

# Blashfield's Forbidden Garden

By Dennis Raverty

Edwin Howland Blashfield's magnificent *Angel with Flaming Sword*, now on the rear wall in the nave of the Episcopal Church of the Ascension in New York City, is a masterpiece of evocative mystery. Blashfield had been trained in the atelier of French academic painter Jean-Léon Gérôme, and the picture was probably painted in France. It was first exhibited at the annual Salon of the Académie de Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1891 and was favorably reviewed by the press. American painters were not often accepted into the extremely competitive Salon and so it was a rare honor for a relatively young artist from the United States like Blashfield to gain entry to this prestigious and exclusive exhibition at the very epicenter of the European art world.

The large, dramatic painting depicts the imposing six-foot-tall figure of the angel placed by God at the gates of Paradise to forever keep out Adam and Eve and their progeny after the Fall, preventing them from eating the fruit of the Tree of Life and thus living forever. Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, identifies the angel as Saint Michael the archangel.

The scene is enveloped in darkness, a tiny bit of the deepening twilight sky just barely visible through the trees above the angel's head; the sun has already set, and soon it will be night. The figure of the angel is primarily lit from below by the glow of the white-hot steel of his enormous sword. My father was an artisan working in ornamental iron, making railings, gates, and balconies, and I recognize the way the iron heats up and changes color in the forge, turning first red, then white, just as in Blashfield's painting, obviously done from careful study of the lighting effects observable in any blacksmith's shop from the period.

The angel's face in Blashfield's painting is steadfast and determined, despite his youth and almost feminine beauty. His thick flowing shoulder-length hair is reminiscent of the women in Victorian Pre-Raphaelite paintings from midcentury. This impression of androgyny is also hinted at in the fulsome, soft chest of the figure that could almost be the budding breasts of an adolescent girl. Despite its youth, clear blue eyes, and delicate feminine qualities, the figure is unyielding, a formidable obstacle to anyone trying to re-enter, making paradise permanently and irrevocably inaccessible.

The angel's large, enfolding wings shield the androgynous creature and reach all the way to the parameters of the painting and to the ground. The coloring of the wings is particularly virtuosic, with paint applied in small



Edwin Blashfield, *Angel with Flaming Sword*, 1891

patches in a stippled manner that recalls the painterly qualities in Impressionist paintings pioneered a decade or two earlier, and the lighting effect also has echoes of the mysterious illumination in some of Rembrandt's finest works.

The painting is unique in Blashfield's oeuvre, however, in that it could be seen as belonging to an international artistic tendency at the close of the 19th century called Symbolism, of which Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon

are the most familiar French exemplars (see Delville's *Death of Orpheus*). Symbolism was in many ways the final flowering of 19th-century Romanticism — darker, more pessimistic, and with a strong literary quality, it was the quintessential *fin-de-siècle* movement. Both Post-Impressionist Paul Gauguin and his followers the Nabis, as well as that titan of monumental sculpture, Auguste Rodin, are considered within its wider orbit.

But inspired by the conservative artistic climate of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Blashfield, now returned from France, abandoned his early experiments in this symbolist vein for the tired and provincial “brown sauce” painting of the American Renaissance, a now all-but-forgotten rear-guard artistic movement taking place at the same time as the rise of modernist art movements like Symbolism, and later Fauvism and Cubism (and in New York the urban realists), but unlike those avant-garde movements, the new “Renaissance” embodied reactionary rather than radical artistic aspirations.

In 1912, by then a commercially successful mural painter in the American Renaissance style, Blashfield delivered a series of lectures at the Chicago Art Institute on the classical tradition, which summed up his ultra-conservative view of the contemporary art scene: “We in America are upon the edge of a renaissance whose importance we can hardly calculate.” But the anticipated renaissance never came. In fact, just a few months after his lectures, the Armory Show Exhibition introduced American viewers to Modern European art, which would eventually eclipse both the classicists and their archenemies, the gritty urban realists of the so-called “Ashcan School.” The next year, the First World War broke out in Europe, leading to even further American isolationism after the war.

Typical of Blashfield's later, more classical work is a painting for the Iowa State Capitol, *Westward*, executed in 1905, in which flying allegorical personifications of “civilization” and “enlightenment” clothed in Grecian garb lead pioneers in a covered wagon across the prairie. The lofty



Jean Delville, *The Death of Orpheus*, 1893

sobriety of this uncritically positive allegory of Manifest Destiny, executed in an idealized style derived from the Italian Renaissance (via the late 19th-century French Academy) seems quaint and perhaps even somewhat ludicrous to our eyes today.

The painters of the American Renaissance wanted to return to a lost past that was simply not tenable. Their work represents an escape from the confusing realities and moral ambiguities of an increasingly complex modern situation. The movement did not survive the war. Yet I can't help seeing Blashfield's early masterpiece at Church of the Ascension as an unintended allegory not only of the impossibility of a return to the Garden of Eden for our first parents, but also as a cautionary parable on the impossibility of an authentic return to the idealistic art of the Italian Renaissance or any other historical period, for late 19th- and early 20th-century artists.

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Edwin Blashfield, *Westward!* (Mural in Iowa State Capitol), 1905