



MOUNT HOLYOKE
COLLEGE ART MUSEUM



Portraits of Mary Woolley

November 21, 2017–May 27, 2018

Portraits of Mary Woolley

Mary Emma Woolley accomplished many notable feats in her 36-year term as President of Mount Holyoke College: she increased the academic rigor of the curriculum, improved students' quality of life, and helped build the College's legacy through fundraising. Today, she is perhaps best known for laying a foundation for LGBTQ inclusiveness at the College through her romantic relationship with Professor Jeannette Marks. Their partnership and activism is the subject of the acclaimed 2017 play "Bull in a China Shop," written by alumna Brynna Turner '12.

The two portraits displayed here were commissioned by graduating Mount Holyoke classes and were featured in some of the first special exhibitions at the Museum. The portraits capture different moments in Woolley's life and tenure at the College. Together, they spark a dialogue about the gendered perspectives of both the sitter and the artists.

- Katia Kiefaber '17

2017–2018 Art Museum Advisory Board Curatorial Fellow



John White Alexander (American, 1856–1915)
President Mary Emma Woolley, ca. 1909
Oil on canvas
Gift of the Class of 1909
1911.5.I(b).PI

Mary Woolley is an emblem of elegance in this portrait by John White Alexander. Feathery brushstrokes and delicate shadows make her prestigious, dark robes weightlessly cascade off the canvas and highlight her dignified facial expression. Woolley lightly thumbs a book with one hand while holding a poised fist with the other, possibly an allusion to her knowledge and composed passion. Alexander's portrait of Woolley demonstrates a trend among male artists of this era, who often painted women as domestic, inwardly emotional beings with exquisite exterior refinement.



Marie Danforth Page (American, 1869–1940)

Mary E. Woolley, 1931

Oil on canvas

Gift of the Class of 1931

1997.20

In contrast with Alexander's painting, Marie Danforth Page's earnest portrait of Woolley comes from a place of shared experience. Like Woolley, Page straddled societal expectations of women. She most often painted portraits of socially acceptable subjects like women and children. Yet through her bold technique, she illustrated each sitter's individual character rather than ascribing homologous features of domesticity. When Page was commissioned to paint this portrait in 1931, Woolley had just been appointed to serve as the only female American delegate at the Geneva Conference, which called for international peace following World War I.

In this portrait, Woolley's persevering spirit fills the canvas. Her broad body proudly holds up heavy robes, her fatigued eyes still glimmer, and bursts of indigo suggest her daring character. Her illuminated right hand subtly points downward, appearing relaxed yet purposeful. In Page's portrait, we see a confident, accomplished woman who will continue to take a stand for women's rights.