

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Albert Beck Wenzell
(Detroit 1864 – 1917 New Jersey)

An Afternoon in Hyde Park, London

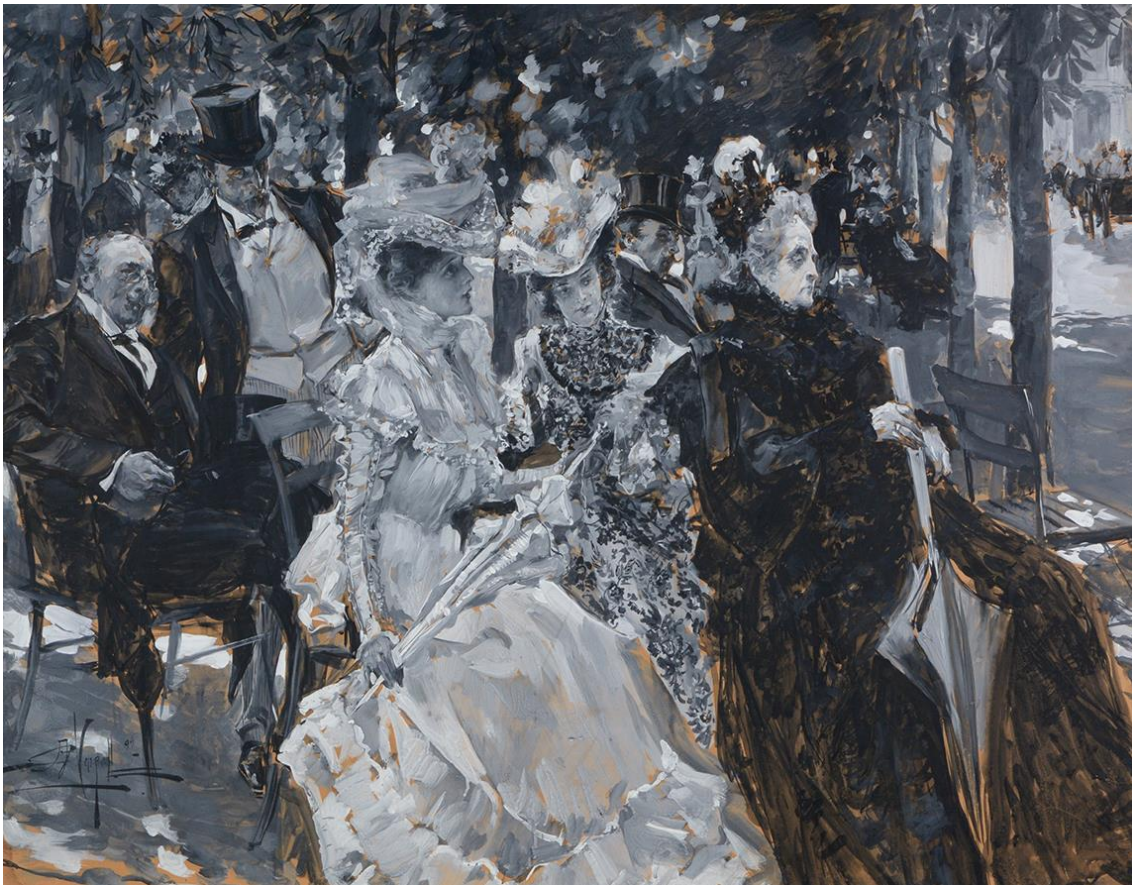
Signed and dated (lower left): *A. Wenzell 99*
Gouache, watercolour and oil on paper, laid down
86.36 x 110.49 cm. (34 x 43 1/2 in.)

Provenance:

With Maxwell Galleries, San Francisco, California (label verso, upper right corner);
Private collection, Europe.

Literature:

Engraved for *Collier's Weekly*, vol. 24, no. 4, publ. P. F. Collier and Son, New York, 28
October 1899.



The present work is an elegant example of Albert Beck Wenzell's genre scenes, which successfully capture the feel of day-to-day life during the Belle Époque. The central group of figures are shown seated in Hyde Park, London, looking out onto a road that is populated by horse-drawn carriages just visible in the upper right corner. The sophisticated clothing donned by the men and women alike speaks to their social standing; indeed, the lady sat furthest to the right wearing a long black gown has been compared to Queen Victoria on the basis of physiological similarities.

Wenzell's exclusive use of shades of black and white paint to build up the composition, interspersed only by glimpses of the bare paper support beneath, was quite typical within his *oeuvre*. Works with comparable colouring include "*Why were you so cross to your husband at breakfast?...*" (fig. 1), in the Delaware Museum of Art, and *Matchmaking* (fig. 2), from the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, which was executed in 1899, the same year as the present painting. Though Wenzell likely opted for this colour palette so frequently on account of his occupation as an illustrator (who liked to imagine his sketches in print), the monochrome tones nonetheless heighten the romanticism of each scene.



Fig. 1, Albert Beck Wenzell, "*Why were you so cross to your husband at breakfast?...*", 1892, gouache and watercolour on paper, 71 x 56 cm Delaware Art Museum



Fig. 2, Albert Beck Wenzell, *Matchmaking*, 1899, gouache and watercolour on paper, 92 x 77.5 cm, Achenbach Foundation, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Wenzell was born in Detroit, Michigan, where his early interest in art was encouraged by his prosperous family. His parents funded a seven year European course of study, with Wenzell beginning his formal art education in Munich before enrolling at the Académie Julian, Paris, where he trained under Gustave Boulanger and Jules Joseph Lefebvre. Wenzell hoped to specialise in portraiture and landscape painting and, upon graduation, was invited by his

fellow-American William Meritt Chase (1849 – 1916) to assist in assessing Chase’s students’ work. Evidently Wenzell did not take to this occupation, however, leaving the post after just three months. He was similarly disheartened when, despite his fine education, he found few patrons for portraiture in Detroit.

Wenzell thus moved to New York in search of work as a commercial illustrator, and was soon taken on by *Life* magazine. The publication’s main focus at that time was the mores and foibles of the affluent middle and upper classes. Wenzell swiftly displayed a great affinity for such subjects, depicting the lavish interiors, apparel, and general opulence of *fin de siècle* New York more convincingly than most of his competitors. His works recall, in this regard, those of the earlier German artist Adolph Menzel (1815 – 1905), who portrayed densely-peopled interior scenes, grand balls and open-air cafes in a manner that reflected the swagger and punch-drunk profligacy of the upper echelons of society during that time. Wenzell’s pictures were sought after by the public and other magazines began to vie for his talents, including *Harper’s Monthly*, *Scribner’s*, *Truth*, *Metropolitan*, *Collier’s Weekly* (fig. 3), and *The Saturday Evening Post*, as well as publications in continental Europe, including the prestigious German satirical magazine *Die Fliegende Blätter*.



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Wenzell’s career truly took off in his thirties: two large volumes of his illustrations were published by *Collier's: The Passing Show* and *Vanity Fair* in 1896 and 1900 respectively. He was awarded medals in the 1901 Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, and in 1904 at the Louisiana Purchase Centennial Exposition in St. Louis. He became one of the founding members of the Society of Illustrators in 1901, was elected its president the following year,

and became a member of the Mural Painter's Association, having painted a celebrated large mural in 1903 for the New Amsterdam Theatre. Wenzell accompanied his weekly illustrations for magazines and journals with similar work for novels, foremost among them being Edith Wharton's best-selling *The House of Mirth* (1905), which had first been serialized that year to great acclaim in *Scribner's Magazine*. By the end of his career, Wenzell's iconic female figures and heroines came to be called 'Wenzell's Girls', instantly recognisable for their fashionable attire, glamour and coquettish air.