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Dating Miss Maude Adams, as “L’Aiglon”

Leslie Anne Anderson, Utah Museum of Fine Arts, University of Utah

On October 22, 1900, Edmond Rostand’s play *L’Aiglon* (1900) opened at the Knickerbocker Theater in New York with famed stage actress Maude Adams (1872–1953) in the lead role as Napoleon Bonaparte’s son, the Duke of Reichstadt (1811–1832).¹ American artist John White Alexander (1856–1915) commemorated her gender-bending performance in a full-length depiction (fig. 1), one of several theatrical portraits painted over the course of his career.² *Miss Maude Adams, as “L’Aiglon”* is now held in a collection that I oversee at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, University of Utah.

Previously, scholars believed that the artist executed the painting following the supposed first meeting of Adams and Alexander at Alexander’s summer residence at Onteora, New York, in 1905, several years after the Broadway debut of the play.³ However, while organizing the 2017 permanent collection reinstallation at the museum, *Mythmaking and Truth-Telling: American and Regional Art*, I made discoveries in the artist’s papers at the Archives of American Art that allow us to precisely date *Miss Maude Adams, as “L’Aiglon”* and to better contextualize the painting within the intellectual milieu of its creation. Between submission and publication of this article, Mary Anne Goley’s long-awaited book devoted to Alexander hit the shelves. In *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age* (2018), Goley mentions the painting in question and confirms a spring 1901 date of completion.⁴ However, the portrait is neither illustrated nor investigated in the concise biography. This *Panorama* contribution, therefore, presents object-based research that complements and suggests additional lines of inquiry to expand understanding of *Miss Maude Adams, as “L’Aiglon”* and related portraits of Adams executed by Alexander.



Fig. 1. John White Alexander, *Miss Maude Adams as “L’Aiglon,”* 1900–1. Oil on canvas, 71 13/16 x 36 1/8 in. Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City

Photographs located within the trove of documents that comprise Alexander’s papers establish the latest possible creation date, or *terminus ante quem*, for the portrait. The images (figs. 2, 3) show him posed in a well-appointed studio.⁵ Recent compositions are seen leaning against the walls and resting on easels. Within the same archival collection is a relevant news clipping. Alexander’s hometown daily the *Pittsburg Bulletin* printed one of the studio photographs on February 16, 1901. Underneath the image, a caption reads: “an interesting atelier and its occupant—Mr. John W. Alexander, and his new studio [on] East Sixty-Third Street, New York. Portraits shown include that of Col. E. J. Allen, of this city, and of Miss Maude Adams, in ‘L’Aiglon.’”⁶ Indeed, the published photograph offers evidence that Alexander painted and framed—presumably in his new workspace—the portrait of Adams by the beginning of 1901. Recently, the museum examined *Miss Maude Adams, as “L’Aiglon”* with short-wave infrared imaging, which revealed the gestural brushwork visible in the photograph was later tamed. Alexander may also have reworked the lower portion of the canvas after this photograph of the studio was taken.



Figs. 2, 3. Photographer unknown, John White Alexander in his studio, New York City, c. 1900. Black and white prints. John White Alexander Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

An inventory of paintings in the artist’s papers provides further documentation of *Miss Maude Adams, as “L’Aiglon”* and indicates an early promotional function of the work. A note states that the portrait was “painted for reproduction in [the] album issued by R. H. Russell.”⁷ Although the art publisher released a pictorial souvenir of *L’Aiglon* in 1901, the inscription probably refers to a 1902 calendar illustrated with theatrical portraits of the actress. An advertisement for the “Maude Adams Calendar” in the December 1901 issue of *New England Stationer and Printer* boasted “beautiful pictures of Miss Maude Adams in character, including the celebrated painting of ‘L’Aiglon’ by John W. Alexander.”⁸ As per *Town & Country*, the handsome calendar, distributed as a gift by theater producer Charles Frohman to his patrons, “consist[s] of a cover and six sheets, each containing a large portrait of Miss Maude Adams in different poses.”⁹

The earliest possible date, or *terminus post quem*, of the work may be determined based on the nearly concurrent events of Alexander’s arrival in New York and Adams’s debut in the play. The *New York Mail and Express*, *New York World*, and *Philadelphia Press* announced that he returned from Europe on October 7, 1900, with fellow artists Anders Zorn and T. Alexander Harrison, to attend the *Fifth Annual Exhibition* at the Carnegie Institute (November 1, 1900, to January 1, 1901) in Pittsburgh.¹⁰ Following the artist’s

advisory role in the contemporary exhibition, his immediate plan in the United States was to spend the winter in his recently constructed New York studio.¹¹ Later that month, Adams took to the stage as *L'Aiglon*, the "eaglet," a nickname for the exiled son of the fallen French emperor and Archduchess Marie Louise of Austria. And, by November 11 of that year, Alexander had become ensconced in the new space. A message penned on letterhead with the studio's address—123 East Sixty-Third Street—bears a postmark stamped in New York City.¹²

How does the proposed date of creation assist art historians in better understanding *Miss Maude Adams, as "L'Aiglon"*? Coinciding with Alexander's return, Adams's opening night performance received the attention of the *New York Times*. Of the actress's convincing guise, the journalist wrote:

She looks the scion of the Bonaparte-Hapsburg union to the life. One never thinks of her as a woman from the beginning of the play to its sad last scene. In every pictorial and superficial attribute her portrayal is flawless. Not a gesture or a pose is out of place or awkward. She wears her garments as if used to them all her life. The mask is a fine study, and the play of features is surprisingly varied and effective, while the young artist's integrity of purpose, her dramatic aptitude, and sympathy shine through all the performance, and her own uncommon personal charm is continuously exerted.¹³

The ambiguity of a woman cast in a male role no doubt intrigued Alexander too, as his approach to portraiture in the 1890s had been guided largely by the sitter's gender.¹⁴ Alexander conveys Adams's commitment to craft in the portrait. She is outfitted in a topcoat with rose boutonniere and a riding stick; and she is posed in profile, her sleek silhouette set against the stark stage. Alexander's sojourn in Paris, where he spent most of the decade prior, may have informed these decisions. As is well known, writings on androgyny, such as Honoré de Balzac's *Séraphîta* (1835) and Joséphin Péladan's *The Androgyne* and *The Gynander* (both 1891), influenced Symbolist artists, who sought to reconcile the tensions between the two sexes with a third gender.¹⁵ The most precise, yet hitherto overlooked, connection might be established between Alexander's *Miss Maude Adams, as "L'Aiglon"* and *The Gynander*, Péladan's musings on masculinized women. As art historian Patricia Matthews has astutely observed:

[To Symbolists,] woman's masculine side, if accorded at all, was generally seen as a perversion of the feminine. Péladan spelled out the impossibility of a female androgyne very directly in his book, *The Gynander* (defined as a form of degenerate femme fatale), published in 1891: "The androgyne . . . is the virginal adolescent male, still somewhat feminine, while the gynander can only be the woman who strives for male characteristics, the sexual usurper: the feminine aping the masculine!"¹⁶

It is unlikely that Alexander shared these negative views on a female androgyne. However, we know the artist was familiar with the ideas of the French critic and their visual manifestations. Péladan organized the Salons de la Rose+Croix (1892–97), which featured works by artists aligned with the Rose+Croix order's goals on topics such as gender and sexuality, and documentation proves that Alexander attended its inaugural exhibition.¹⁷ Although it is not the focus of the present article, Alexander's *Miss Maude Adams, as*

“*L’Aiglon*” merits further exploration through the lens of gender studies and the artist’s frame of reference during the period of its execution.

Now that this information has come to light, it is possible to draw an accurate timeline of the relationship between Alexander and Adams, as it relates to their collaborations on canvas. They made each other’s acquaintance upon Alexander’s October 1900 arrival in New York, where he would establish permanent residency after a decade of dividing his time between France and the United States. Alexander then painted *Miss Maude Adams*, as “*L’Aiglon*,” the first of at least three portraits.¹⁸ A prelude to their future partnership, the technique employed in *Miss Maude Adams*, as “*L’Aiglon*” relied on a support of thickly woven linen fabric (the “Alexander toile”), which absorbed the artist’s diluted pigment (à la Whistler) and produced a spatial effect they explored subsequently in the playhouse.

A six-article series in *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *The One I Knew Least of All* (1926) chronicled Adams’s career and reflected on her lengthy collaboration with the Alexanders.¹⁹ It is here that Adams’s own language—partially in a third-person point of view—may have obfuscated earlier scholarly attempts to date her initial meeting of Alexander and his wife Elizabeth (1866–1947):

When Peter Pan first blew over her horizon and called for human habiliments, the one I knew least found herself in a dilemma. She was mooning out of her window one June morning; it was very early; the morning star seemed to point directly to a cottage on a little hill, one of the “Hills of the Sky.” She had heard that the Alexanders were spending the summer there, and it seemed probable that there was the answer to her problem; if only John Alexander would help! The great painter loved the theater, but he was an extremely busy man; he was on all sorts of committees, not only those related to his own profession; he was interested in everything civic and philanthropic. But only a busy man knows how to manage time, so the one I knew least was emboldened. Mr. Alexander not only helped her in the costuming of *Peter Pan*, but from that day until his death gave his great knowledge and enthusiasm to every plan that was produced by her company; she had not dreamed there could be such wholehearted help in the world as John Alexander and Elizabeth Alexander gave.²⁰

What Adams describes, however, is a renewed acquaintance and the beginning of a sustained working relationship over the course of a decade. Alexander and Adams partnered on set and lighting designs, and Elizabeth created costumes designed by her husband for



Fig. 4. John White Alexander, *Miss Maude Adams as “Peter Pan,”* 1905. Oil on canvas, 70 1/2 x 36 3/4 in. State of Utah Alice Merrill Horne Art Collection, Salt Lake City

Adams's performances.²¹ On February 26, 1911, the *New York Times* celebrated Alexander's innovative and efficient methods for theatrical scenery that filtered light through gauze to create an illusion of depth.²²



Fig. 5. *Portrait of Miss Maude Adams*, 1911–12, illustrated in Christian Brinton, "International Art at Pittsburgh" *International Studio*, 46, no.184 (June 1912): 96

In 1905, Alexander painted Adams as the title character in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (written in 1904; first performed by Adams in 1905). *Miss Maude Adams, as "Peter Pan"* (fig. 4), now held in Utah's state art collection, shows the character in flight. The flatness of the composition has been attributed to Alexander's absorption of the Art Nouveau aesthetic;²³ however, it is instructive to note that the artist's papers record the oil as a "poster," which was displayed at the Empire Theater in 1905–6.²⁴ The decorative form of the painting therefore corresponds with its advertising function, as in *Miss Maude Adams, as "L'Aiglon."* And, because Adams is here in the guise of a prepubescent boy, gender is also a consideration in this under-researched work. In fact, according to Péladan's views, it represents an antithetical (male) androgyny to that depicted in *Miss Maude Adams, as "L'Aiglon."* Another work titled *Portrait of Miss Maude Adams* (fig. 5) was created for display in the Empire Theater's lobby in 1911–12 and exhibited in the Sixteenth Annual Exhibition at the Carnegie Institute.²⁵ It has alternatively been described as the "first oil portrait of Miss Adams not in character" and as a depiction of Maggie Wylie in Barrie's *What Every Woman Knows* (1908).²⁶

Alexander's death in 1915 ended their work together on canvas and on stage. When the Carnegie Institute organized the *John White Alexander Memorial Exhibition* in 1916, the actress lent *Miss Maude Adams, as "L'Aiglon"* in memory of Alexander. The striking oil hung in the show as the earliest visual record of their rapport.²⁷ Alexander's portraits *Miss Maude Adams, as "L'Aiglon,"* *Miss Maude Adams, as "Peter Pan,"* and *Portrait of Miss Maude Adams* remained in the actress's possession until 1933, when she donated her collection to the Salt Lake Art Center (called the "Art Barn") in her hometown. The gift received attention in local press, with descriptions of Alexander's paintings as well as another portrait in oil of Maude Adams as Peter Pan by Sigismund de Ivanowski (1875–1944) and a bronze mask by Rudolph P. Evans (1878–1960).²⁸

The Alexander portraits fell into obscurity until their "rediscovery" by former Utah Museum of Fine Arts collections research curator Will South in the early 1990s.²⁹ In 1996, South facilitated the purchase and transfer of *Miss Maude Adams, as "L'Aiglon"* to the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, where the oil would provide fertile ground for curatorial research two decades later. Positioning this portrait within the climate of its creation prompted new interdisciplinary interpretations within the reinstalled museum galleries.

Notes

- ¹ "Maude Adams as the Stricken Eaglet," *New York Times*, October 23, 1900, 6. Louis N. Parker translated the play into English, and it opened at the Knickerbocker Theater. The performance originated at Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt in Paris.
- ² Alexander's theatrical portraits include *Joseph Jefferson, as "Bob Acres" (1883–84)*, *John Gilbert, as "Sir Peter Teazle" (1886)*, *Annie Russell, as "Lady Vavir" in Broken Hearts (c. 1885)*, and a sketch of Tomasso Salvini. Sarah J. Moore, "John White Alexander (1856–1915): In Search of the Decorative (Volumes I and II)," (PhD diss., The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 1992), 67–71, 85.
- ³ A monographic dissertation and collections guides published by the Utah Museum of Fine Arts are among the sources that have dated the oil to the middle of the decade. Moore, "John White Alexander (1856–1915), 349; Will South, *The Utah Museum of Fine Arts: Selected Works* (Salt Lake City: Utah Museum of Fine Arts, 1997), 177. The vague language of Adams's reminiscences may be the reason for this assumption. Phyllis Robbins, *Maude Adams: An Intimate Portrait* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1956), 97. The following note suggests that Elizabeth Alexander misremembered an 1895 meeting with Adams. Mary Anne Goley, *John White Alexander: An American Artist in the Gilded Age* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2018), 238n8.
- ⁴ Goley, *John White Alexander*, 113.
- ⁵ Studio, New York City, c. 1898–1915, box 5, folder 31, John White Alexander Papers 1875–1968, bulk 1870–1915, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, (hereafter cited as Alexander Papers). Another two photographs show Alexander and his son, James Waddell Alexander II (1888–1971), next to the portrait. Photographer unknown, c. 1890–1909, box 5, folder 18, Alexander Papers.
- ⁶ "An Interesting Atelier and Its Occupant," *Pittsburg Bulletin*, February 16, 1901; also located in Scrapbook 1900–4, box 18, folder 1, Alexander Papers. The author of the caption identified portraits of the two sitters with personal relationships to Alexander, Adams, and Col. E. J. Allen, the artist's earliest benefactor.
- ⁷ "An Interesting Atelier and Its Occupant," *Pittsburg Bulletin*, February 16, 1901; also located in Scrapbook 1900–4, box 18, folder 1, Alexander Papers. The author of the caption identified portraits of the two sitters with personal relationships to Alexander, Adams, and Col. E. J. Allen, the artist's earliest benefactor.
- ⁸ *New England Stationer and Printer* 15 (December 1901): 38.
- ⁹ *Town & Country* 56, no. 42 (December 28, 1901): 27.
- ¹⁰ A review of the ship manifest for SS *La Touraine*, which arrived on October 7, 1900, did not provide evidence of the crossing of the three artists. However, several news articles stated that they were passengers on this voyage. "John W. Alexander Returns: The Portrait Painter, Home from Scotland, Will Spend Winter Here," *New York Mail and Express*, October 8, 1900; "Two Liners Arrive with Many Notables. Four Artists on La Touraine, One, J. W. Alexander, with a Gold Medal," *New York World*, October 8, 1900; "Art Judges Arrive," *Philadelphia Press*, October 8, 1900; Scrapbook 1900–4, box 18, folder 1, Alexander Papers. *New York Tribune* added J. Wells Champney to the traveling cohort. "Artists on La Touraine. J. W. Alexander Talks of the Art Exhibit of the Exhibition," *New York Tribune*, October 8, 1900.
- ¹¹ "John W. Alexander Returns: The Portrait Painter, Home from Scotland, Will Spend Winter Here"; Scrapbook 1900–4, box 18, folder 1, Alexander Papers.
- ¹² John White Alexander, November 11, 1900, Correspondence, 1898–1900, box 1, folder 47, Alexander Papers.
- ¹³ "Maude Adams as the Stricken Eaglet," *New York Times*, October 23, 1900, 6.
- ¹⁴ According to Moore, "decorative vitality and the willingness to experiment with surface design would characterize Alexander's portraits of women as distinct from the portraits of men throughout the decade. This gender distinction—that is, the overtly decorative treatment of female figures which emphasized surface design at the expense of realistic details in contrast to paintings of men which emphasized character and physical likeness with only incidental decorative effect—was not an

accidental one and, in fact, became dominant in Alexander's work in the 1890s." Moore, "John White Alexander (1856–1915)," 75–76.

¹⁵ See Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 137–40.

¹⁶ Patricia Matthews, *Passionate Discontent: Creativity, Gender, and French Symbolist Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999) 115–16.

¹⁷ Goley, *John White Alexander*, 53. Goley mentions Alexander's visit to the exhibition, but does not connect Péladan's writings with the artist's paintings.

¹⁸ Goley lists portraits of Adams in roles in the following plays: *L'Aiglon*, *Peter Pan*, *The Jesters*, *What Every Woman Knows*. The location of the painting of Adams as Chicot in *The Jesters* is not provided, and the location of the portrait of Adams as Maggie in *What Every Woman Knows* is unknown. Additionally, the latter may be the same painting as the 1911–12 portrait discussed in Goley (187, 245n67). Goley, *John White Alexander*, 113, 145, 153, 178, 187, 245n67.

¹⁹ This series was published in the March, April, May, June, July, and October issues of the magazine. Maude Adams, "The One I Knew Least of All," *Ladies' Home Journal* 43, nos. 3–7, 10 (March, April, May, June, July, October 1926).

²⁰ Adams, "The One I Knew Least of All," *Ladies' Home Journal* 43, no. 10 (October 1926): 23.

²¹ "Mrs. J. Alexander, Arts Patron, Dead," *New York Times*, January 16, 1947, 25.

²² "John W. Alexander Invents New Stage Scenery," *New York Times*, February 26, 1911, SM11.

²³ Will South, *Making & Breaking Tradition: A History of the Salt Lake Art Center* (Salt Lake City: Salt Lake Art Center, 1991), 9.

²⁴ List of Paintings, c. 1893–43, box 2, folder 12, Alexander Papers.

²⁵ The painting was reproduced in Christian Brinton's essay in the *International Studio* and in several newspapers. Christian Brinton, "International Art at Pittsburgh" *International Studio* 46, no. 184 (June 1912): 96.

²⁶ All contemporaneous descriptions refer to the 1911–12 portrait as one of the actress as herself. Later mentions in the artist's inventory of paintings, which was prepared posthumously by the artist's widow, and in the April 1926 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*, uphold this title. However, confusion appears to set in when Adams donated her paintings to the Art Barn. The *Salt Lake Tribune* describes Adams as wearing the robes of Portia, while *Deseret News* refers to the same portrait differently. As "the heroine of Sir James Barrie's *What Every Woman Knows*," Adams wears "a long green dress" in "a soft rightily-lighted" portrait. Not only does this description match the oft-illustrated painting, but the artist's inventory provides the current location as the "Salt Lake City Art Museum." Both South and Moore repeat the erroneous information provided in the *Deseret News* article, that the 1911–12 portrait relates to Adams's role in *What Every Woman Knows*. Goley's recent study lists two separate works but states that the current location of the portrait of Adams as "Maggie" in *What Every Woman Knows* is unknown, and she does not provide a location for the 1911–12 portrait of Adams as herself. I believe that the two works are the same, and that the original title and conception of the painting is that described in 1912 news articles. "The Alexander Portrait of Maude Adams," *The Green Book Magazine* 13, no. 6 (December 1912): 968; "Alexander's Portrait of Miss Maude Adams," *New York Star*, September 14, 1912; Helen W. Henderson "The Pittsburgh Academy: The Sixteenth Annual Exhibition of International Painting," *Arts & Decoration* 2, no. 8 (June 1912): 293, 307; Adams, "The One I Knew Least of All," *Ladies' Home Journal* 43, no. 4 (April 1926): 9; List of Paintings, c. 1893–43, box 2, folder 12, Alexander Papers; "Maude Adams Presents Art Barn with Portraits," *Salt Lake Tribune*, November 18, 1933; "Maude Adams Presents Art Barn with Valuable Collection," *Deseret News*, November 17, 1933; Moore, "John White Alexander (1856–1915)," 348–49, fig. 114; South, *Making & Breaking Tradition*, 9; Goley *John White Alexander*, 178, 187.

²⁷ The memorial catalogue, which was not consulted in previous examinations of the painting, lists the painting under the heading "Portraits Painted Between October 1901 and 1902." However, this information is off by one year. *Catalogue of Paintings. John White Alexander Memorial Exhibition, March MCMXVI* (Pittsburgh: Department of Fine Arts, Carnegie Institute), 45–46.

²⁸ A bronze bust is described and illustrated in Salt Lake City newspapers; however, a sculptor's name was not provided. According to the *Deseret News*, "no information was available on the bronze which is a dynamic rendering of her head." "Maude Adams Presents Art Barn with Valuable Collection," *Deseret News*, November 17, 1933; "Maude Adams Presents Art Barn with Portraits," *Salt Lake Tribune*, November 18, 1933. The bronze is perhaps the earlier 1902 iteration of Evans's *Mask of Maude Adams*, which he modeled again in 1906. David B. Dearinger states, "Adams initially sat for Evans in New York in 1902, when she was at the height of her career. He gave the actress the bust that resulted. For some unknown reason, she named that piece *Betsy*; it is now unlocated." David B. Dearinger, ed., *Paintings and Sculpture at the National Academy of Design, Vol. 1: 1826–1925* (Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills Press, 2004), 187–88.

²⁹ UMFA1996.19.1 object file, Utah Museum of Fine Arts.