

# **Emma Mary Sargent Florence (1857–1954)**

**Lord's Wood, Frieth Road, Marlow Common, SL7 2QS**

## **The artist**

Mary Sargent was born in London in 1857, the third of eight children. They were an artistic middle-class family: her father, Henry, was a barrister and her brother, Charles, a judge. Her sister Ethel became a botanist, Walter a headmaster and Francis a sculptor. She studied at the Slade under Alfonse Legros and in Paris under Luc-Olivier Merson. She was a painter of figure subjects, mural decorations in fresco and occasional landscapes in watercolour and pastel (Wikipedia).

In 1887 she married Henry Florence, an American music student; in an unusual move for the time she kept her maiden name. They lived in Nutley, New Jersey, in a carriage house (nearby was the Enclosure district which was popular with artists and magazine editors), which later became a studio used by other local artists. Following her husband's tragic death by drowning in their pond in 1891 Florence returned to England with her two young children, Philip and Alix, in 1899. She set up home in Marlow, where she had a house built, Lord's Wood.

Three of her works are held by the Tate: *Children at Chess* (1903) – the models are probably her own children; *Suffer Little Children to Come unto Me* (1913); and the *Pentecost* sketch (1913). Her frescoes include those at the sixteenth century Old School, Oakham, formerly in Rutland, where her brother Walter was headmaster; they depict the *Morte d'Arthur* story of Gareth executed 1909–14. She also worked on frescoes of New Testament scenes in the hall at Bournville Junior School (Grade II) located in the Arts and Crafts-style model village created by the Quaker Cadbury family (C/L article, HE website).

Mary was a suffragist and a founding member of the Women's Tax Resistance League, the Artists' Suffrage league and the Suffrage Atelier which hosted exhibitions and held classes to support women artists (Bailey). Louise Jopling was also a member of these groups (see separate artist report). Mary designed and donated a banner featuring John Hampden (he had refused to pay the king's ship tax in 1635) and other banners used by the suffrage societies. Mary refused to pay her tax in 1912 and 1914 and had goods seized and sold. Lord's Wood became a refuge for suffrage campaigners needing rest and recuperation on their release from prison (Suffrage-pioneers website). She was also a pacifist and a member of the committee for the Hague Peace Congress of 1915: she felt it was a woman's prerogative to combat international militarism.

She died at the age of 97 in 1954 in Twickenham.

## **The house**

Marlow Common is in the Chiltern Hills, 2km north-west of the centre of Marlow and on the outskirts of Bovingdon Green village. The surrounding area is heavily wooded and undeveloped. The common is a Chiltern Society local nature reserve, with beeches and 100-year-old oaks, and until the twentieth century it was home to the local brick and tile industry.

Lord's Wood (Grade II) was built between 1899 and 1900. It is located to the west of the common and is accessed by a track, known as Frieth Road. Mary chose Marlow as it was already the site of an artists' colony at Monks Corner, led by the sculptor and potter Conrad Dressler and financed by Mr Hudson, the Sunlight soap tycoon. The interior was originally designed to have bare brick walls, no

doors and no plumbing; all night soil was used in the vegetable garden. The architect was Granville Streatfield; he built the 'Queen Anne/Lutyens style' house using local bricks and Westmorland roofing slates, Mary supervising all phases of the building. Mary lived there until 1940 when she passed it on to her daughter Alix and son-in-law James Strachey. The interior bore her stamp, which included a fresco in between the Italianate arches of the hall which depicted three blind men from a story by Maeterlinck (*Country Life*). At the back of the house is the large studio (today used by Messums as an art gallery) which is where she prepared the sketches for her school frescoes.

### **The garden**

The 0.8-hectare garden (total site 14 hectares) at Lord's Wood is primarily the work of David and Millie Messum. When they purchased the house in 1974 the gardens were a wilderness; today they have been redesigned and form the backdrop to the sculpture display (Messums blog). More research into the gardens during Mary's tenure is required. Apart from growing vegetables, the gardens were probably laid to grass. When the Stracheys lived at Lord's Wood it is unlikely they had time to spend in the garden and in later years Alix became increasingly reclusive and eccentric. However, a photograph from 1960 in the *Country Life* article from 1973 shows the couple by the summerhouse, which is of a contemporary wooden design (now gone 2022). A photograph of the front of the house dating from the 1970s shows a large magnolia tree obscuring the front door, with several neglected stone urns and a couple of conical bushes.

Today (2022) the gardens are managed by head gardener James Piercey and Ryan Belton who have overseen further improvements, including the creation of three ponds, the long border on the north lawn and the herb garden (Lord's Wood Information sheet).

### **The studio**

The studio was probably built for Mary at the same time as the house, around 1900; she collaborated on its design with her architect Streatfield. It was here where she planned and made studies for the two fresco commissions. After 1920 it was used as a centre for psychoanalysis by Alix and James.

After Lytton Strachey's (founding member of the Bloomsbury group and James's brother) death in 1932 and following the sale of the Strachey home in the early 1960s all his letters, books, and documents were taken to the studio at Lord's Wood. However they were not catalogued and were left to gather dust piled high on tables (*Country Life*). They remained there until Alix's death in 1972.

The studio was extended and restored by the Messums and now houses a collection of paintings and books (Lord's Wood Information Sheet).

### **Links with the Bloomsbury Group**

'An Outpost of Old Bloomsbury in the Marlow Woods' (Frances Partridge Diary 1958)

Philip Sargant Florence (1890–1982), Rugby and Cambridge, became an economist

Alix Strachey (1892-1973) née Sargant Florence, Bedales, the Slade and Newnham, Cambridge. Became a psychoanalyst and translator of Freud.

In 1915 Alix moved into her brother's flat in Bloomsbury and became associated with the group, the principal players of which included Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Vanessa and Clive Bell, Roger Fry and Duncan Grant. Here she met James Strachey, assistant editor of the *Spectator* and Lytton's younger brother. In 1920, they married and travelled to Vienna to see Freud, where they both underwent psychoanalysis. Freud asked the couple to translate some of his works into English, and this was to become their lives' work. Both became psychoanalysts themselves and their translations, which included the first English version of Sigmund Freud's *On Dreams*, remain the standard editions of Freud's works to this day (Wiki).

Alix and James visited Marlow frequently and other guests included the artists Mark Gertler and Dora Carrington (who both have connections with other artists in Bucks including Paul and John Nash). Following Mary's death in 1954 the couple lived permanently at Lord's Wood (Messums website).

### **Fresco painting**

**Fresco** is a technique of mural painting executed upon freshly laid 'wet' lime plaster. Water is used as the vehicle for the dry-powder pigment to merge with the plaster, and with the setting of the plaster, the painting becomes an integral part of the wall. The word *fresco* (Italian: *affresco*) is derived from the Italian adjective *fresco* meaning 'fresh', and may thus be contrasted with fresco-secco or secco mural painting techniques, which are applied to dried plaster, to supplement painting in fresco. The fresco technique has been employed since antiquity and is closely associated with Italian Renaissance painting (Wikipedia).

There was a fresco revival in the twentieth century in which Mary Sargent Florence was a leading figure between 1900 and 1940 when she created her three major works.

### **Marlow Common**

The pretty woodland of Marlow Common became something of an artists' colony during the late nineteenth century. Conrad Dressler, sculptor and art potter, moved into the White Cottage (now **Monks Corner**) around 1897, to work as director of the Marlow Common-based Medmenham Pottery, founded and funded by the soap manufacturer Robert Hudson of nearby Medmenham. Dressler used the cottage, which is near the west end of the hamlet, to display trial runs of items commissioned from the pottery. On its exterior is the 25' polychrome ceramic frieze *Industry* (showing women working), later to be seen on Sunlight Chambers in Dublin, as well as portrait roundels and other panels, while a few of Dressler's tiles remain inside. The service wing (now **Jerome Cottage**) displays another fine Medmenham piece, a plain frieze of laundrywomen.



Mary and Alex circa 1940 at Lord's Wood (NPG Creative Commons)



Entrance front 1970s

Go to <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1343070> for images of the Bournville School frescoes



Parterre adjacent to the Studio (C de Carle)



Kitchen Garden/Potager (C de Carle)



The Studio 2022 (C de Carle)



Pond



Entrance Gates



The outdoor gallery



The Drive



Lord's Wood (All images C de Carle)



<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1343070> (accessed 10/03/21)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Sargant\\_Florence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Sargant_Florence) (accessed 10/03/21)

<https://www.messumblog.com/post/an-outpost-of-old-bloomsbury-in-the-marlow-woods>  
(accessed 10/03/21)

*Country Life – A Country Refuge from Bloomsbury*, Keith Spence (15 November 1973)

<https://www.countrylife.co.uk/out-and-about/theatre-film-music/art-and-sculpture-sale-in-lords-wood-28811>

*The Journal of the Decorative Arts Society 1850 – the Present*, no. 12, Aspects of British Interior Design (1988), p. 38. Published by the Decorative Arts Society (accessed via Jstor 11/1/21)

[Tile Gazetteer – Buckinghamshire – TACS \(tilesoc.org.uk\)](https://tilesoc.org.uk/)

Sculpture at Lord's Wood – Messums