

Alice Mary Chambers



Portrait of a woman

Reference: 10955

KAREN TAYLOR

FINE ART

Dimensions:

Height: 41.80 cm / 16½ in

Width: 35 cm / 13¾ in

Signed with monogram I.I., red chalk on wove paper

41.8 x 35 cm; 16⅜ x 13¾ inches

Private collection, U.K., until 2020

Alice Mary Chambers was a talented and well-connected artist associated with Whistler and the Pre-Raphaelites, whose career and family ties have so far been overlooked. A notable figure in the late nineteenth century British art world, Chambers exhibited her work in many major galleries including the Royal Academy, was a close friend of the collector Charles Augustus Howell and gave Dante Gabriel Rossetti's plaster death mask to the National Portrait Gallery.

Chambers was born in Harlow, Essex in 1854 or 1855. Her father Charles Chambers (1817–1874), vicar of St Mary's, Harlow, was a significant figure in the ritualist or AngloCatholic movement, her mother Mary Upton (c.1815–1873) the daughter of a Sedbergh cotton merchant. Orphaned by their death within a year of each other in 1873–4 she was able to complete her studies in art. The 1881 census records Chambers as an artist in drawing and painting, living at 17 Red Lion Square in the house which had been previously lived in by William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones and where Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. had their first headquarters.

Chambers was a direct contemporary of Evelyn De Morgan, Kate Bunce and Marianne Stokes and like them, the Pre-Raphaelite influence on her work was profound. She was a friend of the collector Charles Augustus Howell and through him met other artists such as Whistler (see McClean, op cit. p. 77). Howell was Ruskin's secretary from 1865–70, and a close friend of Algernon Swinburne, the Burne-Joneses and Whistler. Howell famously oversaw the exhumation of Lizzie Siddal's coffin to recover Rossetti's manuscript poems in 1869 and was rumoured to have overseen the forgery of various paintings with the help of his lover, the artist Rosa Corder. When the collector Samuel Wreford Paddon sued Howell for fraud, Chambers and Corder provided promissory notes to help settle the claim. On Howell's death in 1890 he named Chambers as an executor and trustee of his will and a guardian of his daughter Rosalind and she made the arrangements for his funeral and the sale of his estate.

Chambers exhibited nine works at the Royal Academy between 1883 and 1893. Her work included such titles as Cydippe, Psyche, A Priestess of Ceres, Nancy, An Egyptian Fellah Woman, Relentless Memory and During the Prelude. She exhibited Daphne in 1892 at the New Gallery; the catalogue described it as a 'little upright picture of a maiden penetrating with closed eyes through dense laurel thicket' (New Gallery 7). She showed During the Prelude and Home through the wood: Brittany, at the Autumn 1894 exhibition of the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists (Royal Society 35, 55). She exhibited work at the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours, the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, and the Manchester City Art Gallery. She also provided the frontispiece illustration for Mary Hullah's The Lion Battalion (1885), a collection of stories for children.

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She specialized in drawings of female figures and mythological and orientalist subjects, and favoured red chalk and her monogram is reminiscent of that of Rossetti. She often used a leafy backdrop, as in the present work (not unlike the famous Morris wallpaper Willow Boughs) which can also be seen in her lithograph of the actress of the silent screen Mary Anderson and a similar drawing of a woman with her hair up and with plants in the background which was sold at Christies, London (10 March 1995, lot 134).

Chambers appears to have moved again in London and led quite a peripatetic life spending time in Spain and France and was living in Sussex by 1911. In 1913 she donated Rossetti's plaster death mask to the National Portrait Gallery.

I am most grateful to Thomas McLean for his helpful comments on this drawing; see 'Family Portraits: The Life and Art of Alice Mary Chambers', Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature, Number 133, Summer 2018, pp. 69–83 <https://doi.org/10.1353/vct.2018.0006>