

## What story does this painting tell?

The menacing silhouette of Leslie's faceless wizard has fascinated Christchurch people for generations. While the painting is laden with symbolism that suggests a sexually-charged narrative, it retains an unknowable quality. Who is the elegant young woman in the garden? Is she the prisoner of the wizard? Is the wizard entering the garden, or is he leaving? And most critically – what is she thinking?

The young woman looks troubled, and perhaps also resigned. Something is about to happen. Everything points to it. Her hitched-up scarlet dress; the withered leaves; the hand shears as an ancient representation of the arbitrary nature of fate; the enclosed garden as a Biblical symbol of female purity; the euphemistic locked purse that she carries – all are pictorial symbols which combine to tell the story of a young woman teetering on the brink of sexual experience. She has not yet taken a fateful step, but looks as if she is about to.

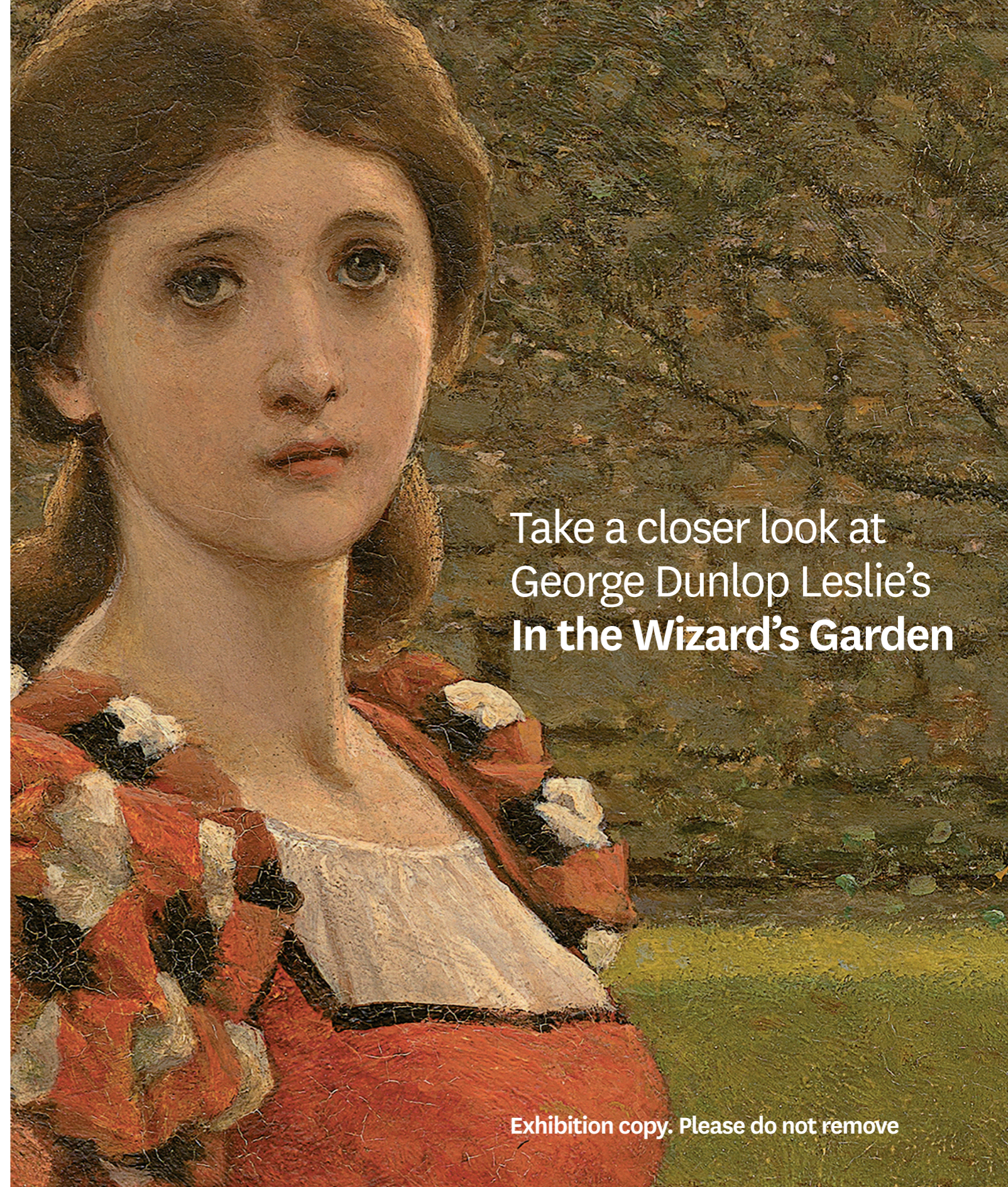
The “fallen woman” was a relatively common subject in mid-Victorian art. Nineteenth-century society generally expected that a woman's sexuality should be expressed only in marriage, and there were harsh social penalties for women who transgressed. While *In the Wizard's Garden* was painted in the early years of the twentieth century, its type would have been familiar to its middle-class English audience, as would the pictorial symbols used by the artist to tell the story. Leslie frequently painted attractive young women at the moment of opening a letter and receiving news, or making a critical decision, but *In the Wizard's Garden* represents one of the darkest situations in which he placed his female protagonists.

When the painting was exhibited in Whanganui in 1919, the local newspaper reported that many interested visitors “wondered what it is meant to suggest”. Sir Isidore Spielmann, the curator who had originally selected the painting to come to New Zealand in 1906, commented that the painting “was partly suggested by a beautiful short tale by Nathaniel Hawthorne, called ‘Rappaccini's Daughter’, and the artist intended painting it as an illustration to this story.” ‘Rappaccini's Daughter’ is a story about ill-fated love, in which an unscrupulous scientist raises his daughter in a poisoned garden. She becomes poisonous herself, unable to touch living things without killing them. A young man sees her and falls in love, bringing her a vial of a potion meant to cure her. She drinks it and promptly dies in front of her lover, to the horror of her father, Dr Rappaccini.

Leslie often drew on literary sources for his works, and *In the Wizard's Garden* may also have been partly inspired by a Grimms' fairy tale, ‘The Girl Without Hands’, in which a wizard tricks a miller into giving up his daughter. After encountering an evil wizard, the young woman leaves her childhood home and eventually finds herself outside one of the royal gardens which she cannot reach as it is surrounded by a moat. (After many adventures, including the loss of her hands, she eventually marries the king.)

Lara Strongman

Cover:  
George Dunlop Leslie  
*In the Wizard's Garden*  
(detail) c.1904  
Oil on canvas  
Collection of Christchurch  
Art Gallery Te Puna o  
Waiwhetu, presented to  
the Canterbury Society of  
Arts by W. Harris, 1907;  
given to the Gallery in 1932



Take a closer look at  
George Dunlop Leslie's  
**In the Wizard's Garden**

**CHRISTCHURCH  
ART GALLERY  
TE PUNA O  
WAIWHETU**

Exhibition copy. Please do not remove



## Who was George Dunlop Leslie?

**George Dunlop Leslie (1835–1921), the artist of *In the Wizard’s Garden*, was a prolific and successful Victorian artist of American descent who specialised in idealised images of English girlhood. Although today his work has largely been forgotten, during his lifetime it was both critically well-regarded and popular.**

Leslie was regularly praised for his talents as a colourist, and for the qualities of his subjects—sunny, elegant and quintessentially English. He painted young women in historical costume, sewing garlands of roses, drifting downstream in punts and striking poses against rustic garden gates. The inner world of his paintings was essentially anti-modern, a serene and golden place untroubled by the grime of Victorian urban life. Only very occasionally did a dark note creep into his works, as with *In the Wizard’s Garden*, painted late in his life. Critic John Ruskin called his art “quietly capable”, and in 1875 was so struck by one of the female figures in a painting by Leslie at the Royal Academy that he wrote: “I have no words to say how pretty she is.”

Born in London in 1835, George Dunlop Leslie was the sixth child of the well-known and well-connected genre painter Charles Robert Leslie, an American expatriate who knew Washington Irving and wrote biographies of both Joshua Reynolds and John Constable. George grew up surrounded by artists and writers. He fell easily into a career as a painter, and later as an author. After his first work was accepted for exhibition by the Royal Academy in 1859, he exhibited there annually for the rest of his life.

Leslie’s formal art training largely involved drawing from plaster casts of Greek and Roman sculptures. He noted that his artist father gave him “very little systematic teaching, but continually caused me to look at fine pictures, taking me to galleries and collections, and from a very early period I had formed a pretty correct



John Watkins  
George Dunlop Leslie 1860s  
Albumen carte-de-visite  
Collection of the National  
Portrait Gallery, London.  
given by the Art Fund, 1916  
© National Portrait Gallery,  
London

taste in these matters.” He later regretted, though, that he hadn’t travelled abroad and received better technical training: “I have, I think, rather suffered in consequence of my unfortunate attempt to render my ideas without sufficient knowledge of the means: and I believe a few years’ study in Paris would have been of inestimable advantage to me.”

Leslie was a lively character, known among his friends for his elaborate practical jokes. He painted throughout his long life, and in his mature years wrote several books about the River Thames as well as a history of the Royal Academy. He designed a large garden for his property at Wallingford, in Berkshire, which became the backdrop for many of his later paintings. A keen gardener, he suggested that he was probably the only person who had been a member of both the Royal Academy and the Royal Horticultural Society at the same time.

## Who were the St John’s Wood Clique?

During the 1860s, George Dunlop Leslie was an enthusiastic member of a group of well-to-do young artists known as the St John’s Wood Clique, who lived in close proximity to one another in north-west London. Influenced by the aesthetics of pre-Raphaelitism, members of the Clique were generally interested in historical subject matter, but without the more socially progressive politics of the pre-Raphaelites. Art critic Bevis Hillier described them as ‘the reverse of the Impressionists’: revered during their lifetimes and reviled by a later age, they dominated the Royal Academy and lived well from sales of their work.

In their heyday, the St John’s Wood Clique met on Saturdays at each other’s houses to draw and paint. They played croquet and picnicked together, and one summer clubbed together to rent the thirteenth-century Hever Castle in Kent as a backdrop for their paintings. They hired models and brought historical costumes for them to wear. Each member of the Clique wore a badge in the shape of a grid-iron to symbolise the critical grilling they gave one another’s work: their motto was Ever On Thee. They were notorious for their practical jokes, in which Leslie—a lofty figure whose patrician profile was at least once mistaken for King Leopold of Belgium, to his great delight—was always involved.

## Where is this painting set?

*In the Wizard’s Garden* is a stylised view of George Dunlop Leslie’s own garden at Riverside in Wallingford, on the banks of the River Thames. He moved there in 1883, and designed and established extensive gardens, which he used as the setting for several paintings. (His studio was the grand house’s former ballroom.) Familiar features of the wizard’s garden—the flight of shallow steps, the doorway (here a summer house), the sloping bank, the garden wall, the stone-flagged stream—appear in an earlier painting, *In Time of War* (c.1900), in which a girl in Regency costume is doubled over in grief.

In recent years, Leslie’s former property at Wallingford has often been used as a shooting location for the ITV drama *Midsomer Murders*. The fishpond still remains, as do the stone steps to the lower lawn.



David Wilkie Wynfield *The St John’s Wood Clique* 1864 or 65. Photograph  
From Pen and pencil sketches, Henry Stacy Marks, Chatto and Windus, 1894

George Dunlop Leslie sits third from left



Above: Image from *Wallingford Through Time*, courtesy of David Beasley, Amberly Publications, 2003

Below: George Dunlop Leslie *In Time of War* c.1900. from *Royal Academy Pictures 1900*