanded the genre in new directions. In this painting, he united a casual image of home life with the subject of the contemplative woman, a role beyond that of the domestic realm.



John Singer Sargent and Julian Alden Weir at Weir Farm, Branchville, after 1896

NPS PHOTO

Capturing the immediacy of the moment, Anna is reading or writing, while holding Caro on her lap in the glow of a tall incandescent lamp. Weir used rhythmic, feathery brushwork, like that in Sargent’s painting, *A Dinner Table at Night*, 1884 (Metropolitan Museum of Art), to record streaks of multi-hued light on the white surface of the tablecloth.<sup>15</sup> The light turns Caro’s dress into a glistening bluish shape against the shadowed form of Anna, whose face is more directly in the path of the light. Weir subtly distinguished other elements in the scene’s dimmer surroundings, including a room to the left of the figures and a mirror to their right.

The artist’s time with Anna was nonetheless short-lived. On February 8, 1892, she died of complications from giving birth to the couple’s third daughter Cora. The loss was profound for Weir, but his domestic life steadied when he married Anna’s elder sister Ella Baker

on October 29, 1893, who gave motherly care to his three daughters.

A painter of great breadth, Weir's interest in landscape grew in the late 1880s, when he explored pastels in the outdoors with his close friend John Henry Twachtman, during the latter's visits to Weir's home in Branchville. The two artists inspired each other to adopt Impressionism in plein-air paintings, capturing sunlit and atmospheric effects with vibrant, complementary hues. Weir used Impressionist techniques, along with the influence of Japanese prints, in two of his best-known works, *The Red Bridge*, circa 1895 and *The Factory Village*, 1897 (both, Metropolitan Museum of Art). He created both in Windham, Connecticut, where the Baker family owned a farm. In the former, as in other landscapes of the area, he featured the Shetucket River. Whereas in some images, he depicted industry on the river, in *Shetucket River*, circa 1910, he portrayed pristine nature. He perhaps rendered the scene from a boat, as his view appears to be looking across the river, where the water reflects the sky and the lush hillsides on both shores. In the water, he painted with broad, fluent strokes that add to the scene's mood of relaxation and leisure, while in the hills, his brushwork consists of more typical Impressionist dabs of color.

The works in this exhibition exemplify Weir's artistic development and versatility. Duncan Phillips—a great admirer of the artist, who wrote two articles and a catalogue essay on him—memorialized Weir as “an adventurous spirit, open-minded and sympathetic in regard to the adventures of young men and frankly opposed to the tyranny of traditions and to all dogmatic intolerance.” Phillips commended him as a human being, describing his kindness, humility, reasonableness, and judicious poise, while seeing such qualities as well in his art in the claim that “the man and his work were one.”<sup>16</sup>

—LISA N. PETERS, PHD

## NOTES

- 1 The most comprehensive source on the artist is Doreen Bolger Burke, *J. Alden Weir: An American Impressionist* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983).
- 2 Eliot Clark, “J. Alden Weir,” *Art in America* 8 (August 1920), p. 232. Clark studied under John Henry Twachtman and wrote biographies on several artists, including Twachtman (1924) and Theodore Robinson (1979). He also wrote a history of the National Academy of Design (1954).
- 3 Weir, letter to his mother, June 22, 1875, quoted in Burke, p. 70.
- 4 Burke, pp. 70–71.
- 5 Quoted in Dorothy Weir Young, *The Life and Letters of J. Alden Weir* (New Haven: Yale University, 1960), p. 97. While in Munich, Duveneck traveled to Paris to visit the Salon.
- 6 “The Paris Salon Exhibition,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 24, 1876; Clark, p. 223.
- 7 F. Newlin Price, “Weir—The Great Observer,” *International Studio* 75 (April 1922), p. 129.
- 8 In 1874, a group of artists calling themselves “Société Anonyme des Artistes, Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs” held an independent exhibition, separate from the official Salon. A critic's disparaging comments on a work by Claude Monet with the title of *Impression, Sunrise*, 1872 (Musée Marmottan, Paris) led the group to be called the Impressionists, which the artists themselves embraced. They first used “Impressionist” in the name of their third exhibition held in 1877.
- 9 Quoted in Young, p. 123.
- 10 Erwin Davis, a wealthy mine owner, was an art dealer and collector.
- 11 Young, p. 161.
- 12 Theodore Child, “American Artists at the Paris Exhibition,” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 79 (September 1889), p. 520; Harold Frederic, “American Art in Paris,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1889, p. 11.
- 13 Whistler's painting was shown in New York in 1881, first at the Union League Club and then at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Loan Exhibition*.
- 14 See the chair in Weir's portrait of his father (private collection), illustrated in Burke, p. 89.
- 15 Sargent and Weir took the exam to enter the École des Beaux Arts in Paris on the same day in October of 1874. In a letter on October 4, 1874, Weir wrote to his mother: “I met this last week a young Mr. Sargent about eighteen years old and one of the most talented fellows I have come across.” Quoted in Young, p. 50. Weir and Sargent remained in touch over the years. In 1890, Sargent created an unfinished portrait of Weir (collection of the Weir family), illustrated in Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent: Portraits of the 1890s—Complete Paintings Volume II* (New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2002), p. 344, no. 248. Weir visited Sargent in London in 1901 and on trips to the United States, Sargent visited Weir in Branchville and Windham.
- 16 Duncan Phillips, “J. Alden Weir,” *American Magazine of Art* 8 (April 1917), pp. 213–220; “J. Alden Weir,” *Art Bulletin* 2 (June 1920), pp. 189–212; “American Old Masters,” in *A Bulletin of the Phillips Collection . . .*, 1928, p. 28; 31–32. Fourteen paintings by Weir are in the Phillips Collection. The quote is from “J. Alden Weir,” *Art Bulletin*, pp. 189–190.



Portrait of Julian Alden Weir in the Studio circa 1910, WEIR FAMILY PAPERS, 1809–CIRCA 1961, PETER A. JULY & SON, ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION WASHINGTON, DC



## *Jeune Fille*, 1875

signed twice *J Alden Weir* and *Weir JA* and  
dated twice '75 and *Autumn 1875*, upper right  
oil on panel  
14 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 10 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

### PROVENANCE

The artist

Mrs. George Page Ely (née Caroline Weir),  
his daughter, 1919

Mrs. Gregory Smith (née Anne Weir Ely),  
her daughter

By descent in the family to private collection,  
California

### EXHIBITED

(probably) Paris, *Salon de 1876*, May 1, 1876,  
no. 12 (as *Tête de jeune fille, étude*)

Munich, Königlichen Glaspalaste, *International  
Exhibition of Works of Art*, July 1–October 15,  
1883, no. 21 (as *Kopf eines bauernkindes [Head of  
a Peasant Child]*)

New York, Century Association, *Memorial  
Exhibition of Paintings by the Late J. Alden Weir  
N. A.*, April 4–26, 1920, no. 27 (as *French  
Peasant*)

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
*Memorial Exhibition of the Works of Julian Alden  
Weir*, March 17–April 20, 1924, no. 1, illus.

### LITERATURE

(probably) "The Paris Salon Exhibition,"  
*Baltimore Sun*, June 24, 1876, p. 6 (as a  
"small study of a head")

Eliot Clark, "J. Alden Weir," *Art in America* 8  
(August 1920), p. 233

F. Newlin Price, "Weir—The Great Observer,"  
*International Studio* 75 (April 1922), p. 129

Doreen Bolger Burke, *J. Alden Weir: An American  
Impressionist* (Newark: University of  
Delaware Press, 1983), p. 72, no. 2.30,  
illus. (as *Jeune Femme*)



*Boy Polishing a Brass Jug*, late 1870s—early 1880s



oil on canvas  
25 × 30 inches

PROVENANCE

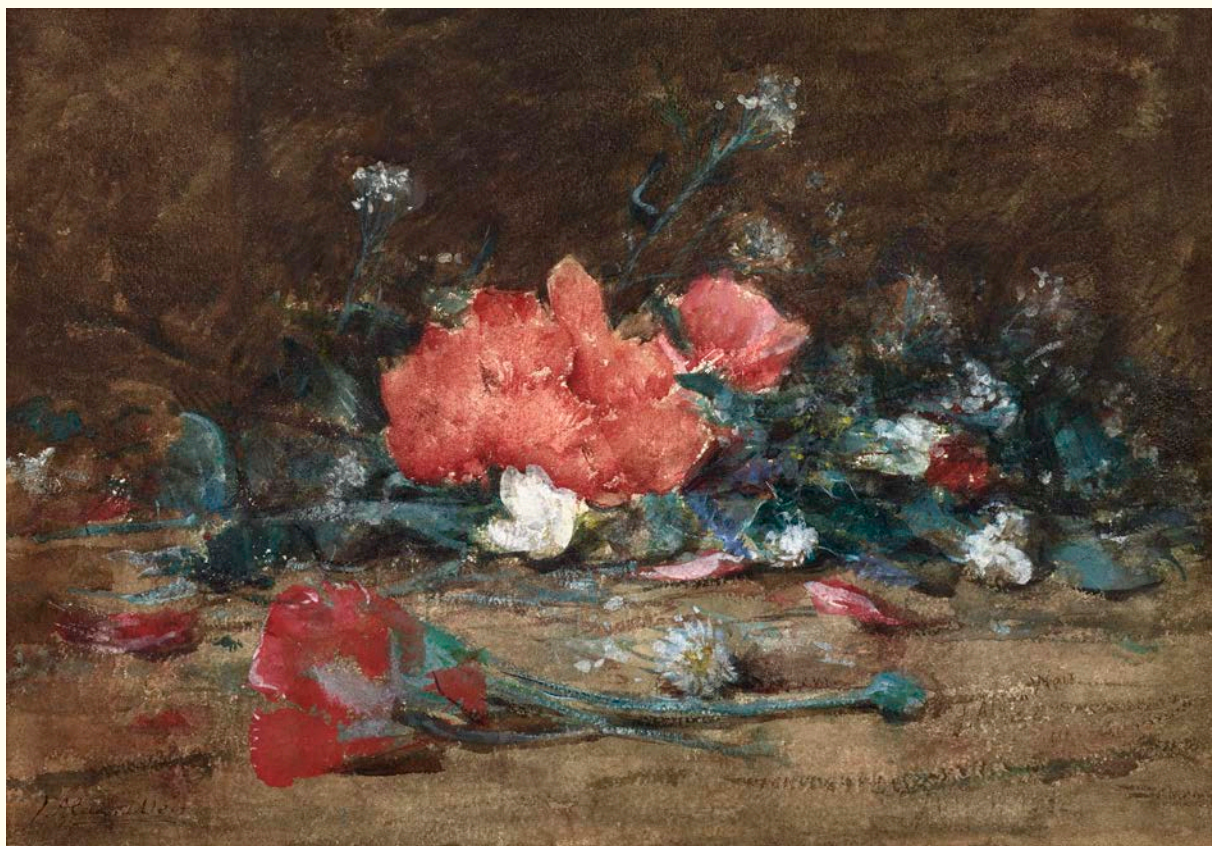
The artist  
Mrs. George Page Ely (née Caroline Weir), his daughter, 1919  
Mrs. Gregory Smith (née Anne Weir Ely), her daughter  
By descent in the family to private collection, California

EXHIBITED

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, *J. Alden Weir: An American Impressionist*, October 13, 1983—January 8, 1984, pp. 102–104, no. 3.20, illus. (this exhibition traveled to Los Angeles, The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, February 9—May 6, 1984 and Denver, The Denver Art Museum, June 13—August 19, 1984)



*Flowers*, 1882



signed *J. Alden Weir* and dated '82, lower right;  
signed again lower left and on the reverse  
gouache and watercolor on paper  
14 × 20 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches

PROVENANCE

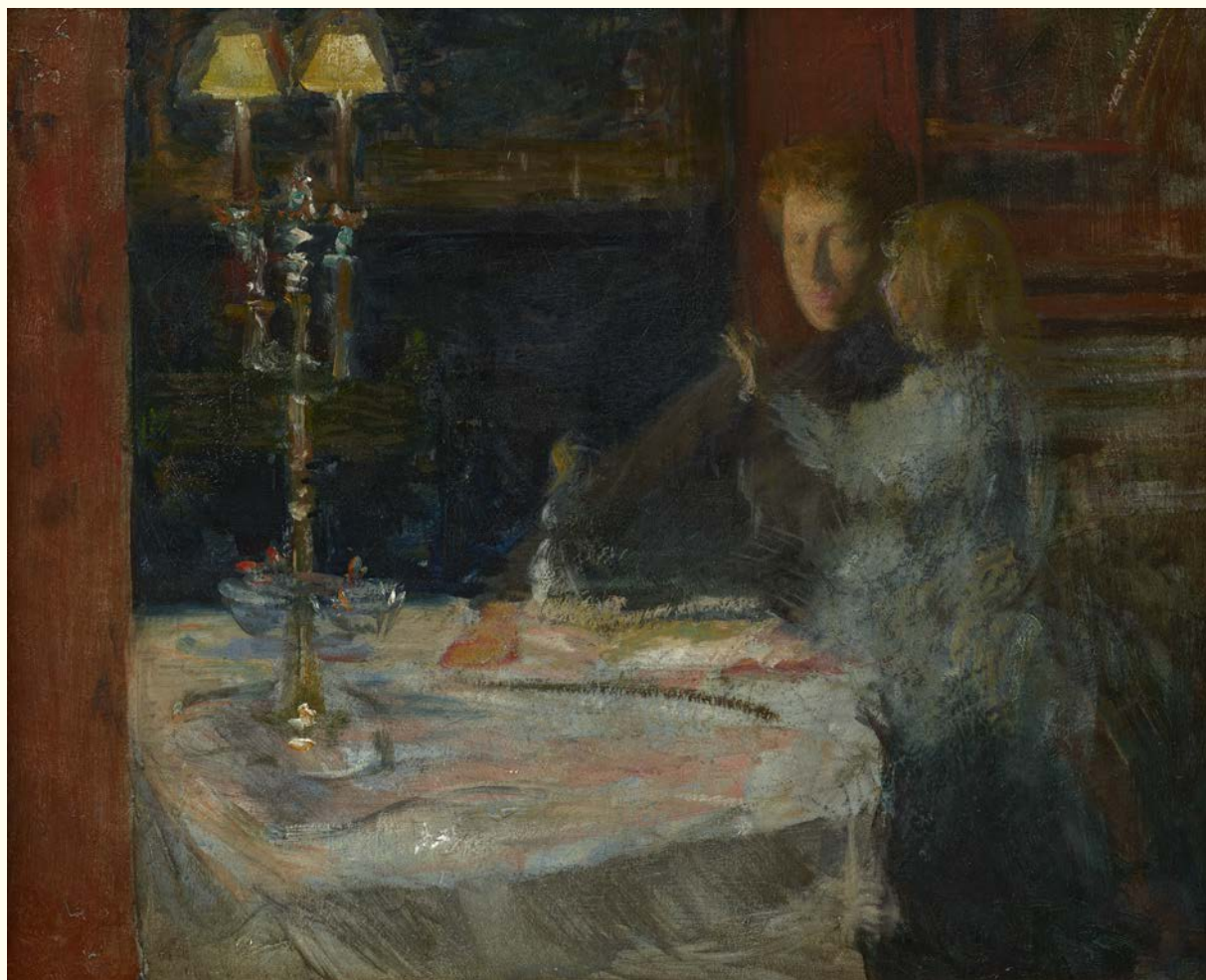
Private collection  
[Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York]  
Corporate collection, acquired directly from the above, 1991  
[Sale: Sotheby's New York, December 11, 2020, lot 141]  
Private collection, New York, acquired directly from the above

EXHIBITED

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, *J. Alden Weir: An American Impressionist*, October 13, 1983–January 8, 1984, n.p., no. 12, illus.  
(this exhibition traveled to Los Angeles, The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, February 9–May 6, 1984 and Denver, The Denver Art Museum, June 13–August 19, 1984)



*Anna by Lamplight*, late 1880s



oil on canvas  
16 × 20 inches  
(COVER DETAIL)

PROVENANCE

The artist  
Mrs. George Page Ely (née Caroline Weir), his daughter, 1919  
Mrs. Gregory Smith (née Anne Weir Ely), her daughter  
By descent in the family to private collection, California

EXHIBITED

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, *J. Alden Weir: An American Impressionist*, October 13, 1983–January 8, 1984, p. 119; 121, no. 31, illus. (this exhibition traveled to Los Angeles, The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, February 9–May 6, 1984 and Denver, The Denver Art Museum, June 13–August 19, 1984)

## *Caro with an Orange (Portrait of Caro)*, 1887

signed *J. Alden Weir* and dated 1887, lower left  
oil on canvas  
49<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 36<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

### PROVENANCE

The artist

Mrs. George Page Ely (née Caroline Weir), his daughter, 1919

Mrs. Gregory Smith (née Anne Weir Ely), her daughter

By descent in the family to private collection, California

### EXHIBITED

Paris, Palais des Beaux-Arts, *Universal Exposition*, May 5–November 5, 1889, no. 326 (as *Portrait of Artist's Child*)

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Memorial Exhibition of the Works of Julian Alden Weir*, March 17–

April 20, 1924, no. 7, illus. (as *Portrait of a Child*)

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, *J. Alden Weir: An American Impressionist*, October 13, 1983–January 8, 1984,

n.p., no. 3, illus. (as *Portrait of a Child*) (this exhibition traveled to Los Angeles, The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, February 9–May 6, 1984 and Denver, The Denver Art Museum, June 13–August 19, 1984)

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, *The Paris Universal Exhibition of 1889: American Artists at the*

*World's Fair*, September 15, 1989–July 30, 1990, pp. 225–226; 296, no. 326, illus. (as *Portrait of Caro*)

Storrs, University of Connecticut, The William Benton Museum of Art, *J. Alden Weir—A Place of his Own*,

June 4–August 18, 1991 (as *Portrait of Caro*)

### LITERATURE

Harold Frederic, "American Art in Paris," *New York Times*, June 16, 1889, p. 11

Theodore Child, "American Artists at the Paris Exhibition," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 79  
(September 1889), p. 520

Hildegard Cummings, "Art and Nature in the Landscapes of Nod," in Nicolai Cikovsky Jr. et al,

*A Connecticut Place: Weir Farm—An American Painter's Rural Retreat* (Wilton, Connecticut: Weir Farm Trust,  
2000), p. 82, no. 72, illus. (as *Portrait of a Child*)

### BACK COVER

## *Shetucket River*, circa 1910

oil on canvas  
19<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 23 inches

### PROVENANCE

The artist

Mrs. George Page Ely (née Caroline Weir), his daughter, 1919

Mrs. Gregory Smith (née Anne Weir Ely), her daughter

By descent in the family to private collection, California

### LITERATURE

Anne E. Dawson, "J. Alden Weir in Windham, Connecticut, 1882–1919," in Anne E. Dawson,  
ed., *Rare Light: J. Alden Weir in Windham, Connecticut* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University  
Press, 2016), pp. 48–49; 138







May 6—June 18, 2021

Monday—Friday, 10AM—6PM and Saturdays by appointment

*Debra Force* FINE ART, INC.

13 EAST 69TH STREET SUITE 4F NEW YORK 10021 TEL 212.734.3636 WWW.DEBRAFORCE.COM