

Writing Sample – Partial Draft Article: Amalia Kussner - Darling Artist of the Gilded Age
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When one looks at the social and industry leaders of the Gilded Age and learns of their daring exploits and fabulous balls, their lives also included the painter, Amalia Kussner. She was both a talented and bold artist who preserved their likeness in miniature portraits. For especially the women, she preserved their images in glorious and meticulously detailed paintings, usually measuring no more than 4 inches wide. At the height of her career, from the mid 1890's to early 1910, having a Kussner miniature was just as an important accessory as fine jewelry. Her subjects included the Astors, Vanderbilts and Goulds; then later extending into European Royalty and even the Czar Nicholas II and Czarina Alexandra.

Her life started simply, being born in Indiana in 1863. Her father was musically inclined, and the family business was musical instrument repairs. Most of her earlier years were spent living above her father's repair shop in Terre Haute, Indiana. There are records of her parents setting up a stage, in the 2nd floor apartment, for Kussner and her two older siblings. They would perform their own musical plays with singing and dancing. But early on, she exhibited drawing talents, and was sent to St Mary-of-the-Woods Academy, nearby Terre Haute, for art lessons. Then after high school, her family sent her to New York City, for further art lessons and to foreign languages.

By the mid-1880's, Kussner showed that she was "no demure" Victorian woman and started her own portrait business in Terre Haute. Her medium at this time, was both on ivory ovals and larger images on tiles. One of her impressive tile works was stunning and sensuous "Moon Lady" painting, done across 3 tiles. This was a fantasy image of a woman, in gossamer fabric, reclining on a crescent moon. It was originally commissioned to decorate a fireplace mantel of a relative. Her clientele started to expand beyond Indiana, to include the well-to-do from Chicago. This included the Armour family, with their well-known meatpacking business. By around 1890, her works became exclusively miniature portraits.

Through a connection with a school classmate, she traveled to New York City in 1892, and here her career had its meteoric rise. She started painting for Tiffany Studios but left in less than a year. Her reason being that *her own work* was not being showcased. This was a clear and early indicator that her goals were for individual recognition, and not just as a supporting talent. Her next bold move was to connect with Mrs. Theodore Havemeyer, a well-known arts patron, and went to her home, uninvited. Mrs. Havemeyer finally relented and viewed the miniature samples brought by Kussner. Recognizing the considerable talent, she helped Kussner garner high society clients in New York City.

At the start of her rise in popularity, and by a mistake in a Harper's Bazaar article, she became known to be 10 years younger and decided to keep that fictitious age. She maintained this ruse the rest of her life, and even lied on passports. She also wanted the press to refer to her as the "girl artist". Already by 1895, she was 32 years old, but knew that the mystique of a young girl of 22 was far more appealing. Another aspect of her mystique was being self-taught, and in some ways comparing herself to the "old masters" with an intrinsic artistic genius. And the few photos of her during this period, were never in a demure pose with hands in her lap, but with a hand on her hip and a confident gaze looking forward. Her beauty was clearly evident in these photos, with her luxurious brown hair and wide, brown eyes.

The reality of her talent was that her miniatures were good, but not always of the highest artistic quality. But her style was almost provocative for the late Victorian period, with her subjects often draped in off the shoulder fabrics with always prominent pieces of jewelry. Their hair was shown loosely pinned around their heads, with tendrils of hair further framing their faces. Those who reviewed her works, said the portraits kept the best

features of the women but gave them an almost a mythical appearance. Kussner was known to have many sittings to create a single work and practiced her art in dimly lit rooms, since she felt a minimal lighting better accented facial features. Many of the elite women had multiple portraits done, which was a clear indication that Kussner had an engaging personality and was well liked.

Kussner made another very fortuitous connection, with Minnie Paget, a “dollar heiress”, who was well connected with the social circle of Prince Edward the 7th. So, her career then made a leap over to England, and London welcomed her as much as New York did.

By 1899, either through Prince Edward the 7th or someone in his social circle, the news of Kussner’s talents reached the Russian royalty. She traveled to the Winter Palace in March of that year, first on the invitation of Czar’s uncle. Shortly after the arrival, she was literally “summoned” to the Winter Palace to paint both Czar Nicholas II and his wife, Alexandra. She was quite welcomed by this royal family, and surprisingly developed a close relationship with the shy Czarina. This visit later became the basis of an article written by Kussner, detailing an intimate portrait of the Czar’s life and times, and published later in 1906.



Moon Lady, ~1885 by Amalia Kussner