

## **M.LiT Tour by Miles Barnett**

Tour Title: Tour #1

### **Description:**

**Location:** American and American Indian Galleries

### **Introduction:**

Welcome to the VMFA. My name is Miles Barnett. I am participating in the VMFA's Museum Leader in Training Program. Tonight I will be leading you on a tour exploring how clothing and adornment are a reflection of beauty and vanity in art. The idea of beauty and vanity is not unique to one society, but is throughout the world in every culture. Since the Native Americans beauty and vanity have been a subject of art in America illustrated through personal adornment.

As a reminder, we may not touch or get too near the works of art.

Now follow me and we will see how these social trends have influenced art in America since the 19th century.

### **OBJECT 1:**

Object Number: 2005.73

Present Location: American Galleries

Artist: Story, William Wetmore

Culture: American

Title: Cleopatra

Period: 19th century

Medium: white marble

Date: 1865

Credit Line: Museum Purchase, The J. Harwood and Louise B. Cochrane Fund for American Art

The first stop on our tour is in 19th century American Art. This sculpture is “Cleopatra” sculpted by William Wetmore Story in 1865. Made of white marble, Story sculpted Cleopatra at the height of the 19th century American taste for neo-classical sculpture.

“Cleopatra” sits on a lion’s leg throne, which symbolizes power. Head in hand, leaning back in her chair, she appears to be in deep thought, possibly contemplating suicide. Her tunic gown reminds one of classical Greek dress.

The soft folds of the fabric drape over her body revealing its form underneath. The gaping neckline revealing her chest is Greek or Roman device and used to symbolize the Amazon female warriors.

The Egyptian queen wears Egyptian jewelry and a pharaoh’s headdress decorated with a cobra, which protects her and the land she rules.

Story was especially successful in portraying Cleopatra’s face and expression, full of gloom and heavy thoughts. The surface of the marble deceives the viewer’s eyes by appearing soft, cushiony, flowing, and fleshy. The sculptor’s treatment of the marble is masterful.

In this work Story shows us a beautiful ruler adorned with jewels that symbolize wealth and power. Do you think Cleopatra is an example of ideal beauty? WAIT

Do you think beauty and power are connected in this sculpture? WAIT

Story’s “Cleopatra” is one of the best-known American sculptures.

**TRANSITION:** Let’s move on to another work that highlights the beauty and vanity of another strong and powerful woman.

**OBJECT 2:**

Object Number: 92.152

Present Location: American Galleries

Artist: Sargent, John Singer

Culture: American

Title: Mrs. Albert Vickers

Period: 19th century

Medium: oil on canvas

Date: 1884

Credit Line: Museum Purchase, The Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund

John Singer Sargent was a late 19th and early 20th century American painter. Famous for his full length portraits, Sargent became the leading society portrait painter. His style rejects the academic portrait style of the past with its direct composition.

In this portrait, Mrs. Albert Vickers, of a newly wealthy family of British manufacturers living in Sussex England, appears to be thoroughly at home with tradition, yet somewhat elusive and mysterious. She is regal and grand.

Looking out from a darkened passage of her home, dressed for an evening in the country, Mrs. Vickers wears a fashionable custom-made gray dress with a bustle and stiff bodice. The lace up front and sober color are reminiscent of the past, just as her pose reminds us of centuries of full length portraits.

Mrs. Vickers represents the new type of client that emerged in the 19th century. Her ivory skin glows warm contrasted against the white trim of her sleeves. She holds a large Magnolia flower, which symbolizes the love of nature and beauty.

Small glints of light flash from her diamond jewelry on her left hand, on her bodice, at her neckline and in her hair. Her jewelry is a form of displayed wealth and riches, as well as personal adornment.

Why do you think she wanted Sargent to paint her portrait? WAIT Newly rich patrons wanted to show themselves in their best light. Portraits like this indulge in the vanity that was so common at this time.

**TRANSITION:** Let's take a walk to the Native American Gallery and see an example of Native dress from roughly the same time in the 19th Century.

**OBJECT 3:**

This three-hide dress is an example of Native American fashion of the mid to late 19th century. Common among the Cheyenne Native Americans, girls and women made these garments of deerskin and adorned them with seed and brass beads, fringes and quills. Of the oldest form of adornment, beads represent wealth and power as well as personal beauty. Often, in native cultures adornment symbolizes wealth and stature or position in a society. Beads can be a form of stored wealth used as a dowry for a young woman. Are there any examples of adornment in our society that parallel that of the Native Americans? WAIT What are the symbols of beauty and wealth on our clothes? WAIT

**CONCLUSION:**

In the three works we have viewed tonight, we have seen how personal adornment connects to the theme.

Each of the three works illustrates how an artist or a culture used personal adornment to communicate beauty and vanity.

Personal adornment, like jewelry, can symbolize power, wealth, position in society, protection, membership in a group, and beliefs.

Not only do we adorn ourselves for beauty, but we do it for vanity, to show off or communicate who we are.

Thank you so much for joining me this evening on this tour. Please join another M.Lit participant on a tour before you leave.