On April 27, 1889, the Boston Journal carried an article that described the annual “Artists’ Ball” of the Art Students’ Association, in Boston: the lady patronesses were artfully placed to represent Paul Veronese’s Marriage of Cana, the huge Louvre painting. The reporter wrote:

“Here, on a dais, covered with red, was a group ‘After the marriage of Cana’* by Paul Veronese. All the luxuriant wealth of draperies, all the gleaming of jewels, which the stately painters love to represent, were carried out by the patronesses. Mrs. Martin Brimmer was the central figure of this Venetian picture, as she received in a superb Venetian costume of yellow brocade over a white satin petticoat, with red ornament, pierced with a diamond-arrow on her hair. Mrs. Whitman in black velvet, the sleeves picked up with white, and with the large ruche common to the period, stood at her left. Mrs. Loring was in rose color, with a small Venetian cap. Mrs. Long was in white satin, with girdle of silk.”

Among the patronesses there was – of course – Isabella Stewart Gardner, who apparently had even her own “blackamoor” in order to look like a Veronese lady:

“To recall still further the memories of Venice, at one side of the dais stood a very small blackamore (sic), the attendant of Mrs. John Gardner. No one could doubt that the grand Venetian dame in her

* This essay is part of a more extended work-in-progress. Some material in this part was presented at the Lisbon EAAS 1998 Conference, as a seminar at the Graduate School of CUNY in December 1999, and as a lecture at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, in Boston, in June 2000. Asterisks indicate slides.

costume of old rose brocaded satin, cut décolleté and ornamented with jewels, was thoroughly in the character of the time, as she stood on the dais or walked through the gallery, her black attendant, with turban and other proper accessories, holding her train and a small and docile black and white dog at the same time."

During the ball, according to the Boston Daily Advertiser of April 27, there was quite a lot of expectation for a grand tableau vivant, which, at half past eleven, had not yet been presented. It was to represent Rembrandt’s Night Watch (Ill. 1).

From the report, it is not quite clear if the tableau was finally staged, but the reporter seemed to be content with the fact that “the figures for the great Rembrandt were present all the evening, and were pictures, every one of them, that suggested the frame in which they belonged”.  

In the articles in the various papers there seems to be some confusion between people dressed up in costumes after specific paintings and tableaux vivants: Rembrandt’s Night Watch was specifically expected and defined as a tableau, while the group on the dais “after the Marriage of Cana” by Veronese must have been more of a receiving line than a real tableau, in spite of some “placing” of the figures, as the Boston Globe reporter underlined. The brocade-dressed patronesses were placed “against the background formed by a long dark seat of dark wood behind which there were hangings of deep red cloth” making thus “a living picture of such form and coloring as one seldom sees”.

In spite of the Veronese painting being defined “a living picture” (which is a literal translation of the French “tableau vivant”), it is clear that the ladies were not placed in a real tableau vivant, since they were standing (and not sitting down as in the painting) and also moving about.

It is not difficult to imagine Isabella Stewart Gardner wearing several rows of her famous pearls on a Venetian silk brocade dress – having given up, for one night, one of her famous Worth gowns, as the black one in which Sargent portrayed

2 Ibidem.
her. It is more difficult to imagine her sitting still, with numerous other ladies, in a painting where she could not possibly be a *prima donna*, as the central figure is a male figure, that of Christ.

The reporter in fact continued describing in detail Mrs. Gardner who

"stood at the end of the line in a Venetian-red brocade of a very rich and heavy quality. It was cut extremely low in the neck, front and back, and the sleeves were queer, large puffs, over longer ones of gauze. A long chain of pearls encircled her neck twice, and the front of the bodice was one mass of diamonds, two diamond stars nestling in her hair also. Mrs. Gardner's little white poodle was carried by her side by a little blackamoor page."  

The reporters do not seem to agree on the color of Mrs. Gardner's poodle – black and white or just white? – but they do agree on her royal appearance, on the dazzling jewels, and on the perfection of someone who chose to have the little "blackamoor" whom one finds in so many of Veronese's paintings. Also in this case, "display proved power", as Martha Banta has observed of the staging of social events by Ward McAllister.

In the description of the ball the various reporters mention a number of painters: Fra Angelico, (Fra Angelico's Angels)*, Titian, Paris Bordone, Tintoretto, Franz Hals, van Dyck. But they also describe Greek maidens and Roman youths dancing with Puritans, Arabs and many Venetians.

---

4 Although there seems to be no photography of Mrs. Gardner in this attire, there is a painting by Dennis Miller Bunker, hanging in the Director's office at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, that shows Mrs. Gardner recognizably dressed as described above.


6 Fra Angelico, Van Dyck, the Greek maidens and the Roman youths are mentioned in *The Boston Journal*, cit. The mere mention of Beato Angelico opens up a chapter in the changes of taste in painting brought about by Ruskin, whose theories were particularly appreciated in America because of the connection between morality, religion, and art. Beato Angelico's presence here proves the penetration of Ruskin's theories in the United States. On the subject see Roger Stein, *Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America: 1840-1900*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1967. A famous story by Edith Wharton, *False Dawn* (in *Old New York*) focuses on the slow change in pictorial taste in a rich American family, whose son is sent on a Grand Tour to Europe, where he meets Ruskin, and returns with no Raffaello, but with a totally unappreciated Beato Angelico among other "primitives".
These descriptions of the Artists’ Ball – however inexact they may be – testify to the vogue of tableaux vivants.

Before we look at other tableaux vivants in the time and circles in which Isabella Stewart Gardner moved, on this and on the other side of the Atlantic, I would like to define tableaux vivants, as this form of entertainment, that by 1889 had had a long history, is often confused with other forms – as was the case with the reporters I mentioned.

Tableaux vivants were a very popular kind of “home theatricals”, for several decades akin to, and connected with, charades and other family games. They were staged not only in big halls, but very much in the home parlors. They were also a very ephemeral kind of entertainment, in that they lasted only seconds, not even minutes: a stage curtain was pulled open in front of a seated, expecting audience, in the home parlor, and it was pulled close after several seconds of absolute immobility on the part of the “players” – the figures being placed so as to represent a painting, or any scenes from poems, novels, or other sources. Several tableaux vivants were shown in succession, with music accompanying them.

There was a complex element of lighting, which changed over the years, as illumination changed: from candles, to magnesium, to gaslight. Most important, the tableau – after the curtain had opened – took place on a platform behind one or more layers of gauze stretched onto a frame.* The gauze could be either white, black, or slightly colored, but it must be well-stretched.

7 In Thackeray’s Vanity Fair (1848) Becky’s tableaux vivants are a clear explanation of how these were used to illustrate the various syllables composing the words in a charade.
8 Tolstoy used a startling comparison describing the horrors of war in War and Peace: “The roar of guns, that had not ceased for ten hours, wearied the ear and gave a peculiar significance to the spectacle, as music does to tableaux vivants”. The reference is to Napoleon, going towards Semionovskoe on horseback, through the battlefields of Borodino. See L. Tolstoy, Guerra e pace, tr. E. Cadei, Mondadori, 1951, vol. III, p. 299. I owe the reference originally to William A. Williams Jr.’s concordance (http://www.Concordance.com).

9 C.H. Fox’s Theatrical Catalogue (no date, no place, 106 pp.) advertized “Tableaux gauze, Light Blue, Grey, White and Black”, 108 in. wide, 3 shilling 6 pence per yard. It also advertized Cloth and Plush Curtains, complete with Pulleys, Spinning wheels on hire, and costumes.
Tableaux vivants had therefore a very precise technical set up, and the stretched gauze, with the proper lights, was what "made" the tableau. Between the people "frozen" in their attitudes on the stage and those looking at them in the audience there was therefore a visual filter, which enhanced the artificial character of the representation (Ills. 2, 3).


If the tableau lasted only a matter of seconds, perhaps with an encore, the process of preparation was instead at times quite long, and part of the fun for the performers must have been this very process. There usually was a painter – a man – to organize them, although the event belonged very much to the feminine world of the home. The painter was in most cases a friend of the family who provided the scenery, a background, painted by himself. The women prepared and sewed the costumes, and were most often – if not exclusively – the protag-
Ill. 3: Homage to Queen Victoria (1888), *ibidem*, p. 50.

...onists: dressing up in the luxurious costumes of time past enhanced their beauty. Tableaux vivants well reflected the patriarchal structure of the nineteenth century society and family, as, even in the case of cultured women, who knew the paintings they were staging, the whole set up was highly conservative, taking place, as it did, within the home, and underlining the traditional functions of women as hostesses and beauties.¹⁰

In the course of the nineteenth century, this form of “home theatricals” became very popular, and there were many “handbooks” explaining how to set up the frame, the curtains, the lights, how to make the costumes etc.

The subjects were chosen almost from any source – provided that they could furnish a “scene”: scenes from Shakespeare were always popular, but the sentimental nineteenth century also liked “social” subjects as the one representing “The silk dress” (Ill. 4), where two tableaux in succession offered the points of view of the rich and of the poor.

¹⁰ This was even more true in the case of middle-class mid-century tableaux vivants (see below) not representing paintings, but sentimental and moral scenes. See also BANTA, *op. cit.*., p. 650.
Ill. 4a: *The Silk Dress*, in Charles Harrison, *Theatricals and Tableaux Vivants for Amateurs*, London, Upcott Gill, 1882, p. 120.

Ill. 4b: *The Silk Dress*, *ibidem*, p. 121.
The tableaux we are speaking of here, however, are of one very specific type: those that represented paintings — such as the *Marriage of Cana* or *The Night Watch* which were mentioned. By the 1880s and 1890s this particular type of tableaux vivants had become very popular: the bourgeois society that in the course of the century had brought tableaux into stifling home parlors, and had represented sentimental scenes, opened up to art, brought back, we can say, tableaux vivants to their courtly origins.

A tableau vivant representing a painting presumed a visually cultured audience: the success of the entertainment depended on the immediate recognition of the painting on the part of the audience. Therefore the fashion for this particular type of entertainment tells us a lot on the pictorial tastes of the times, and on the degree of visual culture of both the people who staged them and their audiences.

Behind the taste for tableaux representing paintings there is the transformation of American society, where art, by the 1880s, had really made it to the center of the cultural scene. One may think of the great museums that had been founded in the second half of the nineteenth century — be it the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (1870) or the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (1870). Great collections were formed: the mere names of Mrs. Potter Palmer, of J. Pierpont Morgan, Charles Lang Freer, Henry and Louise Havemeyer, Henry Clay Frick (1849-1919, although his collection opened in 1935), and, of course, Isabella Stewart Gardner, evoke wonderful collections. ¹¹

If Isabella Stewart Gardner’s museum had its gala opening on January 1st, 1903, the Museum land purchase had been signed in 1898 (January 31st), and Mrs. Gardner had actually started her amazing collection in 1894, with the purchase of Botticelli’s *Tragedy of Lucretia*.

The general centrality of art was crucial in this period. Some of the painters who were friends and in some cases advisors to Mrs. Gardner in her purchases were also “stage directors” or

performers of tableaux vivants: one example is Ralph Curtis (1854-1922).

Curtis corresponded at length with Mrs. Gardner, in delightfully witty letters, often addressing her as “mia carissima regina” (“my dearest queen”), signing himself “Raffaello”, and at times offering her a “crimson velvet piviale” (pluvial, ceremonial vestment) or some fire iron dogs.

The painter Ralph Curtis was also the son of the owners of the Palazzo Barbaro* in Venice, which Mrs. Gardner rented several times, “holding court” there, royally, Cleopatra-like, as Henry James suggested, or being portrayed as she stepped in from her balcony on the Grand Canal, against a background of fireworks, by Anders Zorn*.

Ralph Curtis, a lively and elegant young man – he is portrayed with his parents and his beautiful wife Lisa Colt Rotch in the Palazzo salon, in a most famous painting, An Interior in Venice (1899), by Sargent* – did not disdain taking part in “home theatricals” in Venice when he was not looking at pictures in Dresden, “deer shooting with the Metternichs” in their “vast estates” near Marienbad, reading Casanova’s “fearfully immoral but deeply interesting” memoirs and advising Mrs. Gardner to do the same (“But you must get some gnome to buy them for you and then hide them away from the Boston Grandies”), or going to Sevilla for the Feria, to Paris for the Exposition, or to Bayreuth to hear Tristan, or, simply, painting. 12

He took part in some tableaux vivants at Mrs. Bronson’s, 13 an American expatriate who had a house right across the Salute on the Grand Canal, a friend of Robert Browning and Henry James. At Mrs. Bronson’s house, as Ralph’s mother wrote to her sister-in-law, on October 27, 1883:

“there were beautiful tableaux the other night ... Afseny (Ralph) was in powder and satin – 18th century* – very pretty”. 14


These tableaux had been arranged by another painter, Frank Duveneck,

"who appeared himself as the Bravo of Venice* – in four tableaux – wrapped in a cloak, sharpening his sword, giving the blow – and lastly wiping the fatal weapon. It was tremendous and made real blood run cold."  

We may imagine Meissonnier’s Bravos* as the source of this tableau.

Other tableaux vivants organized by English and American expatriates in Venice were those in the house of Lady Layard, again on the Grand Canal, near the Rialto. Lady Layard was the wife of Sir Austin Layard, a diplomat and the discoverer of Niniveh, who had some of the Mesopotamian jewels he excavated made into a necklace and earrings for Lady Layard.  

The Layards were also the extraordinary collectionists, who, with the help of Morelli, had in their Venetian home such paintings as Bellini’s Mahomet II*, part of the collection which was donated to the London National Gallery.

In Lady Layard’s house, as we know from her detailed, unpublished, diary, the English painter Henry Wood organized tableaux, usually for Christmas, where the performers were her nieces, but also exiled Royalty such as Princess Olga of Montenegro, the daughter of Queen Darinka, the widow of the assassinated king of Montenegro. We can see Princess Olga in a drawing by Kirchmayer.  

She was the “poor little princess, with no money or art”, whom James contemplated as “a possible subject” for a story, “needing to be a little filled up”.

On Christmas night of 1888, for instance, after some rehearsing during the preceding week, the tableaux vivants were started and

“Nela [one of Lady Layard’s nieces] opened them in a picture called “The Love Letter after Romney” (Ill. 5). After came Dora in a Gainsborough hat*, the princess Olga as Turkish coffee bearer, then Dora as Galatea* Mr. Marzials as a “Venetian Senator” (Ill. 6), and then looking shy in modest costume Mrs. Hulton as The Spanish Fortune Teller. Mr.

16 See Sir Austin’s portrait by Charles Vigors and Lady Layard’s by Palmaroli in Browning a Venezia, cit., n. 111, p. 41 and n. 112, p. 43.
17 Ibidem, n. 91, p. 70.
III. 5: Not Romney, but Sir Joshua Reynolds, Mrs. Lloyd (The Love Letter).

Fischer was a van Dyke*, Mrs. Acton as Beatrice Cenci*. Nela as a Venetian spoon-vendor (Ill. 7) and lastly Henry and I in our modern costume in one picture,"

In 1892 other tableaux vivants were staged, where

"Mrs. Hulton and Agostini appeared as Herodias’ daughter with the head of St. John the Baptist, Mrs. Zecchin as a Madame Lebrun’s painting, Ola in a titanesque picture holding up a dish of flowers*. Mr. Woods as a Franz Hals Burgmeister, while Carisi (le tapeur) played valses on the piano”. 

Other tableaux vivants of the same time and circles in Venice had as subjects “a Velasquez man”, “a Rembrandt Dutch Man with a pipe”, “Titian’s daughter”.

Lady Layard was asked a special staging of tableaux vivants when Empress Frederick, the daughter of Queen Victoria and the wife of the Emperor of Germany, arrived in Venice in the Fall of 1892:
"These tableaux were produced by Henry Wood's and Ludwig Passini, each of them undertaking separate pictures; Passini himself appeared in one of them as Morone's (sic) "Tailor"*. I was in two of them as a peasant in one of Woods' pictures, and then as a Longhi lady*, my husband appeared in another as a Lanzknecht".

The diarist, this time, is Zina Hulton, the author of another interesting unpublished journal, *Fifty Years in Venice*. Her husband was a painter who exhibited his works in the Venice Biennale, in the section called "Venetian Painters" although he was in fact British.

If one looks at the paintings mentioned in the Venetian expatriates' tableaux vivants, one finds names of painters such as van Dyck, Franz Hals, Reynolds, Guido Reni (to whom the famous portrait of Beatrice Cenci* was at the time ascribed), Titian, who were definitely popular in the 19th century. Some of these very names come up in the American tableaux vivants of the same period that were written about in the press, or which were used by novelists in their works.

Portraits by Franz Hals* and a Velasquez, for example, were staged at the benefit performance of the Kit Kat Club in New York in February 1891, together with "works of Greek sculpture". A Franz Hals was staged at a benefit for "St. Katherine's Home in Jersey City", a Velasquez at the New York Decorative Arts Society in 1893. A painter from the Metropolitan Opera House, T.D. Plaisted, had been engaged to paint the sceneries of the Kit-Kat Club tableaux, while other contemporary painters set up tableaux from their own paintings.

If there was a "Titian's Daughter" staged by the expatriates in Venice, there was one in the newly built house of the newly rich Brys in New York, in Edith Wharton's most famous tableaux vivants in *The House of Mirth*, where

---

* One Franz Hals was exhibited, together with paintings by Claude Monet, portraits by Rembrandt, *The Dance of the Gypsies* by Corot, and pictures of the Dutch and Flemish School at the Union League Club, in New York, as *The New York Times* reported on February 13, 1891.


Ill. 8: **Van Dyck**, *Queen Henriette Maria* (Windsor Castle), in *L'opera completa di Van Dick 1626-1641*, Presentazione e apparati critici di E. Larsen, Milano, Rizzoli, 1980, tav. XXV.

"a brilliant Miss Smedden from Brooklyn showed to perfection the sumptuous curves of Titian's daughter*, lifting her gold salver laden with grapes above the harmonising gold of rippled hair and rich brocade".  

There were van Dycks too staged both in Venice, in Boston at the Artists' Ball, and in Wharton's New York, where

---

"a young Mrs. Van Alstyne, who showed the frailer Dutch type, with high blue-veined forehead and pale eyes and lashes, made a characteristic Vandyck, in black satin (Ill. 8), against a curtained archway" (p. 134)

just like Ariana Curtis in Venice. 22

There was also "a Veronese supper, all sheeny textures, pearl-woven heads and marble architecture" in the same group of fictional tableaux, where Lily Bart, the protagonist, chose not to dress up as Tiepolo's Cleopatra** but as Reynolds's Mrs. Lloyd* - surely the same painting called by Lady Layard "The Love Letter", not by Romney (he never painted one) but by Reynolds. 23 In Wharton's novel other paintings mentioned are "Kauffmann nymphs garlanding the altar of love" (surely Angelica Kauffmann's) 24 nymphs), "a Watteau group of lute-playing comedians, lounging by a fountain in a sunlit glade", Botticelli's Spring, and a portrait by Goya (p. 133-134).

If there was a Galatea at Lady Layard's in Venice, there was a most famous Galatea* (Chicago, 1881) touring the United States in the 1880s: Mary Anderson appeared as a statue at the beginning and at the end of Gilbert's play Pygmalion and Galatea. 25


23 This scene has been the subject of much criticism, see Judith Fryer, Felicitous Space. The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather, Chapel Hill, The University of Carolina Press, 1986, pp. 75-82.

24 Not Hugo Wilhelm Kaufmann, as indicated in the Notes to The House of Mirth, cit., p. 335.

25 See McCulloch, op. cit., p. 93. A photo was taken by Napoleon Sarony. Mary Anderson remembers how the painter Alma Tadema wanted her to appear "draped after some Tanagra figurine". As the effect was not good ("Galatea looked like a stiff Medieval saint"), the actress made the statue in her own way, in "white Greek clothes", helped by her mother in the last hour before the show ("suddenly, the statue that I wanted stood before me" in the long mirror), Mary Anderson, A Few Memories, London, Osgood, 1896, p. 150. Mary Anderson also appeared as "America" in the Great Pageant in Queen's Hall in London during the war, when the US had just entered the war. When she appeared "the entire house rose and cheered, and stood, while Sir Thomas Beecham's orchestra played the American National Anthem as I came down the flight of stairs to be embraced by Great Britain (Clara Butt), England (Lady Tree), Belgium...", Mary Anderson de Navarro, A Few More Memories, London, Hutchinson, 1936, p. 160.
There were painters engaged to direct tableaux vivants on both sides of the Atlantic: a painter from the Metropolitan Opera House, T.D. Plaisted, had been engaged to paint the sceneries of the Kit-Kat Club tableaux, while other contemporary painters set up tableaux from their own paintings.\textsuperscript{26} Also in Wharton’s fictional tableaux there is a painter: “the distinguished portrait painter, Paul Morpeth, had been prevailed upon” (p. 131) to organize the tableaux vivants at Mrs. Bry’s: he has been identified as John Singer Sargent\textsuperscript{27} or as William Merritt Chase.\textsuperscript{28}

There were tableaux vivants representing contemporary paintings at the Kit Kat Club, as we mentioned, but there were some also in painters’ circles: at the Gerson’s home, where William Merritt Chase fell in love with his future wife who was still a girl when they met, in 1880 there were tableaux after F.S. Church’s paintings\textsuperscript{29}. Painters liked dressing up as figures in old paintings, as Chase’s photograph in a 17\textsuperscript{th} century à la Van Dyck costume\textsuperscript{*} taken in Munich in 1876 shows (but this would take us into another genre).\textsuperscript{30}

William Merritt Chase organized tableaux at the New York decorative Art Society in 1893,\textsuperscript{31} staging representations of paintings by “Velasquez, Doré, David, Alma Tadema, Gerome, and Gainsborough”. New and old paintings were chosen.

We have now seen how popular tableaux vivants representing paintings were in the 1880s and 1890s, when they definitely represented a respectable (even children staged tableaux vivants)\textsuperscript{32} and even highbrow entertainment in American soci-

\textsuperscript{26} Jack McCullough, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{House of Mirth}, cit., p. 334.
\textsuperscript{28} Judith Fryer, \textit{art. cit.}, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{29} Alice Miller’s \textit{My Father}, quoted in Ronald G. Pisano, \textit{William Merritt Chase}, Boston, Little Brown, 1993, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{30} Perhaps it could be called the genre of “fancy portraits”, where painters represented their subject in fancy or simple old time costumes. On the subject see Sara Stevenson and Helen Bennett, \textit{Van Dyck in Checkered Trousers}, Edinburgh, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, 1978.
\textsuperscript{31} Fryer, \textit{art. cit.}, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{32} On Saturday February 3, 1883 there were “Enjoyable tableaus (sic) and Dances at the Academy of Music” in New York, for the children. There was one opening tableau, which then moved into a pageant: “The homage
ety, at home and in Europe. 33

This “respectability” and highbrow character brought them back – as I mentioned in passing – to their courtly origins: tableaux vivants were used in professional theatres between acts, descending, as a genre, from the medieval and Renaissance English miracle and mystery plays, as Holstrom has indicated; 34 in the 18th century a French lady, Madame de Genlis, took them from the theatre 35 to use them as entertainment at the court of the French king, staging historical scenes (1761) to instruct the children of the Duc d’Orléans. Madame de Genlis must have been a person who really enjoyed the theatre, as she remembers being dressed up as an angel, as a little girl, and not wanting to take off her wings for the whole day after the procession. She also remembers being dressed up as “Amour” with a “pink robe covered with lace scattered with little artificial flowers of all colors, arriving only at my knees” and wearing “little boots the color of straw and silver, my long hair down and a pair of blue wings”. 36 The painter Madame Vigée Lebrun arranged tableaux vivants when she went to St.

paid to Prince and Princess Carnival by throngs of fantastic little people, under the auspices of Apollo, the God of Music, and the Court Jesters, who are most conspicuous in the Royal Pageant”. The “little people” being both the fairies and the children. *The New York Times*, February 3, 1883.

33 As late as 1912 the New York debutantes posed for some “oriental Tableaux” staged by photographer James Breese; see BANTA, op. cit., p. 653.

34 “The art form itself was related to medieval survivals in religious plays and Christmas cribs and to the festivities of the late renaissance: see KRISTEN GRAM HOLSTROEM, *Monodrama Attitudes Tableaux Vivants. Studies on some trends of theatrical fashion 1770-1815*, Stockholm, Almqvist and Wiksell, 1967, p. 239. This book is an essential study of the subject, also as regards Goethe.

35 In 1760 Carlo Bertinazzi (1713-1883), known as “Carlin”, a Harlequin famous first in Venice and then in Paris from 1741, recreated in 1760 Greuze’s painting *The Village Betrothal* during the entr'acte of *Les Noces d’Harlequin*. See McCULLOUGH, op. cit., p. 6.

36 In the Prologue to her *Memoires* she wrote: “mon habit d’Amour étoit couleur de rose, recouvert de dentelle de point parsemé de petites fleurs artificielles de toutes les couleurs; il ne me venait que jusqu’aux genoux; j’avais de petites bottines couleur de paille et d’argent, mes longs cheveux abattus et des alles bleues”; in HONORÉ BONHOMME, *Madame de Genlis. Sa Vie, son Oeuvre, sa Mort* 1746-1830, Paris, Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1883, p. 6. Madame de Genlis went to court in 1770, took care of the little girls of the Duchess of Chartres (1777), became “gouverneur” of the Duc d’Orléans’ children (1782-1791, when she was dismissed), and wrote *Theatre a l’usage des jeunes personnes* (1779), *Les Veillées du Château*, ou *Cours de*
Petersburg in 1775, as McCullough informs us, and Baron Grim, as Martin Meisel writes, in 1765, ten years earlier, reminds us of this form of entertainment "à la campagne".

Tableaux vivants, however, seem to have spread throughout the courts of Europe only after Goethe used them in his most popular novel, *Elective Affinities* (1809). He had seen very special tableaux vivants in Naples in 1787, where, during his Italian journey, he had seen beautiful twenty-year-old Emma Hart, later Lady Hamilton, performing her "attitudes" for Sir William Hamilton, who, in Goethe's words

"after being an art dilettante for many years, and after studying nature for so long, has found the acme of delight in both nature and art in the person of a beautiful young woman.... He has had a Greek costume prepared for her which is most becoming to her; wearing it, she unpins her hair, takes a couple of shawls, and knows how to give such variety to her attitudes, her gestures, her expressions, that one ends up by really believing one is dreaming".

Sir William Hamilton had had a "box", lined with black velvet, with a huge gilded frame, on the one side open, prepared for Emma to show off her abilities. Her representations - or attitudes - were directly inspired by the Pompei frescoes, but also by her spouse's wonderful collection of vases, in a city, Naples, that had a great tradition of theatrical and ephemeral architecture, the ideal cultural background for beautiful Emma. Emma had been previously portrayed by Romney, as "Circe, Calypso, Euphrosyne, a Sybil, a Bacchante, Saint Cecilia, Lady Macbeth, Cassandra".

---

Morale à l'usage des enfants (1784) and Leçons d'une gouvernante à ses élèves (1791). She also published Arabesques mythologiques, ou les attributs de toutes les divinités de la fable (Paris, Charles Barrois, 1810).

37 McCULLOUGH, op. cit., p. 7. McCullough cites other examples preceding Goethe.


40 MEISEL, op. cit., p. 338. See also An Illustrated Catalogue of Engraved Portraits and Fancy Subjects painted by Thomas Gainsborough, RA, Published...
Goethe used tableaux by Van Dyck ("Belisarius"), by Poussin ("Ahasuerus and Hester"), by Terburg ("The Paternal Admonition") in *Elective Affinities* (1809). His taste for the theatre, his liking for Neapolitan “presepi” (creches, or nativity cribs), and his unconditioned admiration for Emma Hamilton’s attitudes must have counted in his choice of tableaux vivants in his novel. In 1813 tableaux vivants were staged to celebrate Grand Duchess Maria’s birthday, which Goethe described in a letter.  

Tableaux vivants seem to accompany courtly celebrations throughout Europe: in 1821, on the occasion of Grand Duke Nicholas’ visit to the court of Prussia, the painter William Hensel staged some tableaux vivants with scenery by Shinckel and music by Spontini. The Prussian kaisers’ birthdays were celebrated with tableaux vivants, which we find staged as late as 1910, 1912, and even, for Louise Queen of Prussia in 1929. They seem to have been particularly popular in German culture. Decades earlier, *The New York Times* actually reported at length on the “historical pageants and brilliant scene at the Prussian court” (2-3-1883).

The bourgeois 19th century took over tableaux vivants, making it a form of entertainment that spread to theatres and homes: by the 1830s and 1840s tableaux vivants were adapted to family taste and moral subjects.

They also developed in an opposite direction: in public the-

---


43 In addition to the amazingly vast bibliography regarding Germany, one may quote Dumas, who, in *Le Comte de Monte Cristo*, Paris, Nelson, n.d. vol. IV, p. 330 (1841-1845), wrote: "Mademoiselle d’Armilly, qu’on apercevait alors, formant avec Eugénie, grace au cadre de la porte, un de ces tableaux vivants comme on en fait souvent en Allemagne" (see William A. Williams 1998, *Concordance*, cit.).
atres they presented a didactic purpose but they also became a means to justify the presence of naked women on the stage, after flourishing in the 1830s presenting “Living Statues” of ancient history, especially Greek history, as the “Grecian Statues” staged by Andrew Ducrow in New York. In the United States theatres were at times closed down on charges of immorality. In 1847 the Apollo rooms in New York were closed down because Dr. Collyer’s models, who also presented a personification of the most famous nude statue of the 19th century in America, Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave, were considered indecent. (Among wealthy society people only Alva Vanderbilt in 1883 dared to represent the famous Greek Slave by Powers, perhaps with some scandal.) Nobody had closed down anything in Berlin, in 1843, where a lot of nudity was on show, be it the Farnese Hercules (Ill. 9), Thorwaldsen’s Bacchus and Ebe, or Canova’s Three Graces, even if the police were in the room. At Napoleon III’s court the tableau representing “Diane chasseresse entourée de nymphes” was “toute une exposition de splendeurs charnelles” and the tableaux “dèpassèrent les bornes de convenances” even in that far from Puritan court.

In the 1850s and 1860s in America tableaux vivants in the homes sometimes represented paintings, but most often chose “scenes” from nursery rhymes, novels, fairy tales, or “exempla-

44 This tendency produced also libertine literature, such as the libertine stories that have nothing to do with tableaux vivants in Les tableaux vivants ou mes confessions aux pieds de la Duchesse, par un rédacteur de la R.D.D.M. (Paul Perret), Amsterdam, 1870, the pornographic illustrations in La Maison de Verre. Défilé de tableaux vivants, Paris, Aux Dêpons de la Compagnie, 1891 (with lesbian and interracial erotic scenes), or The Marchioness’s Amorous Pastimes, London, Privately printed, 1893.
47 FRYER, art. cit., p. 51.
48 GODÊFROI SCHADOW, le père, Relation d’une représentation de tableaux vivants qui eut lieu le 5 mai 1843, dans la salle de l’Académie royale des beaux arts à Berlin. “Si, parmi le grand nombre de spectateurs, quelques-uns sentaient un désir impur, on ose soutenir que les artistes étaient plutot animés d’un sentiment profond, et absorbés en fixant cette nature dévoilée” (p. 14).

... moral tales. In George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876) Gwendolyn Harleigh impersonates “Hermione as the statue in the *Winter’s Tale*”, Shakespeare being a favourite source throughout the century. Handbooks published in London, New York, Boston multiplied, giving practical instructions and suggesting subjects.

In 1869 the handbook by Annie Frost suggested new subjects as “The complaint is made every winter of a want of suitable subjects...” as “The old established pictures are worn threadbare, and many are not able to take the time, or command the books to search out new ones”. 50 There were tab-

---

leaux such as "The Dancing lesson", tableaux based on proverbs (Two are company, three is a crowd), on charades (The Courtship, The Newsboy, The Bookworm), Mother Goose Tableaux, Fairy Tale Tableaux, and tableaux "from the Sociable" presenting such subjects as The Temperance Home, in addition to many others such as The Brigand's Family, The Witches in Macbeth.

William F. Gill, in Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals, printed in Boston in 1867, 51 gave a list of as many as 167 tableaux (and pantomimes), ranging from subjects most popular in the 19th century such as "Beatrice Cenci led to Prison" — made famous by Shelley's play and Paul Delaroche's painting, — or "Raphael's cherubs", Raphael being the painter preferred by Americans in the 19th century, 52 to scenes from Shakespeare, patriotic scenes (The Genius of Liberty, Emancipation), biblical scenes.

James H. Head's Home Pastimes and Tableaux Vivants, printed in Boston in 1860, insisted on the necessity that art should not be limited to the painter's studio but should "embellish every home", 53 and offered a number of historical subjects (such as Napoleon and his old guard at Waterloo), and a high number of allegorical figure, ranging from Liberty to the Spirit of Chivalry to Faith*, not to mention Little Eva and Uncle Tom, Hiawatha Sailing, and again scenes from the Bible and family life (Marriage Bliss). There were tableaux which have an obvious pictorial origin, such as The Banditti, 54 made popular in the 19th century by the prints from Salvator Rosa's paintings, but where the painter was ignored. In the "Portrait of Gabrielle", instead, the source, Delaroche, was openly acknowledged.

The taste for tableaux vivants representing paintings was related to a number of different visual entertainments and to

54 The Italian Brigands, or Banditti, had been popular in the theatres in the late 1830s with Horace Vernet's "Celebrated pictures of the Brigands as starting image" (McCullough, op. cit., p. 15).
the fortunes of photography in the nineteenth century. “Glyptoramas” and “Panoramas”, with their painted scenes and illusionary set-up, had something in common with the fundamental principles of tableaux vivants, that is the rendering of an “illusion” in realistic terms, and in both cases a painted scenery was used. Crowds gathered to see “the largest painting in the world,” the “National Panorama of the Surrender of Yorktown, at 59th Street, corner Madison Avenue, 50 cents (Children 25 cents), open daily (Sundays included), from Sunrise to Sunset”, or to see “The Siege of Paris”, lit up by electricity, in 1883. Verisimilitude, realism and illusion – the three tenets of so much literature and art in the nineteenth century – intermingled also in tableaux vivants, as they did in famous “Passion Plays”, such as that of Oberammergau, which had had a long tradition, but became very popular in the 1880s.

Tableaux vivants were also connected, as regards sentimental subjects, with the taste for melodrama, in which often medieval costumes were often used, due to the revival of the taste for the middle ages. This could also be seen in the masked balls, in the numberless pageants, and even in the backdrops of photographs taken in the studios.

Photography was of course also important, and many well-known photographers experimented with photos of tableaux vivants: Henry Peach Robinson had a Little Red Riding Hood (1858), Julia Cameron created The Parting of Lancelot and Guinevere (1874), and other tableaux, Lewis Carroll had Alice Liddel pose as The Beggar Maid, and staged St. George and the Dragon (a. 1874) in a very special rendering of the tableau as the actors were children and the objects children’s toys. But Carroll’s use of a trunk of clothes and gadgets – tin crown and swords included – from the Drury Lane Theatre in his “glass house” above his rooms at Oxford is part of the Victorians’ taste for fancy dressing. A taste shared by the aristocracy, as we can see in the photo of Arthur, Duke of Connaught, dressed up as The Beast of the fairy tale (Beauty and the Beast) for the Fairy Tale Quadrille at the Marlborough House Ball in 1874*.

57 Ibidem, p. 69.
58 Ibidem, p. 44.
or Alexandra (Ill. 10), Princess of Wales, with her page,* dressed up as Marguerite de Valois, for the Devonshire House Ball, in 1897.  

Napoleon Sarony ⁶⁰ had used the new medium to produce photos of famous actresses, often in costumes and with a particular scenery: we have mentioned his photo of Mary Anderson as Galatea. There were Adelaide Ristori as Lucretia Borgia (c. 1885), and Eugene Sandow (1893), the "greatest strongman


⁶⁰ Born in Quebec in 1821, he died in Manhattan Nov. 9, 1896, the brother of Olivier François Xavier (1820-1879), a portrait photographer. Napoleon was a lithographer in New York in 1833, founded the firm Sarony and Major (later Sarony and Knapp), producing theatrical posters. He moved to Birmingham, in England, where he opened a photographic studio. He became famous for his portraits of actresses, having gone back to New York in 1866. See Ben L. Bassham, The Theatrical Photographs of Napoleon Sarony, The Kent State University Press, 1978.
of the Victorian age”, as the Farnese Hercules. “Stage props” that were used in theatrical photos were in fact used also in “usual” (non theatrical) photos.

In a few photos from a private collection one can see a little boy in 18th century attire (Count Nicolò Mocenigo) standing in front of a rocky studio backdrop and Countess Matilde Papadopoli in front of a vaguely Gothic window, again a studio backdrop. The Gothic background is no different from that used in history paintings, such as those by Hayez* or Molmenti*.

The fact that tableaux vivants were sometimes photographed takes us back to the gist of the matter: these representations of a work of art were, as I mentioned at the beginning, ephemeral, in that they lasted only seconds. We are then in the condition of discussing tableaux vivants on the basis of the actual painting which was reproduced (that is only on the basis of their source); or we can discuss them on the basis of ekphrasis, that is the verbal description of the representation (the tableau) of a representation (the painting), or on the basis of the photographs (that is the visual representation (photo) of a representation (tableau) of a representation (painting)). There is no way to discuss the “real thing”, unless we go to Laguna Beach in August and see the tableaux vivants that are produced there every summer. 62

In spite of their actual “non existence”, we can “see” them, especially when described wonderfully by such great writers as Edith Wharton. We can see them through our imagination, not only by linking them to a society that had a strong family life – and no movies and no television – and a taste for the theatre, but that also had a good visual culture. We should imagine them in the way Wharton suggested:

“Tableaux vivants depend for their effect not only on the happy disposal of light and the delusive interposition of layers of gauze, but on a corresponding adjustment of the mental vision. To unfurnished minds they remain, in spite of every enhancement of art, only a superior kind of waxworks; but to the responsive fancy they may give magic glimpses of the boundary world between fact and imagination.”

61 See Mamoli Zorzi, The Pastimes, cit.
62 McCullough, op. cit., p. 145.
TABLEAUX VIVANTS IN ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER’S TIME

We can only think of 19th century tableaux in these terms, to try and catch the "magic glimpses of the boundary world between fact and imagination" that another great American writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, caught in his works, and in his representation of tableaux vivants in his novel *The Blithedale Romance*.

ABSTRACT
This essay discusses the characteristics of tableaux vivants, a form of home and theatrical entertainment, as staged in the USA and in Europe. The bourgeois 19th century developed a form of dramatic representation that was made popular by Goethe and his *Elective Affinities*. In the USA it developed in two directions, the home and homely tableaux, often represented at charities, and the tableaux staged in the theatre to present naked women (pornographic literature also developed from tableaux). Tableaux representing paintings are interesting signs of which painters and paintings were popular at the time, as instant recognition of the subject represented was essential. This essay is part of a more extended work-in-progress.

KEY WORDS
Tableaux vivants. Paintings. America.