

Elyse: Our next story provides a surprising insight into the decadent world of New York's high society at the turn of the 20th century. It's 1901. New York City is bustling with the excitement of a growing metropolis. For the city's elite, it was an indulgent time of lavish parties and glamorous affairs. Attracted by the promise of wealth and fame, a young starry-eyed woman arrives in the big city. But one nightmarish event changes her life forever. In full view of a crowd of theater-goers her insanely jealous husband fires three shots into the face of her former lover, killing him instantly. Her name is Evelyn Nesbit and the scandal rocks the foundations of New York's high society. Her face is seen on the front pages of newspapers across the nation. Almost 100 years later, Sarah Powell of New Jersey has a painting of a beautiful woman whose identity has remained a mystery for years. Could this be a previously unknown portrait of Evelyn Nesbit?

Sarah Powell: I inherited this painting from my mother and she inherited it from her father. It's always been a mystery to me who this woman is. I did see him walk by it one day and he looked right at it and said, "Yup. That's her. She's the one. She's the one they were fighting over."

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray, Tukufu Zuberi have come to New Jersey to take a look at Sarah's painting.

Tukufu: Wow.

Elyse: She's beautiful.

Tukufu: Sarah, what do you know about this painting?

Sarah: Well, I know it was done by a very famous illustrator named Howard Chandler Christy. It's a watercolor. He did it in 1921. That's about all I know.

Tukufu: What do you want to know?

Sarah: I want to know who the woman in the painting is. There is speculation in my family that this is Evelyn Nesbit.

Tukufu: Now why do you think this is her?

Sarah: My grandfather worked for some very wealthy families in New York including the Thaws.

Tukufu: The Thaws, known for their railroad fortune, were the family of Evelyn's husband, Harry Thaw.

Sarah: This painting may very well be something my grandfather rescued from the trash. I had taken this to a conservator not too long ago because it was damaged and it needed to be worked on, and they titled it: Unknown Woman Seated.

And I'd like to put a name to that unknown woman.

Tukufu: If this really is Evelyn Nesbit then this painting is quite a find! The Nesbit scandal was front page news for years. In 1901 at age 16, Evelyn meets Stanford White, an esteemed architect famous for his indiscretions with under-aged showgirls. Their fling lasts only a year and Evelyn then marries Harry Thaw. Both an abusive and jealous husband, Thaw forces Evelyn to confess her earlier affair with White. What happens next was so shocking that Thomas Edison's protégé filmed this dramatic reenactment... On June 25, 1906, Thaw tracks down White at the rooftop theater of Madison Square Garden and murders him in cold blood. The ensuing courtroom drama is deemed the "trial of the century". As the star witness, Evelyn's testimony gets Harry off by reason of insanity and she becomes New York's most infamous celebrity.



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Elyse: To make sure that the painting is authentic, I'm taking it to American Illustration expert, Roger Reed, Director of the Illustration House in New York City. We remove the frame to get a closer look. I asked Roger to tell me about American illustrators during Christy's time.

Roger Reed: Before TV and movies the main form of entertainment and information was publications. Because of that the illustrator became very well known. In fact, very famous and even had fan clubs and got fan mail.

Elyse: And Howard Chandler Christy was a superstar among illustrators. He became world famous for his depictions of women. His work set the styles of the day and created an idealized image of the modern American woman. So much so that she became known as the Christy Girl.

Roger: It was considered a great honor for a young woman to model for Christy and there was a real frisson between artist and model.

Elyse: So was Christy's relationship with his models more than just professional?

Roger: It's said that Christy's interest in his models went beyond the canvas.

Elyse: OK I'm dying to know. Do you think this painting is an original Christy and have you ever seen it before?

Roger: I have never seen this particular painting before. It's definitely an original watercolor, and there are many Christy-like aspects to it. The pose of the hands is typical of Christy. The angle of the hand and pose in the chair are typical. It almost looks very casual the way its just tossed off. But that's just a way that illustrators show off how casually they could paint something and yet everything is dead on. The anatomy is correct and the proportions and the special configurations are correct.

Elyse: Shows how good they are.

Roger: Exactly, and that carries over to the signature itself. He had a peculiar way a making his C's. Rather square and he crossed the H at the high level, and the letters are compressed together.

Elyse: So what do you think?

Roger: I think you got a real Christy here.

Elyse: It's authentic?

Roger: Absolutely. What's interesting about this is he spent extra time and care for their face. I think he really liked this particular model.

Elyse: So there is something special about this woman. But is she Evelyn Nesbit?

Tukufu: I'm headed to the Players Club in New York City. Remodeled by Stanford White in 1888, this private social club was a prime gathering spot for New York's elite. I'm meeting with Paula Uruburu, English professor at Hofstra University. For years Paula has studied women in art and literature at and is currently writing a biography of Evelyn Nesbit. I asked her to tell me about Evelyn's relationship with Stanford White.

Paula Uruburu: He was a connoisseur of beautiful objects including young women and among other things

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had them pose in very seductive photographs in a variety of poses, most famously on the bear-skin rug.

Tukufu: Very beautiful. I can see why she was famous.

Paula: Yeah. She was what Marilyn Monroe was to the 50's. She became an icon for the period. She was really the first supermodel and the first sex goddess of the 20th century.

Tukufu: But people really started hearing about her during the trial.

Paula: Yeah. Unfortunately for her she becomes the central figure in this trial because of the testimony she had to give to save Harry Thaw from the electric chair. She ends up getting on the stand and saying things that no woman has ever said before talking in great sort of lurid detail about how he had seduced her and how he had raped her and eventually how she became his mistress for a time.

Tukufu: I compared Paula's photos of Evelyn to our portrait. If you look at the eyes, the eyes in the photograph are much larger than those depicted in the photographs.

Paula: She's got sort of a square jaw line whereas Evelyn's is much more rounded.

Tukufu: So we can't tell anything definite from the photos. Have you ever heard of Evelyn posing for an American illustrator?

Paula: Oh certainly. Charles Gibson drew her as his Gibson girl and she became the model that everyone knew as the Eternal Question. She posed for many big illustrators of the day including Christy.

Tukufu: Christy! So she posed for him. That's great! Now when did she pose for Christy?

Paula: Well she wouldn't have posed for him at the same time as Gibson. They were friends, so that would have been between 1900 and 1904.

Tukufu: But our painting is from 1921. I wonder what happened to her after the trial. Did she continue modeling?

Paula: She had a rough time. She ran some nightclubs, she attempted suicide. She had been hooked on morphine, but I would say like the phoenix, she rose out of her own ashes every time. Eventually, she cleaned up everything. She became a grandmother and a sculptress. She died peacefully in her 80's in California.

Tukufu: OK. Is it possible that Evelyn has posed for this 1921 Christy painting?

Paula: You know just looking at this picture and taking into account the date and the fact by 1921, she was in her 30's, she wouldn't have been modeling then so I'd have to say no.

Tukufu: So if this isn't Evelyn Nesbit who is it? For a great illustrator like Christy to paint her with such care, she must have been someone special. Maybe someone who knew Christy personally can give us some clues. I've come to the Café Des Artistes in New York where Christy lived and worked. The Café is famous for the Christy murals that cover the walls. I've arranged to meet with Olga Steckler, a woman who is a former Christy model and previous resident of this hotel.

Olga Steckler: Look at those legs. I'll never have legs like that again.

Tukufu: So what was it like back then?

Olga: It was just super, super, super.

Tukufu: Really, why?

Olga: All the artists were friends and we would all gather here.

Tukufu: So Christy would hold court here?

Olga: Oh yes. This was his table. Anyone going at the bar or pass by would say hi to Christy and Nancy, his wife.

Tukufu: What was it like modeling for Christy?

Olga: It was charming, absolutely charming.

Tukufu: Now he was quite the ladies' man.

Olga: Yes. That happened between artist and model.

Tukufu: So he developed a special relationship with his models. Did he ever try anything on you?

Olga: No. He was like my daddy. I used to hug him. He was like my Santa Claus.

Tukufu: You know I have this painting here and it's a Christy from the 1920s. Do you recognize?

Olga: No, I can't. She may have been a starlet. I don't know. I can't help you with that. So sorry.

Tukufu: So I wonder if Christy had a special relationship with the woman in our painting?

Elyse: I'm going to the American Illustrators Gallery in New York City. Judy Cutler has been studying Christy and selling his work for 35 years. She knows a lot about the women in his life. If she can't tell me who this woman is I doubt anyone can.

Judy Cutler: You know those eyes. They're really captivating. I've never seen this illustration before, but the date tells me that it would have been an illustration for a magazine since its in black and white and in 1921, he was doing illustrations for McCall's Magazine, Women's Home Journal and Cosmopolitan. So I think I have an idea.

Judy: Look what I found. This is an original World War I poster.

Elyse: Oh. I think it's her. The eyes, the nose, the mouth. It's her. Who is she?

Judy: She is Nancy Christy. The wife of Howard Chandler Christy.

Elyse: His wife. It's so simple. Why didn't I think of that earlier. Wow. She's beautiful.



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Judy: She was his model from 1912 to 1921 and she was his inspiration for the WWI posters. These are the most historically significant paintings that Howard Chandler Christy did. And Nancy Palmer Christy was the model for all of these. Across the country they were printed in the millions and they were in every recruitment office throughout the United States.

Elyse: So everyone in the country would have known this woman's face. Yeah it's great because you can really say that she's responsible for shaping the image of the women of that time, and at the same time, she was the inspiration for the young men to join the U.S. military.

Judy: That's right. We could say she built the army.

Elyse: Now I know our mystery woman's true identity, but how was the painting used? According to Judy Cutler, in 1921 Christy was illustrating for popular magazines and the New York Public Library has a vast collection in their archives. Sarah's going to be so surprised.

Tukufu: Elyse and I head back to New Jersey to give Sarah the news that the woman in the painting is not Evelyn Nesbit.

Sarah: That's okay but then who is the person in the painting? Were you able to find that out?"

Elyse: She was a famous model during her time. She was a fashion icon. A lot of women looked up to her and tried to copy her style. And her name was Nancy Christy. She was his wife."

Sarah: Oh wow. I think my grandfather was wrong.

Elyse: After going through all the archives and going through hundreds of magazines at the library, we were able to find this copy of McCall's from 1922. Christy was the illustrator for a story where your painting was one of the characters.

Sarah: Oh look. There it is. Awesome. This is exactly what I was after.

Tukufu: We have something else for you. You said you wanted to put a name on this painting. We want to help you do that.

Elyse: It's a name plate.

Sarah: Very nice. Thank you. Nancy Palmer Christy is Nelly Marquis. McCall's February 1922.

Elyse: Marquis is one of the characters in this story.

Tukufu: Thank you very much for allowing us to help answering your questions.

Elyse: We've had a lot of fun.

Elyse: Howard Chandler Christy and Nancy Christy remained married for over 30 years until his death until death in 1952. His legacy as one of America's greatest illustrators lives on to this today.

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