

Allegory, Technology, and History: Howard Pyle's Illustrations in Wisconsin

Heather Campbell Coyle

The Girl at the Garden Gate



beautiful woman glides through a wooden gate (plate 1). Her eyes are closed and she seems to float rather than walk on the uneven ground. Light falls across her bare shoulders and highlights the rich floral pattern on her gown. Nearly lost in the sun-dappled foliage above her head spring the tips of small, feathered wings; she is not an earthly creature. Beyond the open gate, a hooded figure in a red robe crouches as he plays a pipe. Impelled by the music, the winged woman drifts from light into darkness, red hair flowing behind her.

This somnambulant stunner is the subject of an oil painting by American illustrator Howard Pyle. Produced at the height of Pyle's career, the picture was one of four colored plates that accompanied his text "The Travels of the Soul" in the December issue of *The Century Magazine* for 1902. A little more than a year later, the painting was hanging at the Kellogg Public Library in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Encountered alone, the jewel-toned canvas with its alluring, allegorical subject might seem an odd decoration for a public library. The picture's literary role begins to resolve only when the four paintings for "The Travels of the Soul" are seen together, ideally with the text that Pyle composed to accompany them.

In 1903, when A. Weston Kimball approached Pyle in hopes of purchasing one of the paintings, the illustrator refused to sell one alone. He wished the group to remain together to better represent the story.¹ A famous illustrator and author,