Doorways:

a Loeb Letter

by Bella Dalton-Fenkl
Several of my favorite works at the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center depict doorways. What is it about this structure in artwork that is so compelling to me? This Loeb Letter seeks to explore this question.

The shape of the arch that frames the doorways depicted in my favorite works is an architectural feature I find especially beautiful. Resembling a rainbow or a bending wing, the arch both frames and protects what it holds below, and supports what lies above. The sculpted figure above the arch in *Doorway Patricksbourne Church, Kent*, 1851, by M. D., looks worn, its face half missing, but still it stands triumphant, as if carried on the crest of a wave.
Doorways are promises, potentials. And an open doorway or archway one can see past may be architecture’s clearest nod to liminality. In *Norman Doorway, St. Peter's in the East, Oxford*, attributed to William Alexander, the delicate shaft of light draws the eye past the open door, where one can just barely see the suggestion of a column and the next room over. The door handle is its own arc, mirroring the shape of the arch. The doorway of this drawing demonstrates that doorways can be enticing mysteries ripe for exploration.

*What do the faces in relief, surrounding the arch, add to the drawing/architecture?*
However, passing through a doorway can also symbolize loss. In this photo from Martine Gutierrez’s 2014 series, *Girl Friends*, the shut door that nonetheless lets light through its windows signifies the separation between the two women (one played by the artist, one played by a mannequin double), like the all-important space between the words “girl” and “friends” in the series’ name forever keeps the relationship between them from being openly romantic. The mannequin woman is paired with a mannequin man in this photo, their bodies cut in half by the door itself.

An edge of a window can be seen in the alcove to the right of the door. Does this add tension to the work? How does the wall art on the left compare to the alcove?
June, an 1880 oil painting by Walter Launt Palmer, is one of my favorite works in the collection. I vividly remember staring at it in the Project Gallery, so transfixed I could see the brush strokes swimming. I remember discussing June with Peter Daniel, gallery security guard, and the two of us pointing out the many details: the mounted plates and mirror tilting as if they are about to fall, the murky surface of the mirror contrasted by the bright outdoors, the white dress of the female figure and the warm brown of the male figure, the abruptly cut-off tabletop and ceiling that lend the painting a claustrophobic air, and of course the single discarded flower lying on the floorboards.

The fanlight (semicircular window) and the hanging curtains include similar shapes. What does this add? Do the windows in this work lend the same sort of feeling as those in the photo from Girl Friends? Why, or why not?
And what does the doorway signify here? At the time, I suggested that painting’s composition recalled other nineteenth-century paintings depicting widows gazing out at the ocean as they think of their husbands lost at sea, yet in June, it is a female figure inside as the male figure gazes out at the ocean.

Is the interior of the room a place of safety, or does it hold its own peril, signified by the dropped flower and the perilously-tilting, dusky mirror? Is the view through the door suggestive of freedom, impending danger, or something else entirely?
It depends on one’s perspective. However, like the rays imply as they emanate through the titular door in William Richardson’s watercolor *Door to the Cloisters, York Cathedral*, circa 1840, no matter how turbulent things may be moving forward, I would like to believe that the changes symbolized by doorways can be positive, illuminating ones.

*The vault (supportive arch) before the door has sculpted veins, almost like the veins of a leaf. What character does this lend to the drawing?*
Reference Information

M. D. (English, active 1850s)
*Doorway Patricksbourne Church, Kent, 1851*
Ink, pencil and watercolor on paper
Gift of Matthew Vassar
1864.2.2647

Attributed to: William Alexander (English, 1767-1816)
*Norman Doorway, St. Peter's in the East, Oxford, n.d.*
Watercolor and pencil on paper
Gift of Matthew Vassar
1864.1.78

William Richardson (English, active 1838-1877)
*Door to the Cloisters, York Cathedral, c. 1840*
Watercolor
Gift of Matthew Vassar
1864.1.184

Martine Gutierrez (American, born 1989)
*Girl Friends (Anita and Marie), 2014*
Archival inkjet print on Arches Baryta on Sintra, one of a set of seven
Purchase, Advisory Council for Photography
2016.21.1.4

Walter Launt Palmer (American, 1854-1932)
*June, 1880*
Oil on canvas
Gift of Ruth Scherm, class of 1945
1995.4.1