

# **The Chanler Fireplace Project: Historic Assessment**

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## 1. ABSTRACT

In a short article published in *The Christian Science Monitor* in 1923 surveying current exhibitions, the author exclaims, “Chanler flames forth in his Flaming Screen” when describing the exhibition of Robert Chanler’s work at the Wanamaker Department Store.<sup>1</sup> Chanler, a descendant of the well-known Astor, Stuyvesant and Winthrop families among others, had by that time become a fixture of New York high society who had also garnered acclaim as an artist after participating in the Amory Show in 1913. When the Luxembourg Museum in Paris bought one of his screens in 1922, it was heralded as a “valuable tribute not only to Mr. Chanler’s artistic ability but to American art as well” and when he died in 1930, his obituary headline read “R. W. Chanler, Famous Mural Painter, is Dead.”<sup>2</sup> As a distinctly American artist with an array of famous patrons, Chanler was iconic within the burgeoning New York City art scene bolstered by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in the 1920s and 1930s. Yet the artist remains largely absent from the history of American art and the existing scholarship overemphasizes the decorative or ornate function of his work. When Whitney commissioned Chanler to design the interior of her private studio between 1918 and 1923, however, he created a monumental, three-dimensional fireplace that displays his evolution as a technical and stylistic innovator. Climbing a twenty-foot wall with expressive force, the Whitney fireplace is an extraordinary counterpoint to his more prevalent work in murals, stained glass and painted screens.

Installed over an existing brick fireplace with molded flames in bronze and plaster decorated with layers of metal leaf and glazes (now obscured by overpaints), the fireplace conveys a sense of movement and dynamism largely absent from Chanler’s two-dimensional works depicting flora and fauna. Though the fireplace builds on the artist’s *Flames* screen from 1913, this work diverges from the artist’s representative style towards a more abstract mode that prioritizes compositional unity and optical effect. Unlike Chanler’s narrative screens like *Vizcayan Bay*, which reimagines the American conquest, or his anatomically descriptive *Giraffes* from 1906, the Whitney fireplace does not tell a story nor does it provide minute visual details. Rather, Chanler’s sculpture in the Whitney Studio captures a destructive and unwieldy force of nature that communicates the physical and emotional rebirth represented by fire and thus the

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<sup>1</sup> R.F., “Decorative Art in New York,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (Mar 12, 1923), 16.

<sup>2</sup> “Current Observations About Art and Artists,” *New York Tribune* (Aug 20, 1922), D6; “R. W. Chanler, Famous Mural Painter, is Dead,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Oct 25, 1930), 24.

very chaos of transformation itself. In positing that the formal device of ‘fire’ and flames in Chanler’s work represents a move towards a more abstract vocabulary to express the theme of regeneration, this paper positions the Whitney fireplace as fundamentally ‘modern’ both in comparison with his other works and within the larger genre of American decorative arts.<sup>3</sup>

Through an analysis of the history, creation and artistic milieu surrounding the work, as well as pointed comparison with two of his other major projects at the Vizcaya Estate and the Colony Club in New York City, this research demonstrates the conceptual and artistic significance of the fireplace within the *oeuvre* of this enigmatic yet understudied American artist.

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<sup>3</sup> Though the word ‘modern’ has acquired various connotations in the current scholarship (as it mostly references ‘abstract’ or ‘conceptual’ works), it is important to note that Chanler’s work looked ‘modern’ to contemporary writers. In one article in the magazine, *Arts & Decoration*, for example, Chanler’s work is described as part of an “essentially modern collection,” in this case that of Mrs. Charles Cary Rumsey. Guy Pène Du Bois, “Mistresses of Famous American Collections: The Collection of Mrs. Charles Cary Rumsey.” *The Arts* 7 (1916-17): 559.

## 2. HISTORIC REPORT

### *Introduction*

In a short article published in *The Christian Science Monitor* in 1923 surveying current exhibitions, the author exclaims, “Chanler flames forth in his Flaming Screen” when describing the exhibition of Robert Chanler’s work at the Wanamaker Department Store.<sup>4</sup> Chanler, a descendant of the well-known Astor, Stuyvesant and Winthrop families among others, had by that time become a fixture of New York high society who had also garnered acclaim as an artist after participating in the Amory Show in 1913. When the Luxembourg Museum in Paris bought one of his screens in 1922, it was heralded as a “valuable tribute not only to Mr. Chanler’s artistic ability but to American art as well” and when he died in 1930, his obituary headline read “R. W. Chanler, Famous Mural Painter, is Dead.”<sup>5</sup> As a distinctly American artist with a recognizable style and famous patrons, Chanler was iconic within the burgeoning New York City art scene bolstered by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in the 1920s and 1930s. Yet the artist remains largely absent from the history of American art and the scholarship that does exist overemphasizes the decorative or ornate function of his work. When Whitney commissioned Chanler to design the interior of her private studio between 1918 and 1923, however, he created a monumental, three-dimensional fireplace that displays his evolution into a technical and stylistic innovator [fig. 1]. Though Whitney’s fireplace has long been acknowledged as somewhat of an anomaly for Chanler, an analysis of the history, execution and conceptual framework of the work can prove particularly revealing for both the significance of the studio in which it was built as well as for the *oeuvre* of this enigmatic yet understudied American artist.

Climbing the roughly twenty foot tall fireplace of the studio and undulating with expressive force, the fireplace in Whitney’s Eighth Street studio proves an extraordinary counterpoint to Chanler’s more typical work in murals, stained glass and painted screens, all of which were present in the studio. Ms. Whitney originally commissioned the fireplace sculpture

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<sup>4</sup> R.F., “Decorative Art in New York,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (Mar 12, 1923), 16.

<sup>5</sup> “Current Observations About Art and Artists,” *New York Tribune* (Aug 20, 1922), D6; “R. W. Chanler, Famous Mural Painter, is Dead,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Oct 25, 1930), 24.

in 1918 for her private studio attached to her stable on 19 MacDougal Alley\* in New York City. For the studio, Chanler also provided seven stained glass windows, one folding screen and a decorated ceiling in Bas-relief [figs. 2 & 3].<sup>6</sup> The future founder of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney was an avid collector and supporter of American artists like Chanler and was an aspiring sculptor herself.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the two appear to have been quite close friends, with Chanler often addressing Whitney as his “Dear Patronne” in their correspondence. In a letter to Chanler dated October 2, 1915, Whitney’s secretary (Irene Givenwilson) implies that the two spoke frequently on the phone – a situation that explains the dearth of documentation for the project [Appendix A].<sup>8</sup> The studio, consisting of a loft space above one of the stables converted into the Whitney Studio,<sup>\*</sup> functioned as Whitney’s most private sanctuary in New York City (her Westbury, NY studio was frequented more often and was also photographed for publication).<sup>9</sup> As Bernard Friedman describes in his biography of Whitney, there is “considerable evidence already... that MacDougal Alley and Boulevard Flandrin [Paris] are more congenial to her than Westbury” [fig. 4].<sup>10</sup> Given their friendship and her previous patronage of Chanler’s work at both her Mansion in Westbury, New York and at the elite Colony Club in Manhattan, it is not surprising that Whitney gave him full control over the decoration of the personal space she used to create her sculptures and host her artist friends.

Despite the studio’s current monochrome appearance and the absence of any extant color images, it is possible to imagine how the fireplace looked after it was completed in 1923. As

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\* Though the official entrance to the Whitney Studio Club and later the Whitney Museum was at 8 West Eight Street in the East Village, the entrance and address for the Whitney Studio occupied the loft space atop the first stable that Whitney had purchased in 1907 with the address of 19 MacDougal Alley. See “New York Studio School: Master Plan Documentation” by 1107 Design from March, 2006 for specific information on the evolution of the structures.

<sup>6</sup> B.H. Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney: A Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 397.

<sup>7</sup> For the history and evolution of the Whitney Museum, see Avis Berman’s *Rebels on Eighth Street: Juliana Force and the Whitney Museum of American Art* (Atheneum: New York, 1990) and Janis Conner and Joel Rosenkranz’s *Rediscoveries in American Sculpture: Studio Works, 1893-1939* (Austin, Texas, 1989) for a more detailed account of Whitney’s career as a sculptor.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Winthrop Chanler to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, October 2, 1915. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

\* Before naming the residences the ‘Whitney Studio Club’ in 1918, which would feature a regular exhibition program, Whitney showed work she had purchased from a variety of artists at informal exhibitions at the ‘Whitney Studio.’ Chanler was also a founding member of the ‘Whitney Studio Club.’ Whitney Museum Library, Whitney Studio Club and Galleries, 1907-1930, Whitney Museum of American Art Archives (New York, NY).

<sup>9</sup> As Friedman notes, Whitney threw a party to celebrate the completion of the Westbury Studio, which was an “expensive toy” that annoyed Harry Payne Whitney (her husband). The painter Jerome Myers described the opening party thusly: “I can hardly visualize, let alone describe, the many shifting scenes of our entertainment... Robert Chanler showing us his exotic sea pictures, blue-green vision in a marine bathroom, and Mrs. Whitney displaying her studio, the only place on earth in which she could find solitude.” Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 328.

<sup>10</sup> Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 328.

described in the report by Lauren Drapala from 2011 and the 2013 study of the fireplace by the team from New York University and Columbia University, the ceiling and fireplace were covered in a thick layer of white paint after Whitney's death in 1945 to make it more amenable to future inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> While the white paint certainly belies the sculpture's original polychrome appearance, the twisting and curling flames molded in bronze at the base and the plaster moving up the chimney towards the ceiling suggest the work's once-lively nature. As described in the 2013 Technical Report on the fireplace, SEM, FTIR and Raman analyses have revealed that the original paint layers included a variety of pigments and glazes, mostly red, on top of bright copper leaf.<sup>12</sup> Friedman, writing some fifty years after the work was commissioned, between 1918 and 1923, described the impression the original room would have made:

What's new, startling, and unique is the decorative design of the mantelpiece and chimney. A huge fire, in molded plaster, painted mostly bright red and gold, blazes from the floor, twenty feet up the chimney, and across the ceiling where the sculptural forms flatten into low relief. Half hidden among the flames are nymphs, birds, fish, reptiles, dragons, gargoyles, a fantastic world of real and imagined animals.<sup>13</sup>

While the studio's white appearance certainly disrupts the 'startling' impact of the blazing sculpture that Chanler intended, the enduring presence of the 'nymphs,' birds, fish and other fantastical creatures intermingled with the flames helps to conjure the dynamic aesthetic of Friedman's account [figs. 5, 6 & 7]. Furthermore, the interwoven faces of the animal creatures create a multivalent, layered façade in both texture and depth that would have reinforced the alternating pattern of painted red and gold flames punctuated with figures likely painted in primary colors like blue and green; as seen in a recreation from 2005, the room must have been both magnificent and awe-inspiring, enigmatic and elusive [fig. 8]. Certainly Chanler was as adept with color as he was with design and contour, as the writer Frederick Price described his work as a "manifold expression" that was "beautiful in radiant color, life-filled, original, stimulating, and inspiring."<sup>14</sup> Color also plays a decisive role in the stained glass windows

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<sup>11</sup> Lauren Drapala with Frank Matero, "The Whitney Studio Ceiling: Examination, Analysis and Recommendation for Conservation," Architectural Conservation Laboratory (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, August 2011), 45. See citation 2 for specific information: "These interventions were intended to make the room more appealing to possible renters, one of which included the photographer Herbert Matter in the 1960s-70s."

<sup>12</sup> Alafia Akhtar, Kathryn Brugioni, Megan Randall, Kari Rayner and Jessica Walthew, "The Chanler Fireplace Project," Conservation Center, Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, August 2013, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 397.

<sup>14</sup> Frederick N. Price, "Illustrations of Tropical Splendor: Illustrated by the Work of Robert Chanler," *The Touchstone* 5 (1919): 469.

Chanler installed in the room, which portray creatures from different realms of the natural world and would have cast colorful shadows across the room depending on the light.

Significantly, Whitney bought and displayed the very screen that inspired the above quote “Chanler flames forth in his Flaming Screen,” which was entitled *Flames* and completed by the artist in 1913 [fig. 9]. As seen in the 1922 publication *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* by the Russian scholar Ivan Narodny, *Flames* has swirling, shimmering flames engulf both a shadowy figure and his environment comprised of a medieval-style structure. If this screen, which can also be seen in a photograph of a 1926 exhibition of Chanler’s work from the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, is the same one the writer R. F. designates as the “Flaming Screen” in his 1923 article for *The Christian Science Monitor*, then the work was also executed in “vermillion on vermillion” or bright red on bright red [fig. 10].<sup>15</sup> The work, which is described by Narodny in 1930 as “an elaborate decorative panel in Gertrude Whitney’s New York studio,” is noticeably oversized compared with Chanler’s other screens and already reaches the heights of the gallery ceiling.<sup>16</sup> Given his close working relationship with his patron and Chanler’s persistent use of familiar subjects and *leitmotifs*, it is not unlikely that the placement of this screen in the Whitney Studio inspired the idea for the fireplace and may have even encouraged the artist to work on a larger scale.

Though his screens and mural commissions provide enlightening formal comparisons, the fireplace in the Whitney Studio ultimately demonstrates Chanler’s imaginative and unorthodox use of *space* in a manner that departs from any other work he completed. In this sense, the fireplace sculpture represents one of his most creative and avant-garde endeavors and illustrates the culmination of his shifting aesthetic mode. As Narodny writes in 1922, Chanler’s artistic achievement stemmed from his unique interpretation of an Eastern or ‘Oriental’ style, where “instead of having a floating, or – so to speak – horizontal tendency, his symbols try to shoot themselves directly upward or downward.”<sup>17</sup> The artist’s vertically oriented installation at the Whitney Studio manifests the artist’s ingenuity and creative prowess in a manner beyond any of his other projects. Moreover, Chanler’s substantial departure from his earlier work, in the realization of the fireplace towards a more abstract or conceptual mode, not only reflects the unique physical execution of the work but also provides insight into his development as an artist.

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<sup>15</sup> R.F., “Decorative Art in New York,” 16.

<sup>16</sup> Ivan Narodny, *American Artists* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1930), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ivan Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (New York: William Helburn, 1922), 80.



Supported internally by a brick fireplace topped by molded flames in bronze and plaster, the fireplace is fabricated in a manner unlike any of Chanler's other major works and is thus able to express a sense of movement and dynamism absent from many of his two-dimensional depictions of birds, sea creatures and other flora and fauna. Unlike the narrative screen at *Villa Vizcaya* depicting the conquest of the Americas, for example, or the anatomical description of Chanler's *Giraffes* screen from 1913, the fireplace in the Whitney Studio does not tell a story nor does it provide minute visual details [figs. 11 & 12].<sup>18</sup> Aside from the obvious relationship between the fireplace and the flames it can produce, in this work Chanler deprives the viewer of a single narrative or a straightforward interpretation. Rather, the fireplace conveys a destructive and unwieldy force of nature and is thus more expressive of a mental or emotional state and the chaos of transformation itself.

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<sup>18</sup> Image courtesy Villa Vizcaya; *Giraffes* taken from Ivan Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (Roerich, NY: Roerich Museum Press, 1931), 2.

## *Documentation & Correspondence*

In addition to the extraordinary nature of the fireplace within Chanler's *oeuvre*, the Whitney Studio is also significant as a testament to the unique friendship between the artist and his patron. Robert Chanler and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney maintained a personal friendship as well as a professional relationship that made the artist the perfect match for the decoration of her private studio. Whitney first mentions the recently separated, extravagant and 'handsome' Chanler in a series of journal entries from April of 1906. In one entry from April 2<sup>nd</sup>, she describes a two-hour visit with the artist that demonstrates the peculiar nature of their friendship:

Put aside the fact of his being a fraud and a flirt, and he is inspiring. To hear him talk about art, to hear his ideas, to see the great truths coming from him is worthwhile. The fact that he mixes it all up with admiring remarks and such like perhaps only adds to the force of it. [...] Words and personality drop from him simply as so much dust or air, he does not miss it. There is plenty of both to be had. He is a kind of Walt Whitman. He and Howard [Cushing] and I could have wonderful times. I could talk to him with my soul laid bare, because being a natural person, he brings out the natural in others.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the intimation by several scholars that Whitney and Chanler were more than friends, in actuality they were close, their intimate friendship may simply have bordered on inappropriate.<sup>20</sup> Whitney's husband, Harry Payne Whitney, who reportedly preferred his 'high society' friends to Gertrude's bohemian artists and architects, may have appreciated her friendship with Chanler, who was both wealthy and descended from respectable families.<sup>21</sup> So while Whitney was certainly more than Chanler's 'patronne,' it appears from their letters that their relationship remained primarily artistic in nature, as Whitney was both a fellow artist and a "friend who [shared] his enthusiasm for the exotic environment and the theatrical style of life."<sup>22</sup> Chanler's frequent commissions from Whitney, however, including the decoration of the bathrooms and

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<sup>19</sup> Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 233.

<sup>20</sup> The author Kathleen McCarthy states that Whitney had a number of affairs while she was still married to Harry, including ones with both Chanler and her tutor, Andrew O'Connor [Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830-1930* (Chicago, University of Chicago: 1993), 226]. McCarthy claims that this is supported by a passage in Friedman's biography on page 411 that recounts a letter from Harry to Gertrude after he discovered her affairs (though of course he was engaged in his own affairs). Friedman writes, "by the time that she signed the lease of her MacDougal Alley studio, the Whitneys led increasingly separate lives" [Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 411].

<sup>21</sup> Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 230.

<sup>22</sup> Friedman, 297.

bedroom of her Westbury Mansion, did not result in the same type of ‘documentation’ that exists between her and other artists.

The unique character of Whitney’s relationship with Chanler, combined with the private nature of the places in which he worked, amounted to an overall dearth of correspondence between them. In the letter from October of 1915 discussed above (the first to mention Chanler), Whitney simply offers the artist her opera tickets and apologizes for the poor phone service during their conversation that morning [Appendix A].<sup>23</sup> Unlike the other letters in Whitney’s Correspondence now housed at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, this letter was typed by Whitney’s secretary and is the earliest recorded evidence of their ‘official’ relationship. The first letter from Chanler to Whitney in the files, dated “Jan 19<sup>th</sup> 1918,” is also the first time the studio project and the ‘fireplace’ and ‘ceiling’ are mentioned [Appendix B]. Writing to Whitney, who was traveling in Europe, Chanler states:

The ceiling is finished and the fireplace is beautiful. The mantle is fair simple and will not bother you for sure, my wish is working off the heads. John Sargent and my sister in law saw your studio and Sargent admired the screen – the flame picture and the ceiling – but he wanted a big dragon in the sky. We got the idea from the back of your screen.<sup>24</sup>

In the same letter Chanler also declares, “I do not think we need the dragon” – implying that the fireplace sculpture may have originally included an actual ‘progenitor’ of the flames. He also writes “I have had Rudolph glaze the ceiling & now it is no longer patchy,” which suggests that while the technical execution of the work was part of an ongoing discussion between artist and patron, ultimately Chanler was responsible for the work’s final appearance. Additionally, Chanler’s statements that the mantle will “not bother” his patron “for sure” indicate that the artist retained substantial artistic autonomy in his working process, as Whitney was clearly absent during the execution of the fireplace and likely had little influence on its formation from afar. Friedman echoes this characterization of their collaboration, writing that “while Gertrude is away, Robert Chanler works in her MacDougal Alley studio, decorating it in a style as exotic as

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<sup>23</sup> GVW to RWC, October 2, 1915. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>24</sup> RWC to GVW, January 19, 1918, partial translation courtesy Lauren Drapala. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.). Important to note here that John Singer Sargent had painted a portrait of Elizabeth Winthrop Chanler in 1893, now in the collection of the National Museum of American Art at the Smithsonian Institute.

and even more unifiedly personal than that of the rooms done by him in Westbury.”<sup>25</sup> Perhaps it was this distance between them or his patron’s evolving, exotic taste that led Chanler to create a unified, decorative installation that departs drastically from his other work.

Despite his claim that the ceiling and fireplace were ‘finished,’ in his next letter Chanler indicates the ongoing nature of the project. In the letter, which is dated either to “Monday the 11<sup>th</sup>” or “Monday the 17<sup>th</sup>” of 1918, Chanler writes to Whitney that he recently “took Frank Lazarus & Hellen Barclay to see the sculpture show in your place & they went into your studio” and also expresses happiness at receiving her telegram [Appendix C]. On the third page of the letter, he elaborates on the situation at the studio:

Frank D\_\_\_\_, a wise man him, Jack Townsend calls him the master. He has seen the ceiling & fire place being made also the screen & flame panel. To him he said it was a my [sic] wonderful composition & also the window it was an *originel* [sic] thing unlike anything before.<sup>26</sup>

Chanler’s reference to the ceiling and fire place being ‘made’ demonstrates that the project involved continuous visits from the artist, who was routinely bringing in friends and colleagues to help assess his progress. Though the name following ‘Frank’ is difficult to read with certainty, it is possible that it says Frank *Duveneck* (an American painter whose work was present in the founding collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art). Regardless, Chanler was most interested in the visitors’ sentiments, as he proudly reports their praise for his composition and originality in the project to his patron. He continues:

Frank Lazarus says the Coe work does not compare to what I did for you – I know why & told him so. You are a great woman & fill my mind with vast things, seething unknown things. I miss you terribly.<sup>27</sup>

Chanler’s claim that he ‘knows why’ the work at the Whitney Studio is superior to that at Coe Hall also suggests that the artist took special effort with Whitney’s projects – likely because of his fondness and affection for her. Moreover, in regards to originality, he and Lazarus are not incorrect; Chanler’s murals of buffalo and ‘Indian’ hunters completed at Coe Hall during the renovations between 1918 and 1921, one of which prominently features a fireplace, employ none

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<sup>25</sup> Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 397.

<sup>26</sup> RWC to GVW, ca. 1918. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>27</sup> RWC to GVW, ca. 1918. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

of the spatial ingenuity or creative sensationalism seen in the Whitney Studio [fig. 13]. Though Chanler attempts to incorporate the fireplace in the Breakfast Room at Coe Hall into the larger scheme of an ‘Indian Hunt’ by surrounding it with rocky landscape, ultimately the fireplace remains separate from the mural itself and the effect is one of camouflage rather than integration. Chanler’s letter from 1918 thus also serves as an indirect commentary on the artist’s developing style, which blossomed with Whitney’s encouragement and led to the creation of the fireplace.

In the final letter referencing his work, Chanler expresses disappointment that Whitney has decided not to purchase his screen *Giraffes*. The letter, which is undated and has been labeled as “ca. 1919-20” in the Whitney archives, is significantly shorter than the previous letters discussed and signals a change in tone between the two friends, especially when Chanler writes “Dear Gertrude” [Appendix E]. Chanler can barely disguise his hurt feelings, writing:

I had hoped they [the *Giraffes*] had found a home at last. I’ll take them back when I return from the south & keep them where they perhaps belong on a cylinder near the ceiling & can [sic] look at them when I want.<sup>28</sup>

By the end of the letter, however, the artist has changed his tone, perhaps aware of the dangerous territory he was entering in antagonizing his chief patron:

There is no need of my thanking you for all the opportunities you have given me, my proudest moment – at best my most contented moment was when I sat for Davidson in your studio with my three pictures on the wall. It is thanks to you that I pulled myself out of the mud I had fallen in by my terrible alliance with Cavalieri, you came and gave me work & showed faith in me.<sup>29</sup>

Though Chanler’s comments indicate that their friendship may have at times affected their artist-patron relationship, ultimately the two shared a deep sense of loyalty and appreciation. Chanler’s mention of his ex-wife Lina Cavalieri, who had made him miserable by tying up his inheritance while also thoroughly embarrassing him in the international press, also points to the trust between them. In a draft of Whitney’s response, she writes that she wishes she could have “seen him alone today” in order to tell him “how much I care” and references her constant battle against unhappiness [Appendix F].<sup>30</sup> Her sentiments, which may have stemmed from her

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<sup>28</sup> RWC to GVW, n.d. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> GVW to RWC, n.d. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

growing estrangement with Harry and her recent embarrassment in the *New York Times* article “Poor Little Rich Girl and Her Art,” are accented by a small sketch of a kneeling woman who appears to be praying.<sup>31</sup> Despite the tenderness between them, however, this letter is the last in the series from 1918-19 and the next letter from Chanler on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1923 is noticeably concise [Appendix G]. Despite addressing her once more as ‘Patronne,’ Chanler spends the majority of this letter praising Whitney’s recent exhibition in Philadelphia and proclaiming her as the “Greatest American Woman Sculptor.”<sup>32</sup> While his kind words in no way propose a rift between them, the cursory nature of this final exchange may reflect their waning professional involvement after the official completion of the Whitney Studio interior in 1923.

Significantly, Whitney was also patronizing the artist and illustrator Maxfield Parrish for her Westbury studio around the same time she commissioned Robert Chanler to decorate her studio in New York City. Parrish painted four large panels for the sitting room of the studio in Westbury between 1914 and 1918 and there is substantial documentation concerning the project. In a letter dated March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1916, for example, Parrish writes to ‘Mrs. Whitney’ to tell her that “the decoration for the wall opposite the fire place was finished long, long ago, but the other one seemed so very wrong that I’ve begun again on a new canvas.”<sup>33</sup> More importantly, there are numerous receipts and invoices in the Whitney archives that reference this project, including a bill from “Thomas R. Fullalove’s Varnishes, Paints & Paint Specialties” dated February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1919 [Appendix H].<sup>34</sup> In this letter, the company invoices Mrs. Whitney for the fee of \$70.00 for the installation of Parrish’s painting in her Westbury Studio on October 18, 1918. Such receipts not only shed light on the more mundane aspects of Whitney’s various projects but also reiterate the glaring lack of materials related to the Chanler project by demonstrating the kinds of documents

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<sup>31</sup> “Poor Little Rich Girl and Her Art,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1919, 7.

<sup>32</sup> RWC to GVW, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1923. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>33</sup> Maxfield Parrish to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1916. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>34</sup> Receipt from Thomas R. Fullalove, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1919. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.). Friedman describes the commission for Parrish in more depth in his biography of Whitney: “After a two-year delay while completing ‘acres’ of murals for the Curtis Publishing Company for whom he is the outstanding illustrator, Maxfield Parrish is ready with the first two of four panels, each about six by nineteen feet, for the sitting room of the Westbury studio. [...] Like his art, Parrish’s humor is light; life’s a bit heavier. Nothing works. The panels are off by a few inches. The light in the room is inadequate. T. R. Fullalove, Parrish’s beautifully named installer, will struggle for four more years, cutting and patching these panels and installing the remaining two, one of which, the crucial north wall, will be so out of scale that Parrish will question his abilities as a mural painter and offer to return \$4,000 of his fee (refused by Gertrude) [Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 344].

normally produced. In an undated letter to Whitney, Parrish writes, “I believe the balance due on this last panel is four thousand dollars, which will make complete payment for the decorations” [Appendix I].<sup>35</sup> This straightforward request for payment underscores the professional nature of his relationship with Whitney as well as the lack of concrete information in her letters with Chanler, who never discusses money except in reference to his divorces.

While the overall lack of documents prevents a more in-depth analysis of the specific details of their working process, the prolonged correspondence between Chanler and Whitney between 1918 and 1923 does provide insight into the nature of their collaboration throughout Chanler’s ‘decoration’ of the Whitney Studio. The multiple references in their letters to phone conversations and telegrams implies they had an extensive rapport beyond their paper letters even while Whitney was abroad or at one of her estates outside of New York City. Juliana Force, whom Whitney had hired in 1914 to assist with her various artistic projects and later became the director of the Whitney Studio Club, also acted as a de facto liaison between her boss and Chanler. In a letter to Whitney from March or April of 1918, Force informs Whitney that “Mr. Chanler has really been down in bed & asked me yesterday to tell you that he has had bad luck since you went away & won’t you at least come home if only for a day!”<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, this back and forth rendered “every action of either Mrs. Whitney or Mrs. Force” as ultimately the “action of both, for it was taken after full consultation and in complete agreement.”<sup>37</sup>

Chanler, for his part, mentions meeting with Force on two separate occasions, writing for example in the letter from around 1919 in Appendix C, “I saw Mrs Force this afternoon & got your address & talked about you.”<sup>38</sup> Though Force notably ran the studio with certain creative and monetary authority in Whitney’s absence, with Friedman describing her as “Gertrude’s buffer in many of the activities,” they appear to have remained in close contact despite the distances.<sup>39</sup> In one letter to ‘Mrs. Force’ from June 8, 1917, for example, Whitney writes that she will send \$500 for “current expenses” and that she is hopeful Mrs. Force was “able to understand

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<sup>35</sup> Maxfield Parrish to GVW, n.d. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>36</sup> Juliana Force to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, ca. March-April, 1918. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>37</sup> *Juliana Force and American Art: A Memorial Exhibition, September 24-October 30, 1949*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1949), 13.

<sup>38</sup> RWC to GVW, ca. 1918. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>39</sup> Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 403.

[her] over the telephone this morning.”<sup>40</sup> Force faithfully managed Whitney’s projects even when the heiress was not physically in the studio or even the country; no detail appears to have been too small for discussion, with Force even asking Whitney whether she “wants oil lamps for the studio” in another undated letter sent from 8 West Eighth Street.<sup>41</sup> So while Chanler’s comments that the ceiling is “no longer cracked” or that the mantle “will not bother you” imply a certain amount of artistic autonomy, his frequent encounters with Force demonstrate that there was regular ‘management’ of the project overall. As Drapala posits in her report, cross-sectional analysis does suggest Chanler changed aspects of the ceiling over time in a manner that may reflect Whitney’s intermittent input.<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, the fireplace pleased Whitney enough that she paid for the project in full according to a receipt from August 13, 1923.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Juliana Force to GVW, June 8, 1917. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>41</sup> Juliana Force to GVW, n.d. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>42</sup> Drapala with Matero, “The Whitney Studio Ceiling,” 26-27. See citation 23 and chapter 8 for more information.

<sup>43</sup> See Drapala’s report, where she recreates a table documenting the expenses for the project as taken from a receipt in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Drapala, “The Whitney Studio Ceiling,” 27.



## Chronology

Through the combination of technical analysis outlined in the reports by the NYU-Columbia team in 2013 and Lauren Drapala in 2011 with the archival evidence above, a tentative chronology for the fireplace in the Whitney Studio can be established. Identifying the original color scheme has been made difficult by the presence of first a layer of black paint, which stops short of the studio ceiling, and subsequently a thick layer of white paint.<sup>44</sup> In the only known image of the fireplace prior to Whitney's death, which also features a maquette for Whitney's sculpture *War Monument, Springfield*, the black and white film gives the fireplace a monochromatic appearance [fig. 2]. Though the sculpture reflects light in this image in a way that suggests it still contained metal leaf when the photo was taken in 1928, it remains unclear whether the image presents the finished, colorful work or the later version that was painted over. In the following synopsis, a variety of research and analysis have been combined to attempt to piece together the timeline for the creation of this specific facet of the studio. Though this description is largely provisional due to the complexity of surface finishes, multiple campaigns of decoration and the lack of archival documentation, it is based on months of research and analysis and takes into account a variety of circumstances and possibilities. Thus, while the dates and relative timeline for Chanler's project may change with future research into the Whitney Studio, the overarching narrative will remain largely the same.

When Chanler states in his letter to Whitney from January of 1918 that the "ceiling is finished and the fireplace is beautiful" and the "mantle is fair and simple," the artist implies that work on both elements of the project is by that point fully underway. According to the report by the NYU-Columbia team of conservation students from 2013, the bronze flames central to the fireplace sculpture were most likely installed in a series of phases. The first phase included the installation of a "set of low relief flames present on the front of the fireplace extending from the hearth and ending above the mantle."<sup>45</sup> As exposed bronze results in a process of patination, the appearance of the fireplace during this phase would likely have included green-patinated bronze elements topped by stucco flames.<sup>46</sup> In the letter from either "Monday the 11<sup>th</sup>" or "Monday the 17<sup>th</sup>" of 1918 (which would necessarily post-date the letter from January as the 11<sup>th</sup> fell on a

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<sup>44</sup> Akhtar, et al., "The Chanler Fireplace Project," 16.

<sup>45</sup> Akhtar, et al., "The Chanler Fireplace Project," 8.

<sup>46</sup> Akhtar, et al., "The Chanler Fireplace Project," 19.

Friday that month and the 17<sup>th</sup> fell on a Thursday), Chanler states that he has taken two friends to see the “fire place being made” [Appendix C].<sup>47</sup> Though it is difficult to ascertain exactly when Chanler undertook which phases of the project the change in Chanler’s tone from the first letter (where the fireplace is ‘complete’) to the second letter (where it is ‘being made’) does support the hypothesis that the work was completed in a series of phases.

At some point between the initial mention of the fireplace in the letter from January of 1918 and Whitney’s full payment for the work in 1923, Chanler completed two more phases of work on the sculpture. The second phase after the installation of the low-relief flames included the addition of “highly three-dimensional cast flames on the lower portion of the north and south elevations.”<sup>48</sup> In the report by the NYU-Columbia team, the students posit that the extensive reworking of the lower part of the mantle suggests it was an early feature followed by more focused sculpting of the plaster flames.<sup>49</sup> As the bronze flames have a noticeably different character than the sculpted plaster flames and it was observed that the patina was applied underneath the paint and leaf finishes, the bronze section “may have been considered a finished artwork that was later incorporated into a greater scheme.”<sup>50</sup> The final phase involved the addition of plaster-relief flames, which are found on the majority of the surface of the fireplace and are “sculpturally integrated into the top of the bronze relief and [stretch] the height of... the cove of the ceiling.”<sup>51</sup> The NYU-Columbia team hypothesizes that it was this final layer that integrated the body of the ceiling with the bas-relief ceiling scheme and thus united the room.

The last, and much more amorphous phase of Chanler’s decoration of the fireplace, involved the artist’s addition and reworking of the painted and metallic finishes with the help of a team of artist’s assistants. After acquiring and analyzing over seventy cross-sections of finishes from the sculpture, the NYU-Columbia team has identified three different substrates from this phase: the bronze and brick layer on the bottom level (A) and layers of plaster and brick on the upper two levels (B and C) [Appendix D, Figure 1].<sup>52</sup> Within the cross sections, anywhere from

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<sup>47</sup> RWC to GVV, ca. 1918. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>48</sup> Akhtar, et al., “The Chanler Fireplace Project,” 8.

<sup>49</sup> Akhtar, et al., “The Chanler Fireplace Project,” 32 & 16.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Akhtar, et al., “The Chanler Fireplace Project,” 16. The conservators write that “the integration of the fireplace with the ceiling was likely completed with the installation of the plaster ceiling elements.”

<sup>52</sup> Akhtar, et al., “The Chanler Fireplace Project,” 27.

two to ten finishes were identified, which included metallic leaf, paint layers and glazes.<sup>53</sup> As the NYU-Columbia conservation team has concluded that “more finishes were represented in the cross sections from the base of the fireplace and fewer finishes or reworkings at the top of the fireplace,” the technical analysis of the finishes applied throughout the decoration of the fireplace supports the idea that the lower area of the work, characterized by the low relief flames between the hearth and the mantle, was in fact completed first and therefore worked over with the most layers of paint and other finishes.<sup>54</sup> Though analysis of the different pigments present in the series of paint layers applied to the fireplace suggests that it was once quite colorful (as described by Friedman in his biography of Whitney), further investigation has demonstrated that after this initial polychromy the sculpture was covered in gold toned aluminum leaf that would have given it more of a subdued or dull finish [fig. 39].<sup>55</sup> Any bright or primary colors on the work were discovered near the bottom and were thus likely part of the initial phase of decoration. Ultimately the work features a complex set of original finishes that point towards a continual process of reworking over the five years Chanler spent completing the decorations in the studio.

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<sup>53</sup> Akhtar, et al., “The Chanler Fireplace Project,” 27. In their report the conservators emphasize the complexity of the sculpture’s surface: “Decorative effects were achieved using complex finishes of tinted preparatory paint layers, size, aluminum or copper leaf, and glazes. The leaf and paint layers were often glazed.”

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

## *Major Themes, Methods & Projects*

When considering the fireplace at the Whitney Studio, it is crucial to understand how the project both relates to and deviates from the artist's other well-known works. Nature notably remained central to Chanler's creative process across a variety of media and styles and his interest in the anatomy and decorative function of exotic flora and fauna was widely acknowledged. After visiting his studio at 147 East 9<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City, for example, one critic stated that the artist's work incorporates "every known and unknown bird, beast, fish or fowl" ensconced in a "paradise of gorgeous vegetation and design."<sup>56</sup> Chanler's adeptness at depicting the physiology of the animal kingdom stems from his childhood at Rokeby House, the family estate on the Hudson River in Dutchess County, New York, described by the critic Christian Brinton as a "boy-hood passed in almost feudal seclusion."<sup>57</sup> As narrated by Margaret Terry Chanler\* in her 1934 memoir *Roman Spring*, Robert had a difficult time as a child not only because he was the youngest son but also because "his gift was for painting" and it "never occurred to anyone that this child should be encouraged in his gift" despite the fact that he was "poor at his lessons; Latin and mathematics were not for him."<sup>58</sup> Terry Chanler notes that Robert Chanler was actually punished as a boy for drawing a large and accurate horse on the blackboard while his tutor had left the room. The horse was apparently so well-drawn that the tutor did not believe Chanler's claim that he had drawn it and accused the future of artist of being a liar.

Considering the lack of training he received as a child, it is not surprising that Chanler spent his young adulthood traveling across Europe and absorbing the lessons in art history and technical expertise that the region offered. These years, as described by Brinton, were marked by the artist's "loafing, studying, and painting in various Continental capitals, with special emphasis on Rome and Paris," and though Chanler had originally intended to become a sculptor, he ultimately "renounce[ed] clay for crayon and colour" after an apprenticeship in Rome and a brief training course in the studio of the sculptor and painter Alexandre Falguière in Paris.<sup>59</sup> In his 1922 book on the artist, Brinton attributes Chanler's adoption of the ornamental style to his time

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<sup>56</sup> R.F., "The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler: In His Atelier His Interest in Screens," *The Christian Science Monitor* (Oct 2, 1922), 16.

<sup>57</sup> Christian Brinton, *The Robert Winthrop Chanler Exhibition* (New York City: The Kingore Gallery, 1922), 2.

\* Wife of Robert Winthrop Chanler's brother Winthrop Astor Chanler.

<sup>58</sup> Margaret Terry Chanler, *Roman Spring: Memoirs* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1934), 188-89.

<sup>59</sup> Brinton, *The Robert Winthrop Chanler Exhibition*, 2.

in Italy, where he “reveled in the fluent decorative harmonies of Pinturricchio in the Borgia apartments of the Vatican.”<sup>60</sup> A major turning point in Chanler’s career occurred after he happened upon a 17<sup>th</sup>-century K’ang Hsi screen in a little shop on the Place St-Georges in Paris. The “richly lacquered surface” of this screen “awaken[ed] countless aesthetic atavisms” for the artist and suggested “fascinating possibilities for future development.”<sup>61</sup> While the screen has since disappeared, the influence of the early modern Chinese style of illustration is evident in several of Chanler’s most significant works, particularly in the *Flamingoes* screen from 1913 [fig. 14]. In *Flamingoes*, the animals recede in space through the vertical ‘stacking’ of the planes depicted rather than along the receding orthogonal lines of one-point perspective. As described by the curator William Talbot, in such a system, “space is implied by the convention of vertical perspective in which the more distant the feature the more elevated its position” to the effect that “the topographic character of the middle ground implies a viewpoint suspended in space.”<sup>62</sup> This lack of ‘western’ perspective has traditionally resulted in the denigration or dismissal of the Chinese mode of depiction as unnatural or simply decorative. In a prescient move, Chanler appropriated these methods as part of his aesthetic and compositional ingenuity.

Prior to the commission in the Whitney Studio, the majority of Chanler’s artistic output had consisted of lacquered screens, portrait paintings and traditional works in fresco. Chanler exhibited nine screens at the famous Armory Show in 1913, including his well-known works *Porcupine* from 1914 (now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art), *Hopi Snake Dance* from 1913, *Deer* from the collection of Mrs. Sidney Harris, and the aforementioned *Flamingoes*, among others [fig. 15, 16 & 17].<sup>63</sup> While these screens were both ‘flat’ in the literal sense and in the artist’s superficial use of perspectival space, they were often articulated by deep hues juxtaposed with gold and silver metallic accents, which according to Narodny created a “radical rhythm and bold chromatic harmonies” and comprised a “subjective symbolism” rather than an “illustrative realism.”<sup>64</sup> Chanler’s uncanny ability to infuse the ‘decorative’ style with movement and dynamism increased as he began to work in larger formats with more expressive

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>62</sup> William S. Talbot, “Visions of Landscape: East and West,” *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 70 (Mar., 1983): 114.

<sup>63</sup> Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, *1913 Armory Show: 50th Anniversary Exhibition, 1963* (New York: Utica, 1963), 185.

<sup>64</sup> Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (Helburn, 1922), 17 & 21.

subjects. This talent was on display in his decoration of the Whitney Studio, which also had seven stained glass windows by the artist, depicting both real and imagined creatures, and a lacquered screen with an astrological scene on one side and a deep sea scene on the other [fig. 18 & 19]. In the 1917 screen, entitled *Bataille Soumarine/ Astrological Screen*, Chanler vividly realizes the lattice-like tentacles of seaweed in an all-over composition and limited color palette in a manner not dissimilar to that of the Whitney fireplace.<sup>65</sup> According to Narodny, this work is a “symbolic fairy tale of the deep sea” that figures “those elemental life forces outside and within ourselves, which we both fear and love.”<sup>66</sup> One of Chanler’s later screens, *Deep Sea Fantasy*, is indicative of his increased use of more intricate and lively compositions and builds on works like *Bataille Soumarine*\* (often referred to as *Deep Sea Fantasy*) [fig. 20]. The fluid composition of works like this notably depart from the staid style of screens like *Giraffes*, which Narodny describes as cold, serene and architectural in comparison.<sup>67</sup>

One of the most salient and defining characteristics of Chanler’s working methods was his interest in technical reinterpretation as a form of artistic creativity. After his time spent abroad training in major European workshops, Chanler had acquired a working knowledge of a variety of materials, techniques and methods. Though the artist was working with the historic prototype of the wooden, folding screen, the unusual format of these works endowed them with a novel appearance that left contemporary audiences captivated by the mechanics of their creation. In an issue of the magazine *The Studio*, for example, one writer discusses Chanler’s “particular vein” of “painting with raised pigment on a polished and highly varnished background” in detail:

First of all, the utmost care is exercised in selecting the wood and having it well seasoned [...] This is painted and rubbed down, painted and rubbed down with infinite patience. After the background is thoroughly ready, which means a long, long while and great supervision, the design having been definitively decided upon is drawn on the wood with a brush loaded with heavy white, and this pigment has been mixed with driers, the proportion of siccative, oil and turpentine being the result of much experimentation and research. [...] When this white is dry – dry as a bone – it is scraped down – how much, how little, the worker himself must decide – and what further manipulation is necessary is likewise a question that circumstances arrange. And when this white for the raised part, and the pure color for other parts have dried solidly – not until then – comes the further individual experimenting with the pigment, the scraping here, the adding there, the

<sup>65</sup> Ivan Narodny, *American Artists* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1930), 9; Eve Kahn, “Rescuing a Landmark From Time and the Elements,” *NY Times* (20 November 2008).

<sup>66</sup> Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (William Helburn, 1922), 24.

\* This title is taken from the 1922 publication by Ivan Narodny published by William Helburn, Inc.

<sup>67</sup> Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (William Helburn, 1922), 24.

glazing, the addition of gold or silver, and final varnishing. [...] The result is something of the quality of a Vernis Martin effect, something of a lacquer, something of an enamel; all effected with oil pigment and varnish.<sup>68</sup>

While this account of screen preparation sounds largely generalized based on the author's prior knowledge, he appears to have had first-hand knowledge of Chanler's working process. As the article continues, the author describes how the entirety of this laborious and involved process was undertaken in Chanler's studio in the east village:

In a large and delightfully appointed workshop, with side rooms for the preparation of the wood, these screens in process of completion are arranged about; and at any moment the artist is liable to dash at them, changing here, improving there, adding just the necessary touch that gives them their personal character, while skilled assistants under Mr. Chanler's direction cover immense surfaces. [...] And as a rule the American workman chafes at results obtained thus. The completed work, however, justifies the methods.<sup>69</sup>

Chanler's elaborate system of screen production probably helped prepare him for the challenges of large-scale works like the Whitney Studio. Another article in *The Christian Science Monitor* describes how Chanler managed a team of assistants and acted as the "guiding hand and thought in the work while they, understanding the requirements of surface tone and texture, prepare the panels with their ground of gold, silver or color."<sup>70</sup> Unlike the increasing spontaneity and directness of modern art, where an artist's 'gesture' or mark was linked through the artist's hand to his creative genius, Chanler preferred a diffuse system of execution where assistants "execute the early stages of the designs and assist in the large mural decorations, much as in the atelier system of other days."<sup>71</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that Brinton characterizes Chanler's use of "metallic underlays, overlays, and 'risings' in gold, silver, or aluminum" as the "work of a born craftsman."<sup>72</sup> Chanler's unorthodox methods in his earlier work is particularly relevant to the Whitney Studio fireplace and ceiling, which exhibit substantial technical departures such as the artist's use of sculpted plaster flames for the fireplace and aluminum leaf covered with oil glazes for the ceiling as described by the NYU-Columbia team and Drapala.

Despite his commitment to traditional materials and techniques, Chanler became much more experimental in his large-scale commissions. The artist's experience abroad and his astute

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<sup>68</sup> Hoeber, Aurthur. "The Art Screens of Robert Chanler," *The International Studio* 53 (1914): xxi-xxiv.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., xxiv.

<sup>70</sup> R.F., "The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler," 16.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Brinton, *The Robert Winthrop Chanler Exhibition*, 5.

technical knowledge allowed him to exploit different media to depict an array of animals or themes and to communicate an array of moods and sensibilities. For his murals at the elite Colony Club in Manhattan in 1916, for example, Chanler decorated the loggia of the dining room with a mesmerizing menagerie of exotic birds in a *trompe-l'oeil* garden trellis [fig. 21]. The murals were executed in traditional fresco technique, where pigment is applied to wet plaster, which created deep, lasting hues that retain their color. As described in a 1922 newspaper article, the mural amounted to a “scheme of cool greens relieved with the flashing color of countless birds and butterflies that flit through the trellised white-briar rose tree that climbs the walls and ceiling” [fig. 22 & 23].<sup>73</sup> The pelicans, flamingos, peacocks and other fowl in this work are therefore preserved in impeccable condition, though the club has restored the ceiling to an undisclosed extent. Price describes Chanler’s ‘famous’ creation in detail in 1919:

Over the Welsh tiled floor, brick walls, and arched ceilings rise the walls of soft green. Upon the ceilings, by a method of stenciling and then painting over with brilliant glazes, the result has been almost a mosaic vitreous effect. Mr. Chanler and his assistants painted directly upon the hard ceilings and side panels, requiring two months labor along to complete the radiant effect of the bower with flowered trellis, under and around which, birds of the most lustrous, flashing plumage fly – quarrel – love – ruffle and parade with cheerful vivacity.<sup>74</sup>

As it was Whitney who helped Chanler become involved with the Colony Club, described as a “social, artistic, mental, and physical” club for elite women “endowed with... an inherent distinction in action, manners and art,” the artist likely employed traditional fresco not only to please his refined and cultured patrons but also to ensure the longevity of his polished work.<sup>75</sup> While the mural was completed without any sculptural or three-dimensional elements, the project certainly prepared Chanler for large-scale projects like the interior of the Whitney Studio, which only occupies roughly a third of the space of the breakfast room at the Colony Club.

In another work completed in 1918 at Villa Vizcaya in Miami, Florida, Chanler indulged his more inventive and unorthodox impulses for the first time [fig. 24]. For the grotto of the swimming pool at Vizcaya, which was commissioned for the eclectic estate of the industrialist and collector James Deering, Chanler created a nautical-themed sanctuary through the combination of two-dimensional ceiling panels depicting seaweed and underwater creatures

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<sup>73</sup> R.F., “The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler,” 16.

<sup>74</sup> Price, “Illustrations of Tropical Splendor,” 469.

<sup>75</sup> Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 239-40.



articulated with sculptural, three-dimensional elements in the form of shells, sand dollars and floral bronze stanchions [figs. 25 & 26]. Deering had hired the artist Paul Chalfin to oversee the decoration of this Mediterranean Revival villa and as Chalfin reportedly “insisted on traditional techniques and craftsmanship,” it is not surprising that Chanler executed the majority of the decorations in the ceiling of the swimming pool in solid gypsum plaster.<sup>76</sup> Chanler even traveled to the Florida Keys to collect shell and plant specimens for the project, some of which he installed in the actual ceiling and others of which he cast in plaster [figs. 27 & 28].<sup>77</sup> Letters between the artist, Chalfin and Deering in the Vizcaya archives also reveal that Chanler completed the majority of the plaster panels for the ceiling in his studio in New York and then shipped them to the estate, where he oversaw their installation and performed certain alterations and touch-ups on site.<sup>78</sup> One letter written by Chalfin to a Mr. P. E. Paist in Miami, who was in charge of shipping the crates, revealed aspects of Chanler’s working process:

I am in receipt of your favor of September 9<sup>th</sup> and note the following – [...] Swimming Pool – The finish of this ceiling should be a white coat on the scratch coat but not brought to a hard finish, but a coat which Mr. Chanler can apply his ornament, this ornament consisting of various nautical objects. After the applying of this ornament the surface of the ceiling could then be white coated to take the painting, the effect being, as I understand it, that the central part of the ceiling will be painted water with these objects placed at random in same.<sup>79</sup>

While a series of hurricanes have left the Chanler mural at Vizcaya in a deteriorated physical state – exacerbated by the long-term use of salt water to fill the pool underneath – the ceiling remains a testament to the artist’s unique approach to decoration and his understanding of the traditional techniques of plaster casting and bas-relief. Moreover, Chanler’s incorporation of actual shells into his installation at Vizcaya reflects the overall character of the estate, conceived by Chalfin as a “partial evocation of the city of Tiepolo” and which has been characterized as “an imaginative reconstruction of the past that creates a historical mood.”<sup>80</sup> Though the technical risks taken by Chanler in this installation may have had negative effects on its longevity. Chalfin

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<sup>76</sup> Witold Rybczynski and Laurie Olin, *Vizcaya: An American Villa and Its Makers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2006), 91; information regarding plaster decorations from interview in March of 2013 with Lauren Hall, a conservator who worked on the recent assessment of the Chanler ceiling at Vizcaya.

<sup>77</sup> Rybczynski and Olin, *Vizcaya*, 91.

<sup>78</sup> August Koch in Paul Chalfin’s office to Mr. P. E. Paist, August 31, 1916. Archives of Vizcaya Museum and Gardens (Miami, FL); Paul Chalfin to Mr. P. E. Paist, September 12, 1916. Archives of Vizcaya Museum and Gardens (Miami, FL).

<sup>79</sup> Paul Chalfin to Mr. P. E. Paist, September 12, 1916. Archives of Vizcaya Museum and Gardens (Miami, FL).

<sup>80</sup> Rybczynski and Olin, *Vizcaya*, 91.

notable wrote to Deering as early as April of 1918 to say that the “Chandler [sic] ceiling over the swimming pool ought to have somebody’s attention.”<sup>81</sup> Ultimately, the work represents the artist’s innovative approach towards his art and willingness to collaborate with his patrons, who in the case of Deering and Chalfin had desired that his work “be enough to fill out some one thing, say the swimming pool” from the beginning of the project altogether.<sup>82</sup> It is likely that the project at Vizcaya introduced Chanler to the possibilities of decorating the entirety of a self-contained space and provided a model for his approach to designing the Whitney Studio.

By the time that Chanler began work on Whitney’s fireplace and ceiling, the artist had grown adept at creatively re-interpreting traditional materials for technical experimentation, managing large-scale projects, and designing or ‘decorating’ a self-contained space. Both the breakfast room at the Colony Club and the swimming pool at Vizcaya can be considered ‘total-environments’ in that Chanler conceptualized his designs for those specific spaces and that they also only feature work by the artist. Likewise, the themes Chanler chose for the projects (likely in concert with the respective patrons) reflect the purpose of the rooms themselves: in the case of Villa Vizcaya, Chanler decorated the grotto-like area of the outdoor swimming pool according to an appropriate ‘oceanic’ motif, while at the Colony Club he depicted a variety of exquisite and exotic birds that echo the grand posturing of high society in New York City at the time. As these commissions directly preceded his work in Whitney’s private studio, it is significant that Chanler incorporated the methods of these earlier projects while also elaborating on them. These substantial antecedents, therefore, prove revealing comparisons for the Whitney Studio in their scale, format and in the artist’s approach. In the Whitney Studio, Chanler employs his more traditional techniques like stained glass and bas-relief alongside more unusual techniques such as the sculpted plaster flames and bronze applications used in the creation of the fireplace.<sup>83</sup> The idea that the copper leaf may have corroded throughout the actual execution of the fireplace further substantiates the suggestion that Chanler became more experimental in his later works,

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<sup>81</sup> Paul Chalfin to James Deering, March 18, 1916, Archives of Vizcaya Museum and Gardens (Miami, FL); Paul Chalfin to James Deering, April 15, 1918, Archives of Vizcaya Museum and Gardens (Miami, FL).

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Akhtar, et al., “The Chanler Fireplace Project,” 34. According to the conservation students, while it remains difficult to know whether the presence of bronze in the cross-sections is a result of human intervention or natural corrosion and this is an area that could be explored in further research.

though it remains unclear whether the corrosion was apparent during the five years of the project or whether it occurred afterwards.<sup>84</sup>

Though the mural at the Colony Club and multi-media installation at Vizcaya differ from the Whitney Studio in their thematic focus on one aspect of the natural world, they demonstrate Chanler's commitment to certain schemas of representation while also revealing the diversity of artistic techniques he employed to realize his artistic vision in disparate settings. Interestingly, each commission was preceded by Chanler's creation of a screen or group of screens exploring the singular 'themes' defining the projects. Before executing the mural at the Colony Club, Chanler made screens of several of the birds depicted in the larger work including flamingoes, peacocks and birds-of-paradise, including *Flamingoes, Autobiography* from 1912, and *Birds of Paradise* from 1914 [fig. 29 & 30]. Chanler also demonstrated a persistent interest in marine themed works prior to designing the grotto at Vizcaya, most notably in the creeping sea-tentacles of *Bataille Soumarine (Scuba Battle)* from 1917, in the thrashing ocean waves of *Before the Wind* from 1919, and in a work exhibited at the Armory Show exhibition that is now lost entitled *Fish* (lent by the Vanderbilt Hotel) [fig. 31].<sup>85</sup> Even the murals at Coe Hall appear to have been based on a screen previously completed by the artist, as Chanler painted a similar work in the same color palette in 1912 called *The Buffalo Hunt* [fig. 32]. As many of his screens correspond to motifs he would later explore on a larger scale in his commissions for interior settings, it is more than likely that in this instance, Chanler was inspired to expand the subject of the *Flames* screen from 1913 into a monumental fireplace sculpture when designing the Whitney Studio.

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<sup>84</sup> Akhtar, et al., "The Chanler Fireplace Project," 34.

<sup>85</sup> Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (William Helburn, 1922); Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, *1913 Armory Show*, 185.

### *Chanler in Context*

While the ornamental depiction of nature is pervasive to the decorative arts, the depiction of nature for Chanler also stemmed from his scientific interests. The artist owned an extensive personal collection of books on the study and depiction of rare animal and plant specimens that are currently housed at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum and, according to Mrs. Terry Chanler, his great-grandfather was tutored by Baron Christian Charles Josias von Bunsen, who had been a friend of the famous Prussian scientist Alexander von Humboldt.<sup>86</sup> Despite demonstrating a rational, almost encyclopedic knowledge of the physical world in many of his works, Chanler did not, however, restrict his work to that which was directly observable. Narodny describes the artist's engagement with the natural world as including "various kinds of elemental picturesque beings – birds, octopi, fish, butterflies, magic flowers and monsters, ironic lines, primeval organic life that struggles for higher forms most violently."<sup>87</sup> This creative and mythological approach to nature is certainly present in Chanler's decoration of the Whitney Studio, which had seven stained glass windows depicting both real and imagined creatures, the aforementioned two-sided screen *Bataille Soumarine*, a ceiling featuring both terrestrial and celestial images, and the roaring flames of the fireplace shooting upwards. As Drapala asserts, the studio as a whole became a symbolic microcosm of the universe through the depiction of "three realms of existence," where the ceiling functions as a "map of the cosmos" [fig. 33].<sup>88</sup> The individual but interconnected areas of the ceiling, screen, windows and fireplace thus become what is essentially an allegory for the wonder and mysticism of the natural world through the symbolic mapping of the systems defining both terrestrial and celestial existence. The resulting effect is one of action and conjunction, where disparate realms of the natural world are joined together into a total impression of biological, phenomenological and astrological splendor.

When compared to Chanler's more common depictions of *flora* and *fauna* in his screens and other murals from the 1910s and 1920s, the fireplace in the Whitney Studio stands apart for

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<sup>86</sup> Terry Chanler, *Roman Spring: Memoirs*, 183-84.

<sup>87</sup> Narodny, *American Artists*, 6.

<sup>88</sup> Drapala, "The Whitney Studio Ceiling," 56-57.

its lack of narrative content and abstract tendencies. As the majority of Chanler's works emphasize the naturalistic aspects of his imagined scenes, the destructive force of fire appears to run contrary to the artist's more frequent celebration of the life-cycle of nature. As one anonymous reviewer wrote in 1922, his paintings "seek their themes in the bottom of the sea, among strange flora and fluent monsters; in the firmament, among stars and whirling spheres; in tropical wonderlands... on barbaric shores, among savage dancers and boatmen."<sup>89</sup> It is unclear then how *fire*, a destructive and life-taking force, fits into Chanler's schema of representation, and emphasis on the physical splendors of the environment. Given the distinct circumstances surrounding the creation of the fireplace and the relative dearth of documentary materials, the most enlightening approach to understanding the fireplace may ultimately lie in a consideration of the unusual sculptural form and theme of 'fire' defining the work. Considering the fireplace as a sort of anomaly within Chanler's *oeuvre* may in fact demonstrate its significance; as Briton wrote in 1922, the artist's work "suggests more than all else a series of decorative fantasies each of which is a complete and independent improvisation" and that "technical terminology cannot... adequately indicate the spirit of Chanler's art"<sup>90</sup> In approaching the fireplace from a symbolic or interpretive perspective, therefore, this research can begin to unravel the purpose, significance and intent defining the artwork even with the current lack of expository archival evidence.

One of the most salient aspects of Chanler's use of the formal device of unwieldy 'fire' in the Whitney fireplace and *Flames* screen is the ability to communicate multivalent emotional and aesthetic content through what is basically a simplistic and abstract idea. At the same time, however, the element of fire is significant across scores of classical mythologies, an area of particular interest for Chanler (especially the myths of Egypt, Babylon and Crete).<sup>91</sup> Fire plays a monumental role in the heroic story of Prometheus\*, who was punished by Zeus for giving fire to man and ultimately rescued by Hercules, and functions as a regenerative force in the story of the phoenix, a bird that purportedly lived in the Arabian desert and cyclically rose from its own ashes after ceremonially burning itself alive. Such characteristic of fire may not have been far from the artist's mind; another article from 1922 by the critic R.F. suggests Chanler made a

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<sup>89</sup> "The Work of Robert W. Chanler: His Creatures Are Real," *The Christian Science Monitor* (Apr 6, 1922), 8.

<sup>90</sup> Britton, *The Robert Winthrop Chanler Exhibition*, 5.

<sup>91</sup> Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (Roerich, 1931), 11.

\* It is worth noting here that John Singer Sargent included the story of Prometheus in his decoration of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which was widely reported on after its completion in 1921. See for example, "Sargent Murals: Unveiled at Museum of Fine Arts," *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 31, 1921, 12.

screen depicting a ‘fire-bird,’ while the above letter from Chanler to Whitney in 1918 mentions his inspiration upon seeing a ‘dragon’ on the back of one of his patron’s other screens.<sup>92</sup> In fact, as recorded in her correspondence from 1915-16 at the Smithsonian Archives, Whitney purchased two antique Chinese screens in 1915, one of which depicted an “Imperial five-claw dragon” on its reverse [fig. 34].<sup>93</sup> As Chanler’s letter to Whitney from January of 1918 indicates, the artist would certainly have seen this work, which was called the ‘Kwang-ying Screen’ as it was taken from the Temple of Kwang-ying. In the same letter, Chanler mentions Sargent’s desire for a “dragon in the sky” inspired by the “back of [Whitney’s] screen,” though the artist ultimately decides “I do not think we need the dragon.”<sup>94</sup> Such statements suggest that the initial designs for the ‘flames’ in the fireplace may have been tied to a dragon that was originally planned for inclusion in the ceiling; though the dragon never materialized, this link would have made sense in this context given Chanler’s penchant for combining nature with mythology.

Moreover, Chanler’s friend and frequent collaborator, Ivan Narodny, assigned substantial emotive and symbolic content to the abstract theme of ‘flames.’<sup>95</sup> Throughout his writings on his friend’s artwork, Narodny incrementally develops his theories on the multivalent significance of Chanler’s images of ‘fire’ and flames in both the *Flames* screen and the Whitney fireplace. The earliest mention of his thesis comes from an article in the *Academy Notes* of the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy in 1921, where the author discusses the exhibition of Chanler’s work at the Albright Art Gallery and subsequently quotes from Narodny’s ‘forthcoming’ book on the artist:

Chanler’s art displays a symbolic force as yet too little understood in the West, the sensuous elements of which play with the most elemental emotions of man in a very peculiar way. Thus we can see the soaring and appearing of the most primitive life-spirit images in his ‘Flames,’ which is the subject of Mrs. Whitney’s studio ceiling and fireplace decoration. His mystic symbols are drawn with double meaning in view: the emotion of nature itself, and the emotion of man, to correspond to it. It is not nature that Chanler’s art displays, but the emotional moment within ourselves that is disclosed to us in his art. It symbolizes the dream of the human heart, and the dream of the universe, the

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<sup>92</sup> R.F., “The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler,” 16.

<sup>93</sup> Whitney Correspondence, 1915-16. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>94</sup> RWC to GVW, January 19, 1918, partial translation courtesy Lauren Drapala. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>95</sup> It is important to note here that Narodny apparently stayed with Chanler at his studio at 147 East 19<sup>th</sup> Street, as the scholar wrote “Mrs. Whitney” a letter on Chanler’s stationery (which lists that address) in January of 1923 (Appendix J). In the letter, Narodny praises Whitney and apologizes for not attending the same exhibition mentioned by Chanler in his letter to Whitney from 1923 (Appendix C) and does not mention Chanler. Ivan Narodny to GVW, January 12, 1923. Getty Research Institute (Los Angeles, CA).

drama of the man's and the world's soul at the same time. It is not a picture of actual flame, though it seems to be so, but the picture of the spirit of the flame, the pure sensuous symbol of human life.<sup>96</sup>

In this quote from Narodny's soon-to-be published manuscript, the author clearly conflates the *Flames* screen from 1913 with the 'Flames' work at Whitney's studio, which he mentions for the first and only time in this passage.<sup>97</sup> The passage that was actually published by the Roerich Museum in 1922 is similar yet divergent from the earlier version; though Narodny continues to emphasize the metaphysical meaning of the theme of 'flames,' he removes any mention of Whitney's studio and has added several ideas including the role of fire in "cosmic regeneration" and the function of fire in "allegorical re-incarnation." Narodny writes:

*Flames* is an allegorical picture of a sacred fire, and of human passions. From one viewpoint it is the violent transformation process of the material world from one chemical compound into another; but in another sense it suggests the subconscious desires of man's ego to absorb all the pleasure of the world. In doing so, it destroys itself, until, reaching the regions of the sun-fire, the destructive phenomenon melts into a magic of cosmic regeneration – an allegoric re-incarnation theme. 'Flames' thus depicts the striving of Nature and the striving of the human soul, the melting process of the material and the melting process of human emotions at the same time. Though a picture of actual physical flame, it also a picture of the spirit of flame, the abstract sensuous symbol of something primitively human.<sup>98</sup>

This slightly later version of the passage not only injects new concepts such as re-incarnation but also emphasizes the 'abstract' nature of fire and the 'primitive' connotations it carries. Curiously, Narodny also repeats this passage in his book *American Artists* from 1930, though in this version he once again references Whitney's studio but does not mention the fireplace or ceiling:

Chanler's symbolic design always suggest in some way or other, the emotional side of Nature's soul, and the sensuous force of his own emotions. Symbol is the veiled script of the sensuous message of Nature. The best illustrations in this respect are his 'Flames,' an elaborate decorative panel in Gertrude Whitney's New York studio, and 'Deep Sea Fantasy,' a screen of six panels in the Brooklyn Museum of Art.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> "Exhibition of the Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler at the Albright Art Gallery, January-June 1921," *Academy Notes* 15-19 (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 1920), 3.

<sup>97</sup> Though Narodny published a shorter version of his book on Chanler as an article for *The International Studio* in 1922, this version also does not mention Whitney's studio. Narodny, "Chanler's Dynamic Symbolism: His art, though abstract, is sensuous, and his designs have dynamic rather than static quality." *The International Studio* 75 (March-Sept. 1922): 475-85.

<sup>98</sup> Ivan Narodny, *Art of Chanler* (New York: Roerich Museum, 1931), 23.

<sup>99</sup> Narodny, *American Artists*, 4.

While it remains unclear why Narodny removed the mention of the Whitney Studio and the fireplace from the first quoted version of the passage, his evolving ideas certainly demonstrate the fluidity of the theme of ‘fire’ and the variety of interpretations it inspired. Significantly, Narodny commissioned a screen from Chanler in 1922 for a play he wrote entitled *The Skygirl: A Mimodrama In Three Acts on a Star* [fig. 35].<sup>100</sup> Set in a post-apocalyptic dream-world, the play addresses topics such as destiny, astrology, and the decline of the natural world and was described as a “move from the kinetic external towards the symbolic internal.”<sup>101</sup> In act II, a character named Luna inhabits the “last spot of vegetation left in an artificial world,” which the government creates into a museum.<sup>102</sup> When visitors flock to this cabin-cave, they encounter Luna and her daughter huddled around a ‘primitive’ fireplace inside a cave decorated with Chanler’s astrologically themed screen.<sup>103</sup> The screen, which was reprinted in Narodny’s book from 1922, featured a twirling central ‘sky girl’ surrounded by stars and gold swirls accented by gold leaf [fig. 36]. As *Skygirl* demonstrates, Narodny saw a clear connection between the allegorical role of fire as a light and life-giving force and what he refers to as the ‘abstract sensuous symbol’ of the flames themselves. Thus the author tweaks his analysis of Chanler’s fire motif to incorporate the ideas of ‘primitive’ human emotions and life forces while also stressing its regenerative function. Chanler would certainly have been aware of Narodny’s ideas and while it is difficult to ascertain the artist’s exact intentions, the Whitney fireplace expresses chaos and renewal through the abstraction of this natural force in a way that is unprecedented in his *oeuvre*.

The ‘transformatory’ significance of fire as a violent but also magical force of renewal would have held particular resonance for both Chanler and Whitney between the years of 1918 and 1923 when the fireplace was constructed. As early as August of 1916, Whitney had begun seeing a psycho-therapist named Elizabeth Severn at the Hotel Seymour at 50 West 45<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City who sent the heiress frequent lessons on topics such as ‘Health and Psychic Development,’ ‘The Power of Affirmation’ and ‘Concentration and Meditation.’<sup>104</sup> The lessons offered methods of psychological and metaphysical development intended to help Whitney

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<sup>100</sup> Ivan Narodny, *The Skygirl: A Mimodrama In Three Acts on a Star, Prologue & Epilogue on the Earth* (New York: Britons Publishing, 1925), 9.

<sup>101</sup> Narodny, *The Skygirl*, 101.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-03.

<sup>104</sup> Whitney Correspondence 1915-16. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).



“attain a degree of power and control over [her] life” and in their correspondence, Severin wrote that “a few minutes spent in making a written report will add greatly to the definiteness of the impressions you are working to create and maintain in your own mentality.”<sup>105</sup> Chanler, for his part, suffered through an agonizing and publically humiliating divorce in 1912, with one newspaper article declaring “Chanler Feared Lina Cavalieri: He Would Jump Out of Window if she Entered House,” and was also badly injured in an auto accident in 1918, with one newspaper article proclaiming, “Chanler Still in Hospital: Artist, Injured in Auto Accident, May Be Permanently Lame.”<sup>106</sup> While Chanler’s fireplace cannot be reduced to an expression of these traumatic biographical events of either the artist or his patron, such events were certainly relevant to the project. The personal turmoil experienced by both Chanler and Whitney during the second decade of the twentieth century may substantiate their interest in the initially destructive but subsequently ‘regenerative’ power of the flames of a giant fire and may also explain why the work eschews the lighthearted or spiritual characteristics of his deep-water or cosmological scenes present in the other decorations in the studio.

Fundamental to any discussion of abstraction in the 1920s was the artistic dialectic between Realism and what was loosely termed ‘Modernism,’ which included movements such as Cubism, Primitivism and Fauvism. While Realism generally retained a direct and mimetic link to the objects represented, Modernism was more concerned with the underlying concepts, structures and ideas driving the natural world and thus maintained only a tangential link to reality. The mission of the ‘modern’ painter, according to Wassily Kandinsky in his early theorization of the abstract in the treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* from 1911, was not to imitate nature but rather to “give to those observers capable of feeling them emotions subtle beyond words.”<sup>107</sup> The dichotomy established between Realism and abstraction was famously on display at the Armory

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<sup>105</sup> Elizabeth Severn to GVW, July 4th, 1916. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.). As Friedman notes in his biography, Whitney was plagued by persistent loneliness at early as 1913, when she drafted, but never sent, a letter to her husband expressing her feelings of isolation and abandonment. Some choice quotations from the letter include, “It seems very obvious that we are drifting further and further apart and that the chances of our coming back together are growing remote,” as well as her statement that “Of course for a very long time we have done absolutely nothing together because we wanted to.” Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 329-30.

<sup>106</sup> “Chanler Feared Lina Cavalieri: He Would Jump Out of Window if She Entered House,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (Jan 4, 1912), 1; “Chanler Still in Hospital: Artist, Injured in Auto Accident, May Be Permanently Lame,” *New York Times* (Sep 16, 1918). The situation is best exemplified by an article from the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* from 1910, with the headline “Chanler, Once Millionaire, Now Broke; Duped by the Beautiful Lina Cavalieri.” See Appendix J.

<sup>107</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (Courier Dover Publications, 1914), 24.

Show in New York City in 1913, which caused both outrage in response to iconic works like Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* but also engendered a "leap in taste among American artists and collectors who experienced the assembled work as a revelation" [fig. 37].<sup>108</sup> Chanler entered this debate when he exhibited a work called *Parody of the Fauves*, which scathingly parodied primitivism in modern art by depicting what Drapala describes as "five blindly adoring aesthetes paying homage to a seated monkey meant to mimic the painter Henri Matisse" [fig. 38].<sup>109</sup> Though Chanler reportedly despised the 'studio realism' he encountered during his time in Europe, which involved the slavish and "painstaking copying of old masters," he also clearly disdained what he saw as the naïve or intuitive project of the European avant-gardes.<sup>110</sup> Perhaps it was his playful or satirical approach to the foreign movements that endeared him to Theodore Roosevelt, who disliked the Armory Show overall but reportedly called Chanler's art "first class decorative work."<sup>111</sup> Chanler's overt disdain towards Modernism combined with his identification as a 'decorative' artist\* therefore require a particularly nuanced and delicate handling of the terms 'abstract' and 'modern' in regards to his work.

Though Chanler never identified with the reductive or non-objective painting of the European modernists like Picasso and Matisse, over time his work did evolve to incorporate a greater sense of compositional unity with less focus on minute, representational detail. As described in an article from 1922 by the writer R. F., it was clear even to contemporary critics that Chanler's work had developed "constantly in form and context as the artist has worked from the literal to the more or less abstract and *symbolic*."<sup>112</sup> Narodny echoes this claim in his book from 1922, stating that "only an abstract subject matter is appropriate for a screen" and that "legendary, fairy, or allegorical themes become the best magic mediums in [Chanler's]

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<sup>108</sup> Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. Buchloch, *Art Since 1900* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 143.

<sup>109</sup> Drapala, "The Whitney Studio Ceiling," 38.

<sup>110</sup> Brinton, *The Robert Winthrop Chanler Exhibition*, 4.

<sup>111</sup> Levine Stephen L., "'Forces Which Cannot Be Ignored': Theodore Roosevelt's Reaction to European Modernism," *Revue française d'études américaines* 116 (2008): 14.

\* It is important to note here that for Chanler, there was likely no real different between calling himself a muralist, a decorator or a 'decorative' artist. At the time, these terms were still largely interchangeable in the relevant scholarship and criticism on Chanler's work. It was only after the advent of Abstract Expressionism in the United States that the 'decorative' became anathema to the field of 'fine art.' Though the association has had pejorative connotations since as early as the Renaissance, artists like Chanler prided themselves on the level of craftsmanship present in their work and therefore embraced the association with the early modern *atelier* system.

<sup>112</sup> R.F., "The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler," 16.

symbolism.”<sup>113</sup> The author would elaborate on this idea in 1930, writing that Chanler was not simply interested in nature but also in “the spirit of Nature” and the processes whereby “emotional potentialities can be concealed and expressed in abstract art images by defying every articulate description.”<sup>114</sup> When viewed through Narodny’s analysis, Chanler’s depictions of nature were inevitably imbued with emotion; this theory, while not unfounded, becomes more complicated when the subject is as open-ended as ‘fire.’ Considering Chanler’s formal departure in creating the sculpted, three-dimensional fireplace, the metaphysical implications of fire, and the private nature of Whitney’s studio, it is not unlikely that the artist seized this opportunity to employ an abstract visual vocabulary to express an emotional or psychological environment.

In molding the fireplace primarily out of flames interspersed with small figures and animals, Chanler created a largely abstract work that captures the physical and emotional rebirth represented by fire itself. Though the inclusion of these ‘creatures’ hinders a purely abstract reading of this ‘raging’ fire, ultimately the movement of the flames is prioritized over the figures interspersed in Chanler’s composition. As noted by the NYU-Columbia conservation team, multiple campaigns of thick over-painting have led to substantial loss of sculptural detail in the ornamental figures.<sup>115</sup> This unfortunate circumstance, however, does serve to underscore the crucial role of the flames in determining the form, structure and overall impression of this sculpture. For Narodny, this shift in Chanler’s compositional strategies was manifold; he writes in 1922 that Chanler’s symbolism is increasingly “concerned with the dynamic rather than the static” and that it is noticeable in his latest works, including *Skygirl* and *Flames*.<sup>116</sup> The execution of the fireplace and Chanler’s use of metal leaf certainly contributed to the dynamic effects of his compositions, as one writer claimed Chanler “shimmers delicately in his ‘Variations in Metals,’ a screen of glazed silver” – implying that neither the effect nor the concept in *Flames* was unique to that work.<sup>117</sup> In another review of Chanler’s show at the Belmaison Galleries at Wanamaker’s in *The Arts*, the author presciently remarks that while the artist’s ‘fire-screens’ are remarkable, that surely he will “find the need of a medium more responsive.”<sup>118</sup> Given his recognition of the

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<sup>113</sup> Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (Helburn, 1922), 56.

<sup>114</sup> Ivan Narodny, *American Artists* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1930), 9.

<sup>115</sup> Akhtar, et al., “The Chanler Fireplace Project,” 17.

<sup>116</sup> The author would argue that in this instance, when Narodny writes ‘Flames’ he is referencing the work at Whitney’s studio. Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (Helburn, 1922), 79.

<sup>117</sup> R.F., “Decorative Art in New York,” 16.

<sup>118</sup> “The Belmaison Gallery: Review,” *The Arts* 2 (1921-22): 242.

formal possibilities offered by the flicker of metallic leaf or the staccato of swirling, abstract compositions, it is not surprising that Chanler employed the theme of ‘flames’ in his largest and most experimental work at the Whitney Studio. Though the fireplace is decidedly non-narrative, it powerfully communicates the renewal and regeneration signaled by the theme of fire and suggests the creatures are emerging from, rather than burning in, the heat of the flames.

### *Conclusion*

In positing Chanler’s use of the motif of ‘fire’ and flames as reflective of the artist’s move towards a more abstract style to communicate universal themes such as that of regeneration, this paper argues that the monumental fireplace in the Whitney Studio is a fundamentally modern and innovative work both in Chanler’s *oeuvre* and within the genre of American decorative arts. The artist himself acknowledges his mercurial yet creative working style in his letter to Whitney from 1918, exclaiming “I do not see how you dare to do a thing with me, you are a funny woman” [Appendix C].<sup>119</sup> Accordingly, in the fireplace Chanler emphasized the optical and symbolic qualities of fire in order to harness the primitive energy of this elemental force, shocking the viewer, as Narodny describes it, with “radical rhythm and bold chromatic harmonies which form the bases of a new decorative psychology.”<sup>120</sup> Though this new ‘psychology’ certainly referenced history and mythology, especially since Chanler purportedly viewed the “caves of sorcerers were the forerunners of modern art studios,” the fireplace in the Whitney Studio is ultimately an extension of Chanler’s evolving approach to decoration.<sup>121</sup> This approach is marked by Chanler’s growing tendency towards a site-specific method of decoration, where the unique combinations of frescoes, screens and stained glass windows created are tailor-made for specific settings such as the Colony Club and Villa Vizcaya. Such ‘installations’ would have only made sense within their original context; with the Whitney Studio (per the recreation by 1107 studios in 2006), Chanler’s unique combination of decorations would have created a ‘total impression’ of flickering light (from the stained glass windows) and reflections (from the metallic fireplace/ ceiling). This approach was also significant thematically, as the presentation

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<sup>119</sup> RWC to GVW, ca. 1918. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>120</sup> Narodny, *American Artists*, 1-2.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

of nature through different media in the Whitney Studio amounts to the allegorical **recreation** of the spaces of the classical Aristotelian ‘elements’ of nature: earth in the stained glass windows, air and wind in the cosmological scene in the ceiling and fire in the sculpted configuration of the fireplace. Though his work is overwhelmingly identified as decorative or ornamental, usually in the pejorative sense, the forceful play between volume and patterning, scale and function, subject-matter and opticality in this work signals Chanler’s engagement with the expressive form that characterized European and American modernism.

Chanler may have parodied Fauvism in his submission to the Amory Show in 1913 but by the time he began the fireplace in 1918, his artistic approach had evolved to incorporate aspects of the expressive tactics of the international avant-gardes. This process involved the ‘modern’ revival of historic formal approaches such as the Italian mannerist technique of *figura serpentinata*, where the figure is depicted through “rhythmic visual continuity from all points of view” and the adoption of a “turning, flame-like line.”<sup>122</sup> Narodny refers to Chanler’s addition of a “dynamic quality to the rhythmic, which at times becomes a pictorial syncopation” as a “New World idiom,” a sentiment that echoes another critic’s claim that the artist’s “riotous color, his almost violent design, are exceedingly American” and forms a new, American decorative art tradition.<sup>123</sup> Even his more conservative work at the Colony Club was viewed as unorthodox as described by one contemporary writer who claims the work offers “many new possibilities for an art [fresco] which seemed to have reached its former high water mark in the depicting of cupids and cherubim sprinkled over an azure sky.”<sup>124</sup> Thus Chanler’s work was already recognized as ‘new’ and innovative at the time; contemporary critics constantly responded to his ability to reinterpret traditional ornamental devices, such as his use of shimmering metallic paint and contorted plaster and bronze flames in the Whitney Studio to create a real sense of flickering flames. These formal inventions reflect Chanler’s evolving approach to art, which one critic characterized as “a strong feeling of symbolism and a turning to abstract form” in 1922, as well as his cultivation in three-dimensional form of what Narodny called ‘the emotional side of Nature’s soul.’<sup>125</sup> The fireplace thus represents the height of Chanler’s engagement with abstract

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<sup>122</sup> Roger Harold Benjamin, “The Decorative Landscape, Fauvism, and the Arabesque of Observation,” *The Art Bulletin* 75 (Jun., 1993): 309.

<sup>123</sup> Narodny, *American Artists*, 6-7; “The Work of Robert W. Chanler: His Creatures Are Real,” 8.

<sup>124</sup> Hazel H. Adler, *The new Interior, Modern Decorations for the Modern Home* (New York: The Century Co., 1916), 21.

<sup>125</sup> R.F., “The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler,” 16.

form and its ability to communicate psychological or emotional content beyond the merely descriptive or ornamental. This monumental sculpture at the New York Studio School, therefore, demonstrates Chanler's participation in the twentieth century development of abstraction and suggests that his work can be considered just as modern or avant-garde as it is decorative.

Moreover, the fireplace sculpture in the Whitney Studio effectively points to the series of contemporaneous ideas, styles and attitudes that defined both Whitney and Chanler's careers. Chanler and Sargent's interest in the mythology of dragons, for example, extended beyond their engagement with 'oriental' or decorative motifs. According to a newspaper article from 1924, Chanler's East Village studio was "decorated and painted in the most fantastic way, with serpents and grotesque animals crawling over one another in the most vivid and subtle colors, red tongues hanging from leaping dragons, and porcupines embossed in gold jumping over one another."<sup>126</sup> Such characterizations of Chanler as an eccentric obsessively painting were frequent at the time, as seen in frequent *New York Times* articles where the artist is portrayed as a true 'mad genius.'<sup>127</sup> Chanler encouraged this by inviting people from the street into his home for impromptu tours while also nonchalantly telling reporters that he began painting murals because "there seemed to be a call for that sort of thing."<sup>128</sup> While the private nature of the Whitney Studio and the decreased interest in Chanler's career over the years have left the fireplace and studio virtually unknown in the history of American art, the sculpture represents the artistic zeitgeist that defined Whitney and Chanler's friendship and their careers. Though relatively few people were able to experience the studio in its original glory, Whitney certainly enjoyed the exceptional creation. As Friedman writes in his biography, Whitney reveled in the work and the intimacy of the space for years afterwards, as she would frequently entertain her paramour Dr. Josh Hartwell in the space during the evenings "while watching the lively flames in Bob Chanler's exotic fireplace and sipping cocktails."<sup>129</sup> The exquisite fireplace is thus both a

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<sup>126</sup> Bercovici, Konrad. *Around the World in New York* (New York: The Century Co., 1924), 179-180.

<sup>127</sup> This tendency is best exemplified by Chanler's inclusion in a "Photo Standalone" from 1924 in the *New York Times*, where the artist is shown wearing a wide-brimmed hat, thick-rimmed eye glasses while also smoking a pipe and smirking. "Photo Standalone," *New York Times*, July 13, 1924, RP5. See Appendix L.

<sup>128</sup> "Portrait of a Titan," *Time Magazine*, Monday, April 21, 1930. It should also be noted here that Chanler's antics even inspired literary parody, as the author Isa Glenn based the wild character Daniel Pentreath from her book *East of Eden* (1932) on the artist; the book was set in the literary world of New York City and features a multitude of 'geniuses.' Earle Francis Walbridge, *Literary Characters Drawn from Life: Romans à clef, Dramas à clef, Real People in Poetry, with Some Other Literary Diversions* (New York, H. W. Wilson Co., 1936), 44.

<sup>129</sup> Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 566.

testament to (and the culmination of) Chanler and Whitney's extraordinary collaborative relationship and to the exciting period in American art of which they were an integral part.

### 3. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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#### 4. IMAGES

Fig. 1 – Robert Chanler, *Fireplace*, ca. 1918, Whitney Studio at the New York Studio School, New York City, stitched image courtesy Lauren Drapala.



Fig. 2 – Whitney Studio, ca. 1928, featuring model for Whitney’s sculpture *War Monument, Springfield*. The writing on the back of the image reads: “Model for a War Monument, Springfield, 1928, Bob Chanler’s fireplace and screen in background.” Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

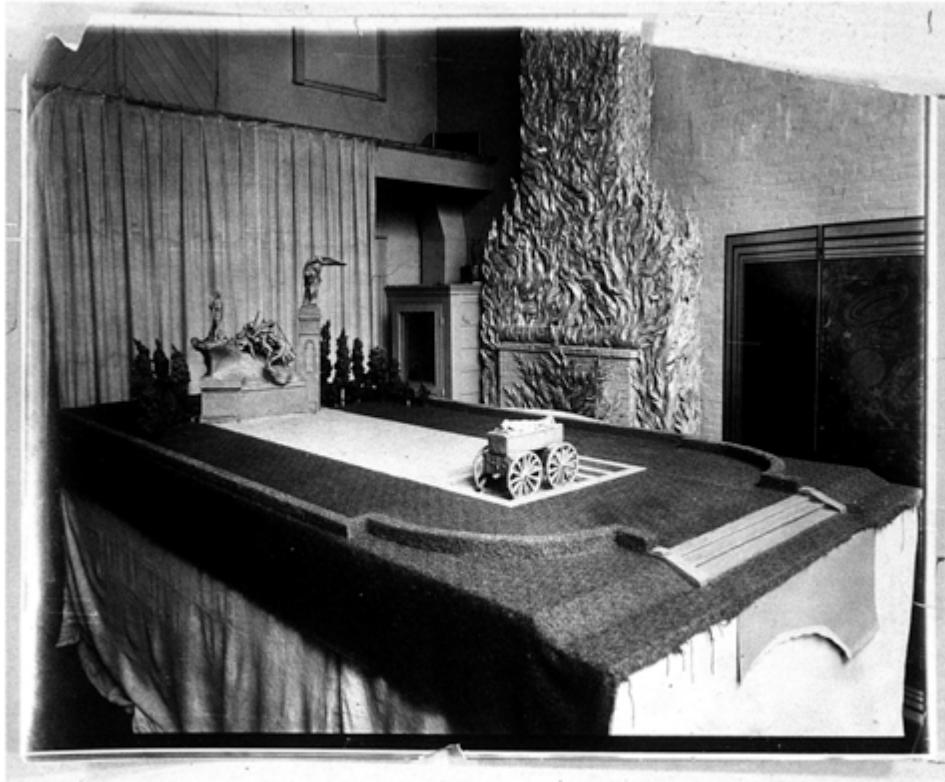


Fig. 3 – Chanler, Five of the original Stained Glass Windows in the Whitney Studio. Courtesy Retro Modern Lighting, 156 5th Ave., New York City.





Fig. 4 – Images of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's studio at her Westbury Mansion, NY.  
Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).



Fig. 5 – Detail, *Fireplace* by Robert Chanler, Whitney Studio at the New York Studio School, New York City, images taken by the author (Lizzie Frasco), 2013.



Fig. 6 – Detail, *Fireplace* by Robert Chanler, Whitney Studio at the New York Studio School, New York City, images taken by the author (Lizzie Frasco), 2013.



Fig. 7 – Detail, *Fireplace* by Robert Chanler, Whitney Studio at the New York Studio School, New York City, images taken by the author (Lizzie Frasco), 2013.





Fig. 8 – New York Studio School, *Whitney Studio Perspective*, Master Plan drawing by 1107 Design / School of Visual Arts / Morris Hylton III, 2005.



Fig. 9 – Chanler, Flames, 1913, taken from the book by Ivan Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (Roerich, NY: Roerich Museum Press, 1931).



Fig. 10 – Exhibition of the work of Robert Chanler in 1926. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).





Fig. 11 – Chanler, *Vizcayan Bay*, 1922. Courtesy of Vizcaya Museum and Gardens; images taken by the author (Lizzie Frasco), 2013, Miami, FL.



Fig. 12 – Chanler, *Giraffes*, 1906, taken from the publication by Ivan Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (Roerich, NY: Roerich Museum Press, 1931).

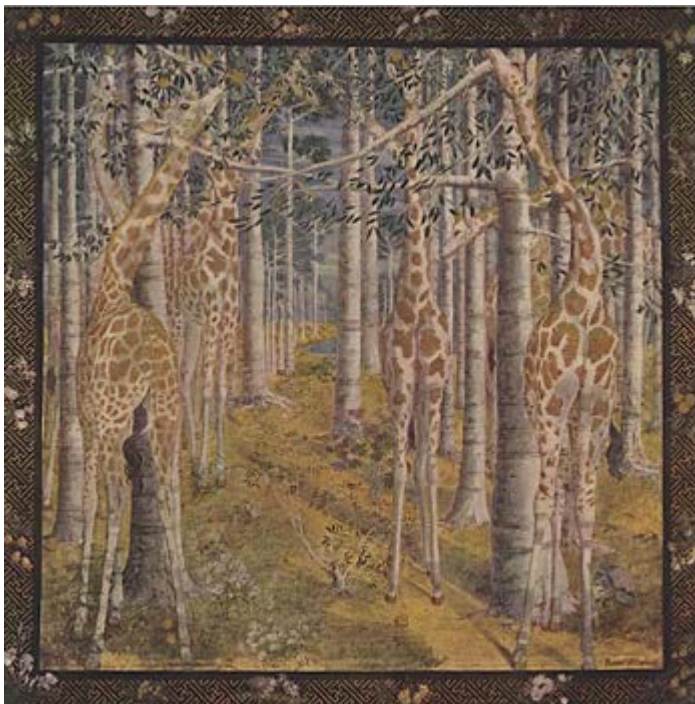


Fig. 13 – Robert Chanler, Breakfast Room at Coe Hall, NY, taken from Ivan Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (New York: William Helburn, 1922).





Fig. 14 – Chanler, *Flamingoes*, 1913, taken from the publication by Ivan Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (Roerich, NY: Roerich Museum, 1931).



Fig. 15 –Chanler, *Porcupines*, 1914. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.



Fig. 16 – Chanler, *Hopi Snake Dance*, 1913, taken from Ivan Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (New York: William Helburn, 1922).



Fig. 17 – Chanler, *Deer*, n.d., taken from Albright Exhibition catalogue.

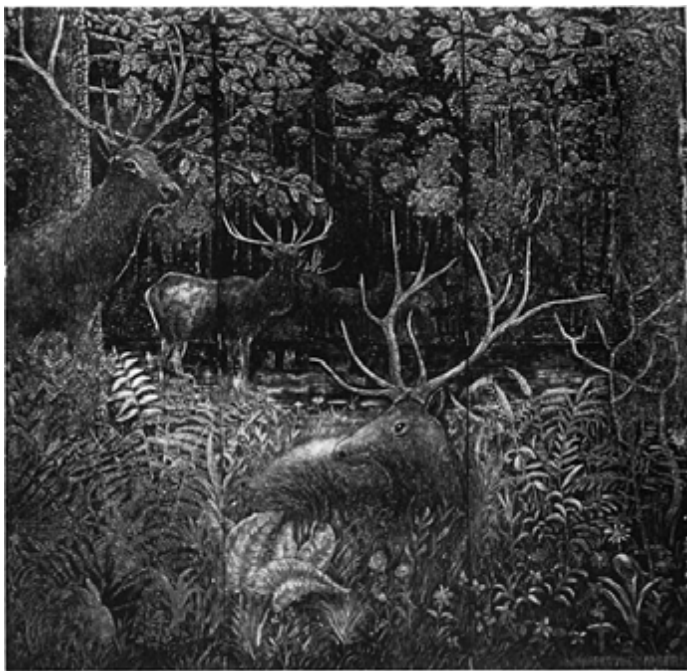


Fig. 18 – Chanler, *Bataille Soumarine*, 1917, taken from Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (New York: William Helburn, 1922).





Fig. 19 – Chanler, *Astrological Screen*, ca. 1920, taken from Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (New York: William Helburn, 1922).



Fig. 20 – Chanler, *Deep Sea Fantasy*, ca. 1920, taken from an article by Eve Kahn, “Rescuing a Landmark From Time and the Elements,” *NY Times* (20 November 2008).



Fig. 21 – Robert Chanler, mural for the Colony Club, New York City, ca. 1915, taken from Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (Roerich, NY: Roerich Museum Press, 1931).





Fig. 22 – Detail, mural for the Colony Club by Robert Chanler. Courtesy Colony Club, 564 Park Ave., New York City. Images taken by the author (Lizzie Frasco), 2013.



Fig. 23 – Detail, mural for the Colony Club by Robert Chanler. Courtesy Colony Club, 564 Park Ave., New York City. Images taken by the author (Lizzie Frasco), 2013.



Fig. 24 – Vizcaya Swimming Pool and Ceiling by Robert Chanler, n.d. Courtesy Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, Miami, FL.



Fig. 25 – Vizcaya Swimming Pool and Ceiling by Robert Chanler. Courtesy Vizcaya Museum and Gardens. Images taken by the author (Lizzie Frasco), 2013, Miami, FL.



Fig. 26 – Detail, Vizcaya Swimming Pool and Ceiling by Robert Chanler. Courtesy Vizcaya Museum and Gardens. Images taken by the author (Lizzie Frasco), 2013, Miami, FL.





Fig. 27 – Detail, Vizcaya Swimming Pool and Ceiling by Robert Chanler. Courtesy Vizcaya Museum and Gardens. Images taken by the author, 2013, Miami, FL.



Fig. 28 – Detail, Vizcaya Swimming Pool and Ceiling by Robert Chanler. Courtesy Vizcaya Museum and Gardens. Images taken by the author, 2013, Miami, FL.



Fig. 29 – Chanler, *Autobiography*, 1912, image taken from Christian Brinton, *The Robert Winthrop Chanler Exhibition* (New York: Kingore Gallery, 1922).



Fig. 30 – Chanler, *Birds of Paradise*, 1914, taken from Ivan Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (New York: William Helburn, 1922).





Fig. 31 – Chanler, *Before the Wind*, 1919, taken from Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (New York: William Helburn, 1922).



Fig. 32 – Chanler, *The Buffalo Hunt*, 1912, taken from Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (New York: William Helburn, 1922).



Fig. 33 – Compilation image of Whitney Studio Ceiling, courtesy J. Elliott & J. Hinchman, Architectural Conservation Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 2009.





Fig. 34 – *Kwang-ying Screen* from the Temple of Kwang-ying. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

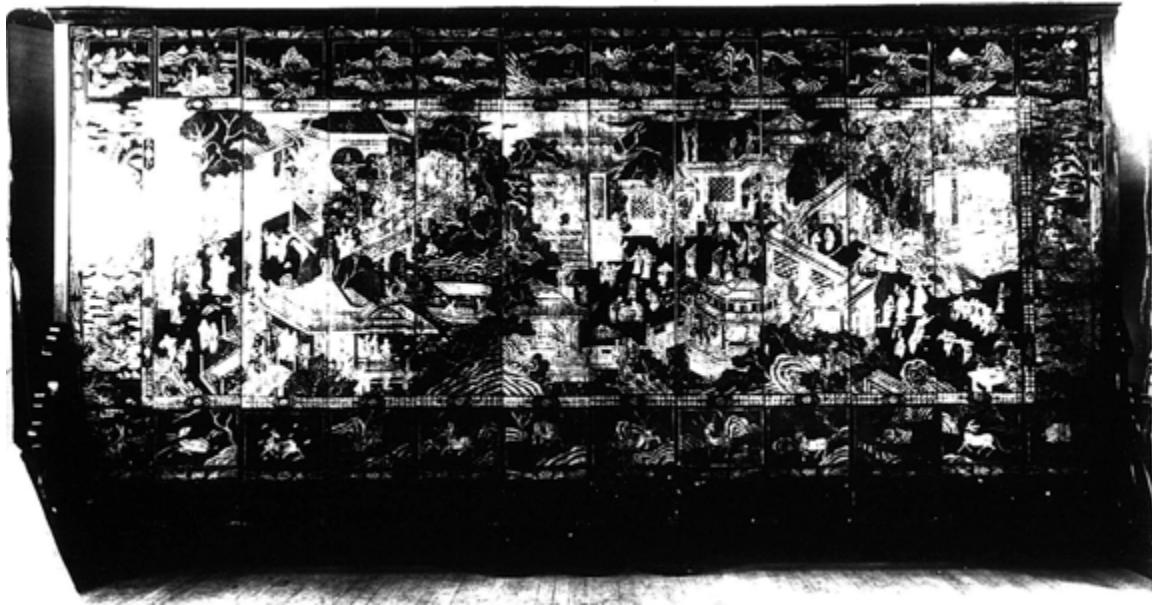


Fig. 35 – Ivan Narodny, *The Skygirl: A Mimodrama In Three Acts on a Star, Prologue & Epilogue on the Earth* (New York: Britons Publishing, 1925).

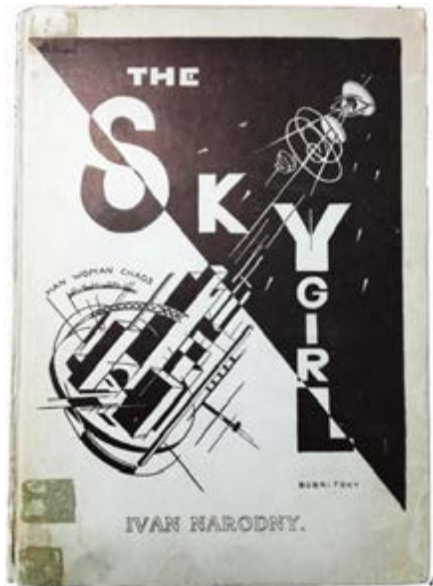


Fig. 36 – Chanler, *Skygirl*, ca. 1922, taken from Narodny, *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* (New York: William Helburn, 1922).



Fig. 37 – “The Rude Descending a Staircase,” from *New York Evening Sun*, March 20, 1913.



Fig. 38 – Robert Chanler, *Parody of the Fauves*, 1913. Courtesy Lauren Drapala and the Woodstock Art Association Museum, Woodstock, NY.





Fig. 39 – Comparison of the current state of the fireplace with a color reconstruction by the NYU-Columbia team of conservators, 2013. Taken from Alafia Akhtar, Kathryn Brugioni, Megan Randall, Kari Rayner and Jessica Walthew, “The Chanler Fireplace Project,” Conservation Center, Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, August 2013, 209.



## 5. APPENDIX

### Appendix A

Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney to Robert Winthrop Chanler, October 2, 1915. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

Old Westbury.  
Long Island. N.Y.  
October 2. 1915.  
October 2. 1915.

Mr. Robert Chanler.  
Mr. Frank Rudy.  
147. E. 19.  
c/o The Corns Co.  
New York City.  
Fifth Avenue.  
New York City.

Dear Mr. Chanler,  
Dear Mr. Rudy,  
I am so sorry the telephone was so bad  
this morning that I could not make you hear easily.  
Mrs. Whitney sends you her two tickets for the performance  
on Wednesday night of the Washington Square Players at the  
Bandbox Theatre in 57th Street. She is unable to go  
herself and thought you might care to use her tickets.  
Yours very sincerely  
J. M. Givenin  
(Secretary)

Yours sincerely  
J. M. Givenin  
(Secretary)



Appendix B

Robert Winthrop Chanler to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, January 19<sup>th</sup>, 1918. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

Jan 19<sup>th</sup> 1918  
147 East 19th Street  
New York City  
Dear Patrouille,  
I have not written before  
as I thought you would not  
stay in the best place  
Mrs. East told me your  
plans for Tuesday so I am  
writing you to give you  
the news & to tell you

about myself.  
The living is finished  
& the fireplace is  
beautiful the mantle  
is fair simple &  
will not bother you.  
You were very wise  
in rocking off the  
heads.

John Sarput +  
my sister in law  
to saw your studio  
& Sarput admired  
the screen the flame  
picture & the living  
but he wanted a big  
chair in the sky.  
He got the idea from  
the back of your screen

"The ceiling is finished & the fireplace is beautiful. The mantle is fair simple [sic] & will not bother you for sure. My wish is working off the heads."

I saw him at night, he said  
"your decorations are running  
through my hair."  
I do not think we need  
the dragon I have had  
the dolly glaze the ceiling  
topper & now it is no  
longer patchy.  
My daughter the eldest!  
one is going to marry

"I do not think we need the dragon. I have had Rudolph glaze the ceiling & now it is no longer patchy."

Paul Helber, son.

142 East 19th Street  
New York City

Who has a fine talent.

They want a settlement.

I put the matter in Harry

Pay's hands. He said

I could make it - where

my lunch did but not

now. Of course I can

send her money but

+ will but he said?

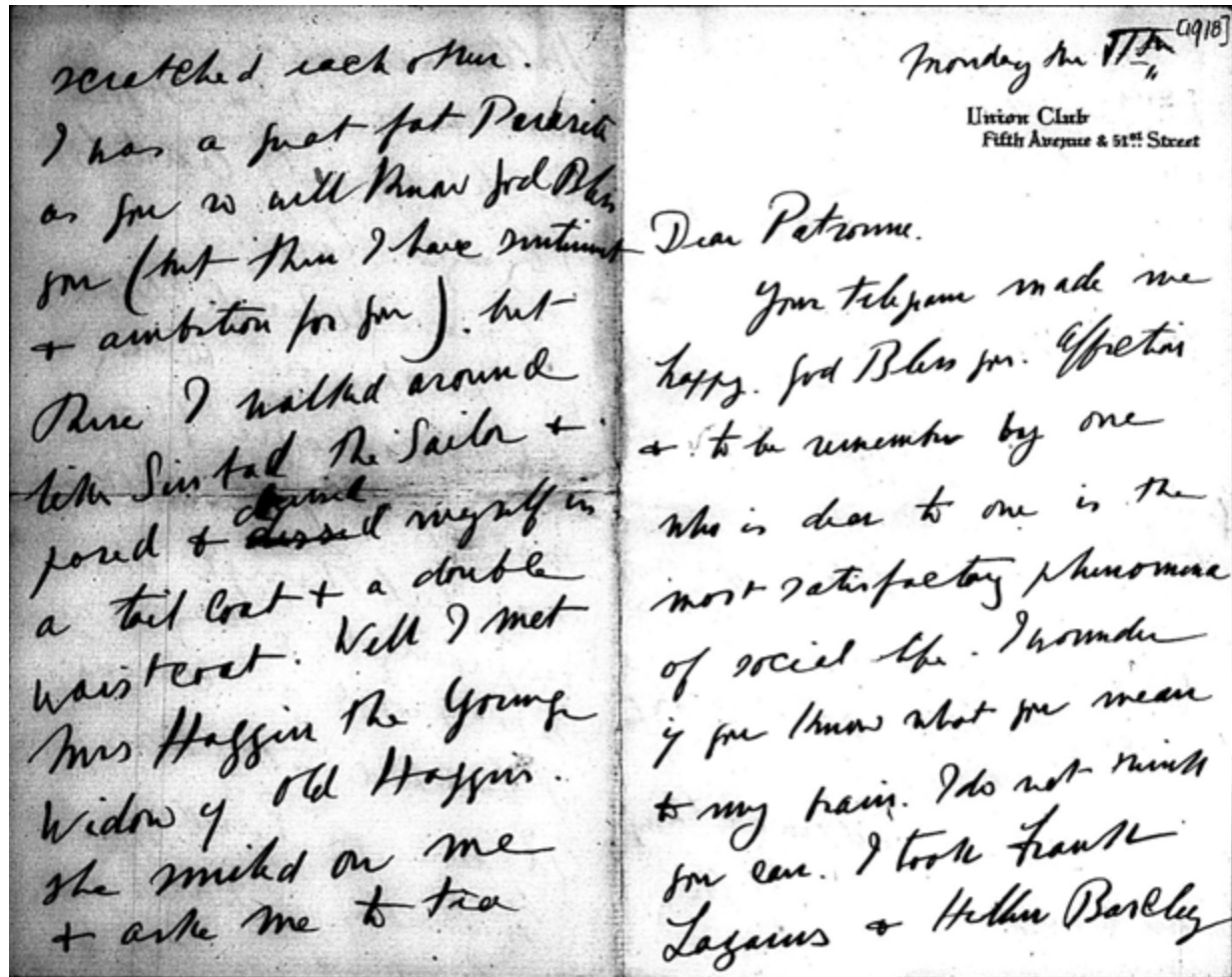
could not not sign  
away any more income  
on top of the twenty thousand  
Boile Combe has just  
been called to the English  
consul, he says he may  
have to return to England.  
I tell him he is jay.  
I know no one who  
is jay except you  
& I do not see you  
enough.  
I miss you & am at  
the same time glad you  
are away. You worried  
me so & made me  
jealous. When you come  
back I suppose I'll  
have my worries

"I miss you & am at the same time glad you are away. You worried me so & made me jealous."

double fold, for are a  
terrible woman. my  
heart to you to grow  
to get your to there  
for what you do to I &  
then I suppose. There  
is a fine play English  
Melodrama Seven days later  
the best I have ever seen.  
a cruise destroying a  
submarine is in me abso-  
lutely wonderful. probably  
you like me Robert  
[ER. Charles]

Appendix C

Robert Winthrop Chanler to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, ca. 1918. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).



"Dear Patronne,

Your telegram made me happy. God Bless you. Affection and to be remember [sic] by one who is dear to me is the most satisfactory phenomena of social life. I wonder if you know what you mean & my pain. I do not think you can. I took Frank Lazarus & Hellen Barclay to see the sculpture show in your place & they went into your studio." [cont. on next page]



to see the sculpture show  
in your Place & then  
went into your Studio.

Frank I consider a wise man  
him Jack Townsend calls  
him the Master. he has  
seen the ceiling & fire  
place being made also  
the screen & flame panel  
to him he said it was  
a very wonderful composition  
& also the window  
it was an original thing  
unlike anything before.

Helen was enthusiastic  
but she is not used to  
day light - only candles.  
Playing a harp.

Chimene Randolph  
is pushing on with  
her manuscript for  
Mallory. I think they  
may pull through it is  
improving my day &  
more people are coming.  
I lunched at Mrs  
Peters. on Sunday.  
Mithras & Parasites



today, but I telephone

I could not - Come <sup>Union Club</sup>  
Fifth Avenue & 51<sup>st</sup> Street

+ she is coming tomorrow  
afternoon on her way  
down to the Street (Wall Street)

to see me + has invited me  
to the opera next Monday  
all of which I think dis-  
+ untrue to my Patronage.

Tom Ryan asks me to  
come to dinner with alone  
to talk. so for me  
I am pushing my little  
Cart with a good heart.

+ will have lots of gossip  
 for you when you get back.  
 Frank Lazarus says the  
 Coe work does not compare  
 to what I did for you  
 I know why + told him  
 so. You are a great woman  
 + fill my mind with  
 vast things seething  
 unknown things.  
 I miss you terribly

I saw Mrs Force this  
 afternoon + got your  
 address + talked about  
 you. The Exhibition  
 looks fine a great  
 deal better than the  
 paintings. I do not see  
 how you dare do a  
 thing with me, you  
 are a funny woman  
 I do all I can to  
 protect you + out of

"Frank Lazarus says the Coe work does not compare to what I did for you – I know why & told him so. You are a great woman & fill my mind with vast things, seething unknown things. I miss you terribly."

"I saw Mrs Force this afternoon & got your address & talked about you. The exhibition looks fine – a great deal better than the paintings. I do not see how you dare to do a thing with me, you are a funny woman. I do all I can to protect you & out of *diablerie* you do that. Wire me when you are returning so that I shall not write letters to you when you are on the way back." [cont. on next page]

dearlier you do that.  
Write me when you are  
returning so that I shall  
not write letters to you  
when you are on the  
way back. Harold Barch  
has been made a Major.  
Dick Wilhams + Edgar Slot  
are <sup>on the</sup> together. The best  
of luck to you & Son.  
+ I remain  
always,  
D.C.

*Appendix D*

Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney to Robert Winthrop Chanler, ca. March-April, 1918. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

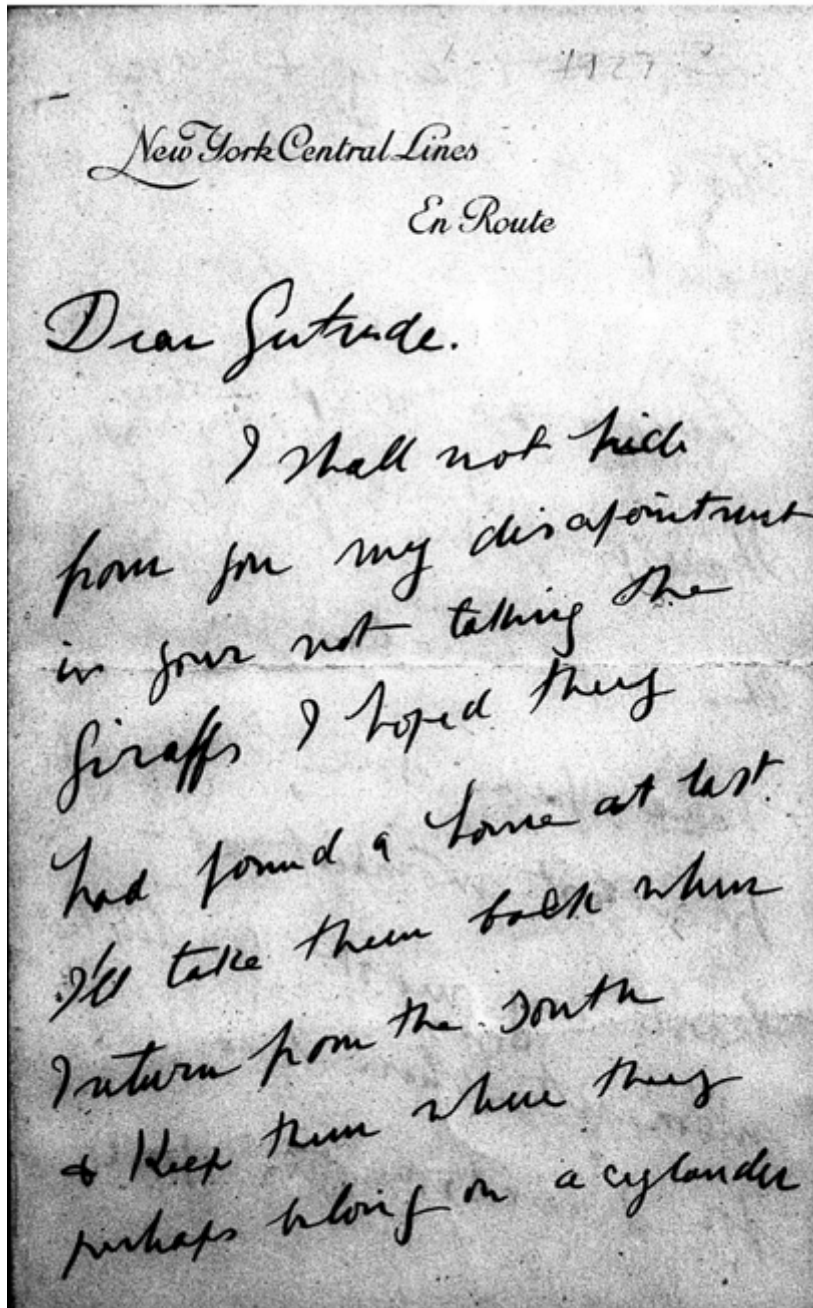
ca. March -  
April 1918]

Dear Bob,

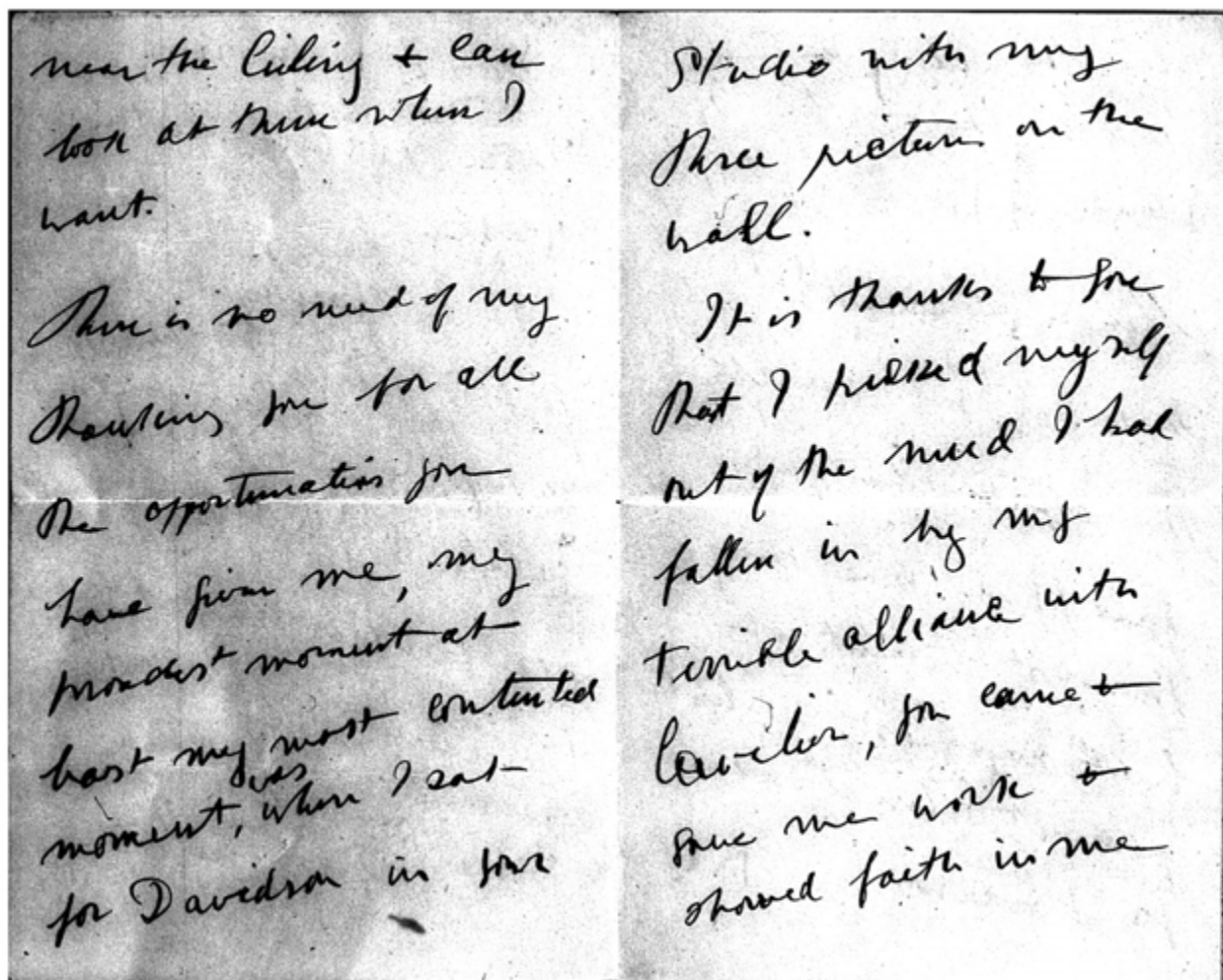
Life in Texas is  
not very gay. In spite  
of the fact that I know  
a lot of officers, that

Appendix E

Robert Winthrop Chanler to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, n.d. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).



"I had hoped they [the Giraffes] had found a home at last. I'll take them back when I return from the south & keep them where they perhaps belong on a cylinder near the ceiling & can look at them when I want."



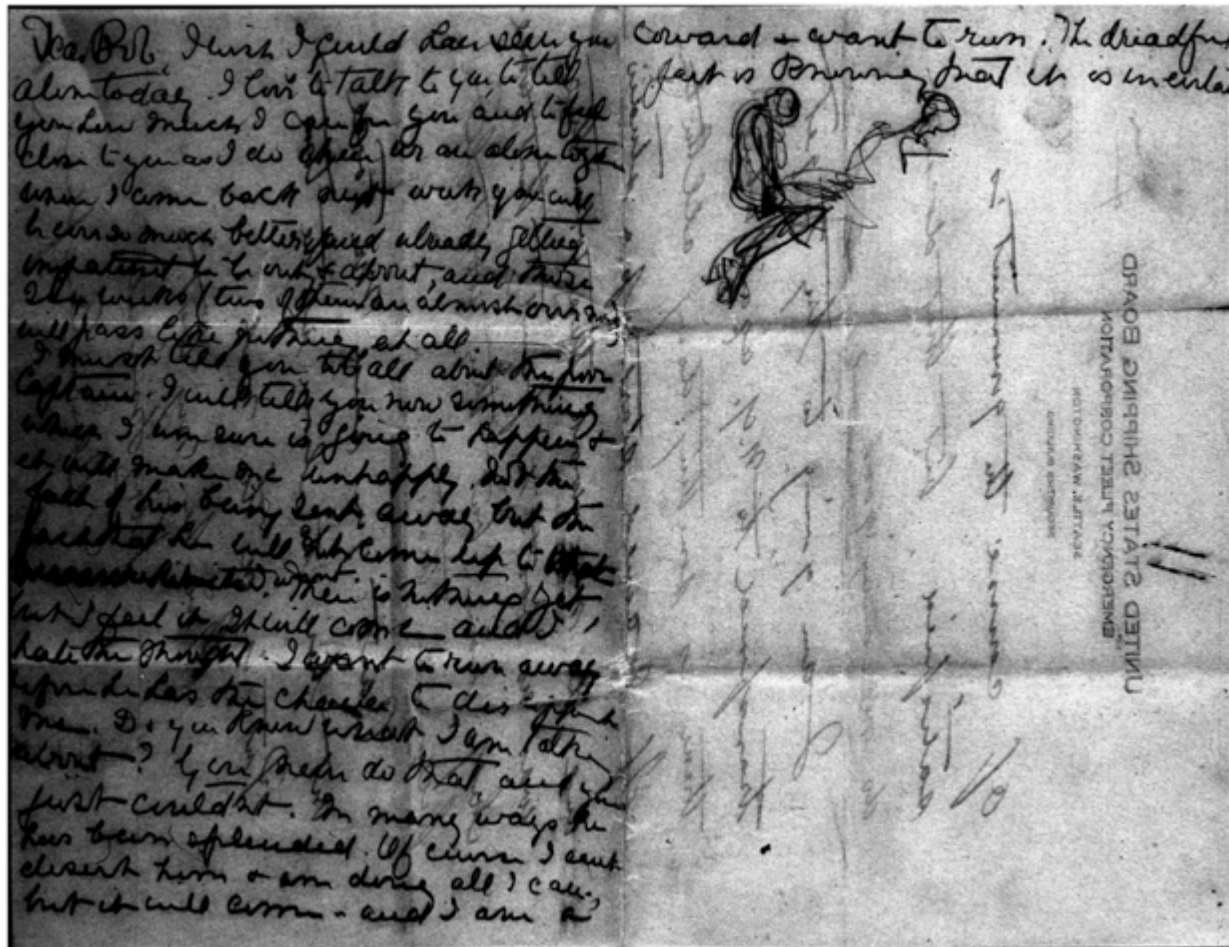
There is no need of my thanking you for all the opportunities you have given me, my proudest moment – at best my most contented moment was when I sat for Davidson in your studio with my three pictures on the wall. It is thanks to you that I pulled myself out of the mud I had fallen in by my terrible alliance with Cavalieri, you came and gave me work & showed faith in me.



John & Miss Randolph  
Whom I have just left  
in Montreal & who has  
become a good Artist  
with a future are my  
two women who helped  
me along but I thank  
you for all you have  
done & hope that your  
Island which is my  
idea will repay you a  
little for my debt to  
you. I wish  
Adieu —

Appendix F

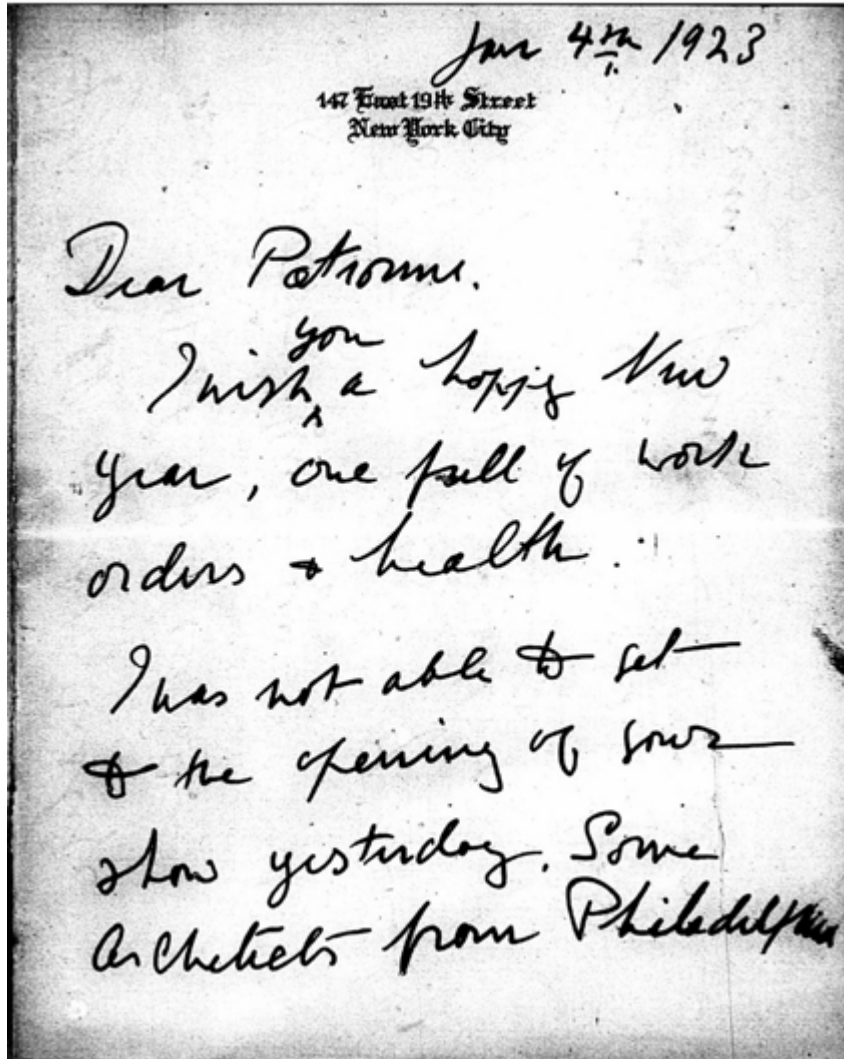
Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney to Robert Winthrop Chanler, n.d. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).





Appendix G

Robert Winthrop Chanler to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1923. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).



"Dear Patronne,  
I wish you a happy New Year, one full of work orders & health. I was not able to get to the opening of your show yesterday."

Came in & staid late,  
talking & working over  
some patent work.

I went in this morning  
& at half one o'clock  
I had no place to  
myself.

It is a wonderful  
exhibition & I am  
very proud of you

"It is a wonderful exhibition & I am very proud of you."

The world must realize  
now that you are the  
greatest American Woman  
Sculptor & I think of the  
World. It is really a  
tremendous show, I was  
dumb founded.

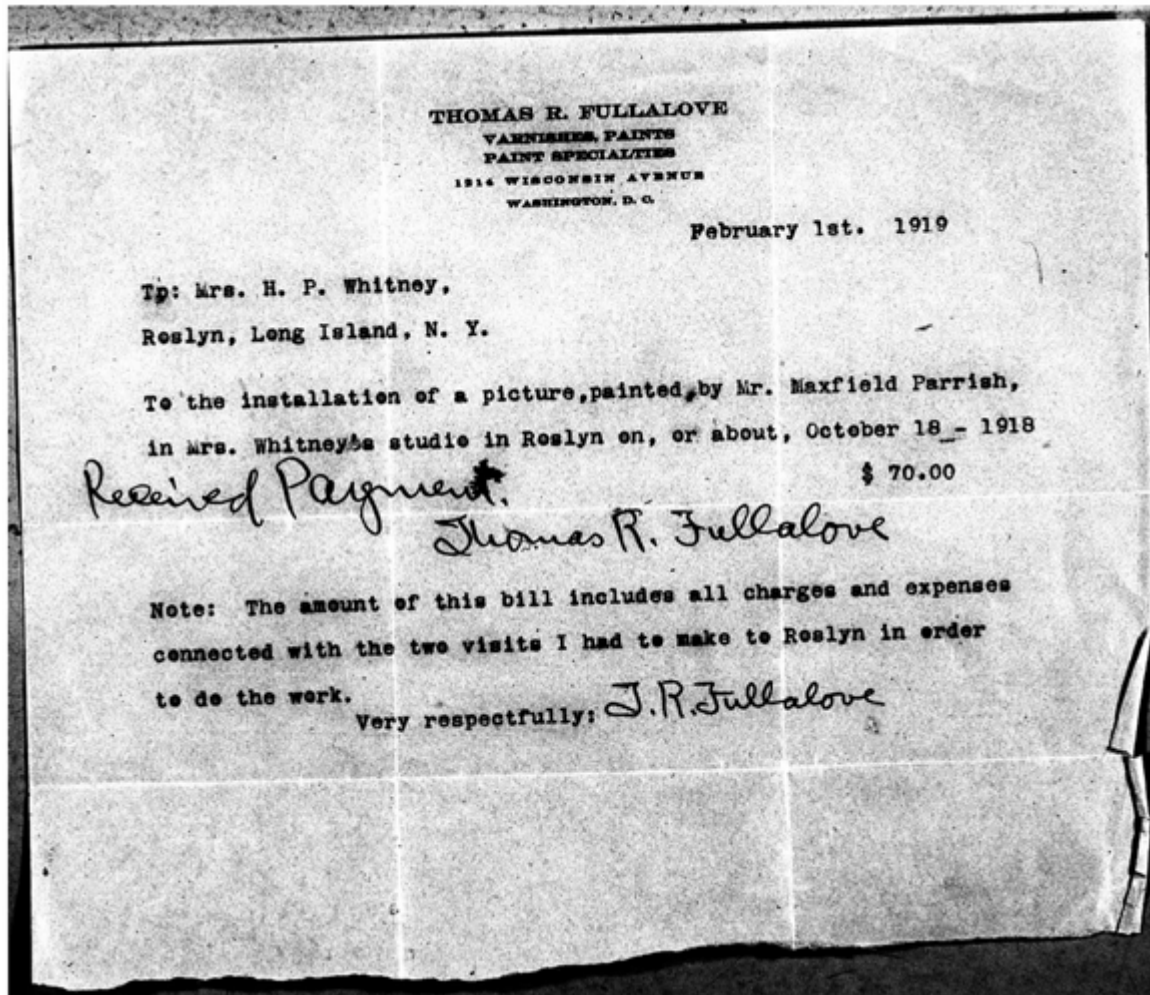
"The world must realize now that you are the greatest American Woman Sculptor & I think of the world. It is really a tremendous show, I was dumb founded."

I think your Cody  
monument very fine  
very Decorative &  
strong. I like your  
decorative dancing  
figures too, your breadth  
of vision is magnificent.  
God Bless <sup>you</sup> & Thanks  
for the magnificent  
moments you have  
given me  
I wouldly about

"I think your Cody monument very fine, very Decorative & strong. I like your decorative dancing figures too, your breadth of vision is magnificent. God bless you & thanks for the magnificent moments you have given me."

Appendix H

Receipt from Thomas R. Fullalove, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1919. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).



Appendix I

Maxfield Parrish to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, n.d. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).

49 East 63<sup>rd</sup> street.  
New York City.

My dear Mrs. Whitney:

Last week I think I completed the work on the decorations at the studio. I was in hopes I would see you there on one of my numerous visits. Because I wanted to set your frank opinion upon the work as a whole, now that it is all in place and can be judged as such. Some day in the spring I would like to go out and give the paintings their final coat of varnish, when they are thoroughly dry and hard. I shall see them then with a fresh eye & feel sure that I shall want to make a few changes. It will not amount to much in actual



work: I have in mind now, the  
subduing of certain groups of  
figures, putting them a little farther  
back, etc. But I hope I may meet  
you there and that you will tell  
me very frankly if there are not  
some changes you yourself would  
like made.

I believe the balance due on  
this last panel is four thousand  
dollars, which will make complete  
payment for the decorations.

With best wishes to you.

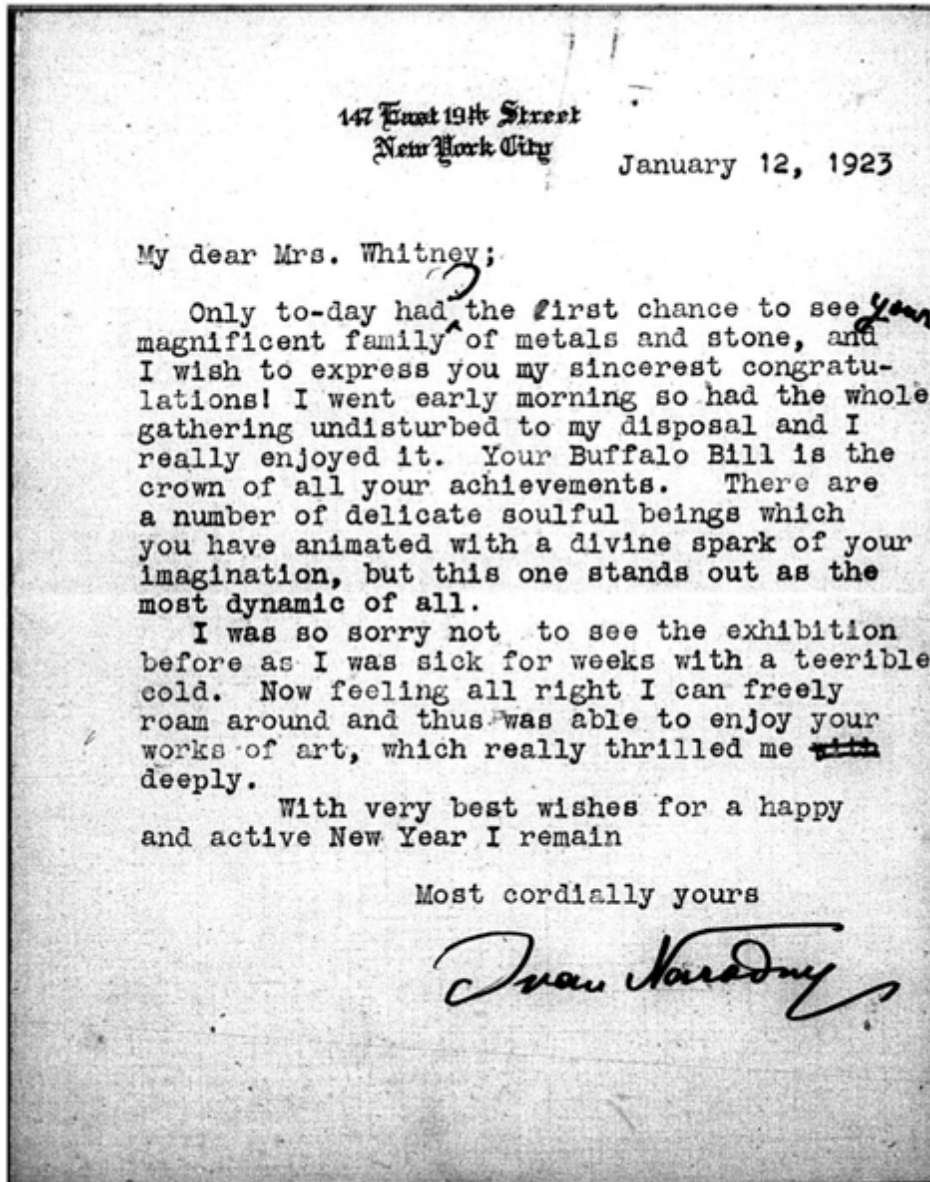
Sincerely,

Maxfield Parrish:

"I believe the balance due on this last panel is four thousand dollars, which will make complete payment for the decorations."

Appendix J

Ivan Narodny to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, January 12, 1923. Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Flora Miller Irving, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.).



## Appendix K

"Chanler, Once Millionaire, Now Broke; Duped by the Beautiful Lina Cavalieri." *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, September 10, 1910, 1.

### Chanler, Once Millionaire, Now Broke; Duped by the Beautiful Lina Cavalieri

Grandson of Mrs. Astor Now  
Said to Be Living on \$20  
Monthly Allowance.

SIGNED AWAY FORTUNE

Barely Tolerated Husband  
When Ill and Finally Told  
Him to Go to Work.

By National News Association  
NEW YORK, Sept. 10.—New York's  
Four Hundred, the city's exclusive set  
of multimillionaire aristocracy, over  
which Mrs. Astor ruled for years with  
a rod of iron, today is jittery to its  
very foundations by sensational dis-  
patches from Paris purporting to de-  
tail the duping of the famous society  
woman's grandson, Robert Wierthrop  
Chanler, by the beautiful prima donna  
Lina Cavalieri, who is said to have  
lost him more than two months ago.



Robert Wierthrop Chanler, the distinguished kinsman of the famous As-  
tor family, and his wife, the beautiful prima donna, Lina Cavalieri, and on  
the lower left Prince Paul Dolgorouki.

Lina Cavalieri, divorcee and profes-  
sional beauty of the world.

Married, secured of his fortune,  
contemporaneously turned aside as a for-  
saken lover and sent back to America  
broken in purse and spirit to hide his  
head in shame from the friends among  
whom he carried it high but a few  
years ago in announcing his forth-  
coming marriage to the beautiful song-  
stress he had courted so long and lov-  
ingly. This is the story, according to  
the story of the brilliant and noted "The  
Chanler, fortune, good fellow and  
dilettante politician.

According to this report, Chanler is  
now in America, a penniless living on  
\$20 a month, allowed him by his wife,  
whereas a year ago he could command  
millions.

The former sheriff of Dutchess coun-  
ty is now living in seclusion in this  
city and what steps he is preparing to  
take, if any, to regain his fortune,  
are held in the utmost secrecy.

Separation Planned.

It is reported that one of the couple  
will seek a legal separation—which one  
is not known at this time.

The dispatch tells how the singer told  
the young American on to the point of  
proposing marriage by slaying Prince  
Dolgorouki against him or rival and  
how she finally, four days before the  
wedding, sent for Chanler and made  
with him one of the most dramatic propo-  
sitions arrangements ever heard of. In  
the end she told him the story  
of her life.

In detail she related to him all the  
experiences of her childhood, how, as  
her girlish pretenses developed into  
womanly beauty she became the pet  
of certain men of the great world of  
Paris, the leader of the dominions,  
directing the life only with the de-  
mon. Then she told of her life in  
the Paris half world, of her hus-  
bands, the drinking married men and  
philistines who had wooed her and  
dared her and had made her with  
jewels, fine houses, costly hats, ex-  
quisite lingerie and the thousand and  
countless other things of a pros-  
perous life. She told of the man who  
was rich before she was old. Chanler  
loved all of this, but he was so filled  
with a desire to possess Cavalieri  
that it did not disturb him.

Father of Sam known to But Few.  
Then she told him how the father of  
her sixteen-year-old son was known  
only to a few persons and not to the  
son himself. She made no one of the  
confidence of her marriage that Chan-  
ler should sign a statement acknowl-

(CONTINUED ON PAGE FIVE)

### CHANLER, ONCE RICH, NOW BROKE; DUPED BY MME. CAVALIERI

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE ONE)

edging the boy as his son notwith-  
standing the fact that when the boy  
was born he was not aware that she  
lived.

Chanler, crazed with love for the  
operatic siren, was willing to do even  
this. But friends in Rome whom  
Mme. Cavalieri consulted advised  
against this, pointing out that it  
might possibly affect the boy's right to  
inherit the enormous fortune his  
mother has accumulated.

Then on the third day before the  
wedding while Chanler was being car-  
ressed by the beautiful prima donna,  
the English solicitor and the French  
notary reappeared, bringing with them  
formidable legal documents. At the  
same time Cavalieri's brother, Orestes,  
walked into the room.

Signs Away Fortune.  
Taking the documents from the so-  
licitor Cavalieri ran up to Chanler,  
threw her arms around him, kissed  
and told him he must sign the papers  
before they could be married. She ac-  
knowledgeed to him that he was sign-  
ing away everything he had for love  
of her.

But also she told him what excel-  
lent care she would take of him; how  
she would live with the one thought  
of making his life happy, managing  
his fortune and keeping from him all  
the annoying cares of business life,  
leaving him free to paint pictures and  
love her to his fullest desire. Chanler  
signed the documents and transferred  
everything he possessed to her.

He had been spending his time on  
enormous mural paintings. He did not  
sell many of these and Cavalieri  
thought this was energy wasted. One  
morning after he had finished his  
breakfast Mme. Lina announced that  
thereafter Chanler would be allowed  
each month 100 francs or \$20. She  
agreed to board and lodge him, but  
out of this \$20 he was to pay his valet,  
was to buy his clothes and meet those  
hundred and one little expenses he  
had always incurred.

Made Him Get to Work.  
"It's time for you to get to work  
and earn your living anyway," she  
told him.

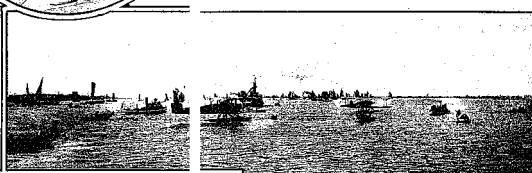
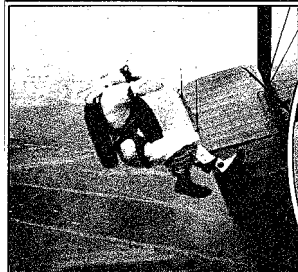
Chanler got to work. At her behest  
he would go out into the parks and  
paint two by four pictures that Cav-  
alieri thought would have some mar-  
ket value.

Until a few days ago he painted  
these pictures and sold them when he  
could.

Prince Dolgorouki reappeared on the  
scene in the role of an ardent lover  
and Chanler was relegated to the  
background while the prince showered  
attentions on the singer. Then Mme.  
Cavalieri became ill and there was an  
operation for appendicitis. At the  
hospital Chanler was only tolerated by  
the singer. It was Dolgorouki who  
was welcomed. Chanler's friends say  
that on a number of occasions he  
would call to see his wife and when  
he got into her room he would find  
Prince Dolgorouki sitting on the foot  
of her bed, laughing and chatting with  
her. The two would exchange tepid  
glances while the husband looked on  
unwilling to make a scene because  
they were in a hospital and because  
the madame was ill.

When she left the hospital she went  
to Cabourg, near Trouville. Her son,  
her brother, Orestes, Prince Dolgo-  
rouki and several maids accompanied  
her. Chanler followed a few days later  
and when he found Prince Dolgorouki  
there he gave up in disgust and started  
for America.

"Photo Standalone," *New York Times*, July 13, 1924, RP5.



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## 6. RESEARCH SUMMARY

The research in this report draws on several months of research in a variety of institutions. The author made two separate visits to the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C. to read through the extensive correspondence housed there, which was compiled and donated by Gertrude's granddaughter, Flora Miller Irving, in 1981. The author has read the entirety of Gertrude's correspondence from 1914 to 1930 (roughly microfilm reels 2358 to 2363) and has also looked through categories such as 'scrapbooks' and 'Sculpture files.' A section called "Works of Art by Robert Chanler" under the heading "Miscellaneous Personal Papers, 1888-1947, 1975" contains the black and white photograph of Whitney's studio from 1928 that features the fireplace as well as the photographs featuring Chanler's screens [fig. 2 & 10]. There is also a copy of Ivan Narodny's *The Art of Robert Winthrop Chanler* in the section "Scrapbooks, 1893-1942." While the papers at the AAA include an array of materials, only 'select' correspondence was included. As Friedman notes, ultimately "Gertrude's private correspondence *is* private and always handwritten by herself."<sup>130</sup> Indeed few of Gertrude's handwritten letters are present in the archives and the majority of the letters were either sent to Whitney or composed by her secretaries. For this reason, it was the expectation that there would be more documents related to the commission for Robert Chanler at the Whitney Studio. While the author did find one noteworthy letter that has not previously been discussed (Appendix C), no receipts, invoices or contractual documents related to the project have been discovered.

Additionally, the author of this report has read through the entirety of the archives pertaining to the Chanler commission at Vizcaya (thanks to the help of curator Gina Wouters) as well as the documents housed at the New York Studio School (thanks to Constance Evans) and those papers mentioning Chanler at the archives of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. The author was also able to visit the archives of Montgomery Evans at the Getty Research Institute, which included letters from the scholar and friend of the artist, Ivan Narodny, as well as a copy of his book *The Skygirl*, which has not previously been tied to Chanler. Though the author has corresponded extensively with Wint Aldrich (owner of Rokeby House) and the archivist at Coe Hall, the author was advised in both instances that neither archive contains primary source information relevant to Chanler's work during the 1910s or 1920s.

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<sup>130</sup> Friedman, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 398.