The title of this paper is derived from that of an exhibition of the work of De Scott Evans held at the Columbus Museum of Art from December 7, 1985 to January 22, 1986. *A New Variety, Try One* refers to the title of a small trompe l’oeil still life in the museum’s collection that has been attributed to Evans. Interest in Evans’ work was revived in 1971 after nearly 75 years in obscurity. At that time art historians William Gerds and Russell Burke proposed that Evans was the creator of a series of trompe l’oeil still lifes executed in New York in the 1880s and 1890s that are variously signed "S.S. David," "Stanley S. David" or "Scott David." It was the continuing mystery surrounding the execution of Columbus’ painting—and more than 18 other nearly identical still lifes of almonds and peanuts—that inspired the exhibition.

Many of the questions concerning Evans’ possible activities as a trompe l’oeil painter, working under a pseudonym, in New York remain unanswered. We now know considerably more, however, about Evans’ development as a portrait and genre painter—the basis of his reputation during his own lifetime.

Evans worked in Cleveland from 1874 to 1887. His years in the city span a critical period in the development of the arts in Cleveland. Only ten artists were listed in the city directory in which Evans’ name first appeared. By 1887, the year he moved to New York, however, the ranks of professional artists plying their trade in the city had swollen to nearly seventy. The intervening years had seen the founding of the city’s first art club (Cleveland Art Club), establishment of the Cleveland Academy of Art and publication of the Academy’s periodical, *The Sketch Book*. Though not identified as one of the Old Bohemians (the name given to the group of young artists credited with initially encouraging the visual arts in Cleveland through these activities), Evans was nonetheless closely associated with these men and was an active member of the emerging art community.

The decisions that Evans made while in Cleveland—decisions that were a direct result of an artistic environment he was simultaneously reacting to and helping to create—determined the course of his mature career in New York. It was the "Western" origins of Evans’ art that interested New York critic Cromwell Childe in his 1893 article on the artist in *The Quarterly Illustrator* (vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 279-282):

The East, and the country at large are indebted to the wide-spreading West in art as well as in literature. That important characteristic, virility, is not seldom prairie- and plain-treated, so to speak. Oftentimes it flourishes best because it has been nursed far away from gas-lit drawing rooms. It gains its freshness and its strength from the absence of conventional things . . .

Nevertheless, the Scottish ballad tradition of the brave "young Lochinvar" coming out of the West is not so very often repeated here. The palette-and-brush Lochinvar of the Middle and Mississippi States more frequently stays where he is. He fears—and wisely, too—to enter the push and crowd of the art mart of Manhattan Island. The saying is right, he thinks: "Better be the first man in a country town than the second in Rome."
And yet the Western talent has made a broad mark in New York. To the dash of the "open-air cities" is added the delicacy that comes from a daily contact with purple and fine linen. The blending of these two qualities produces, more than all else, the fin de siecle man of art. Such a type of painter is the subject of this sketch—De Scott Evans.

The image of himself as a "young Lochinvar" must have been one that Evans shared. He either allowed or encouraged Childe to believe he was five years younger than he actually was by claiming that he left Cleveland at age 35 rather than 40.

The artist was born David Scott Evans in Boston, Indiana in 1847. Little is known of his formative artistic training. We do know that in 1864 at the age of 17, Evans entered the studio of an Albert Beaugureau in Cincinnati to study. Although little is known about Evans' instructor, the aspiring young artist's migration to Cincinnati is not surprising. The city had already established itself as an artistic and cultural center of the West by the middle of the nineteenth century. Evans no doubt benefited from the artistic environment that had attracted a steady stream of artists including James H. Beard, Worthington Whittredge and J. O. Eaton since the 1840s. The only other clue to Evans' early formal training as an artist is his kinship to another midwest artist, Edward Edmondson (1830-1884). A generation older, Edmondson was Evans' cousin by marriage and working in Dayton, Ohio, during Evans' formative years. The personal relationship between the two artists is unknown but the few surviving early portraits by Evans, represented here by the 1878 portraits of Thomas and Elizabeth McCullough, are hauntingly similar to those of the older artist.

Evans spent the first half of the 1870s teaching, first at Smithson College in Indiana in 1872 and then from 1873-75 at Mount Union College in Ohio where he served as Chairman of the Fine Arts Department. It was in Mount Union's catalogue of 1873 where David Scott was first transformed into De Scott Evans. The artist no doubt adopted this gallicized version of his name as his professional identify in order to link himself with the grand tradition of European art and culture. The long shadow of that tradition is very much in evidence in the titles of the now lost works Evans produced to fill the college's art gallery.

Evans opened his first studio in Cleveland in 1874. He continued to teach at Mount Union in nearby Alliance for a time and taught privately in Cleveland. Among his pupils was the future American Impressionist, Otto Bacher. During his early years in Cleveland, Evans developed a reputation for his portraits of children. Although none of these early portraits have come to light, his later Portrait of a Little Girl from 1888 probably reflects the type of portraiture for which Evans first received critical attention.

The leading artist from Cleveland when Evans arrived was undoubtedly Caroline Ransom (1838-1910) who had already gained national recognition for her portrait of the Civil War hero, General George A. Thomas. Ransom, however, spent a significant amount of her time away from Cleveland and maintained a studio in Washington, D.C. It was, therefore, around the primarily self-taught genre painter Archibald Willard (1836-1918) that the young artists who would become known in Cleveland history as the Old Bohemians first organized. The 13 members of the core group were: George Grossman, F. C. Gottwald, John Semon, Adam Lehr, Louis Loeb, Heman and John Herkomer, O. V. Schubert, Daniel and Emil Wehrschmidt, Otto Bacher, Arthur Schneider, and Max Bohm. In December, 1876, they organized the city's first art club whose auspicious beginning was heralded in the local press:
A visit to the new art club in the City Building last evening was pleasant. The venture has been started by most of the leading artists of the city, who have agreed to donate their time and skill at least one evening a week for the benefit of those not practiced in the art of rapid and faithful sketching. The novel and new idea of an hour's pose by the members of the club in costume is a feature both pleasing and instructive. The regular meeting is on Monday night of each week though it is the intention to keep the rooms open every evening—when applications for membership can be made. Already about 30 have joined the class and many more have promised their attendance.

(Cleveland Leader, December 13, 1876)

The educational mission of the club would become formalized when they established the Cleveland Academy of Art on the upper floor of the new City Hall in 1882.

A generation older and from a different economic and social background than many of the original art club organizers (who were primarily young working-class German immigrants), Evans remained somewhat removed from the camaraderie of the group. He was, however, an original member of the art club. Evidence suggests that he was an increasingly active participant. He was a founding co-director and instructor of figure and drapery painting of the Academy of Art. He contributed sketches to the Academy’s monthly periodical The Sketch Book which appeared in January 1883 under the editorial direction of W. H. Eckman.

In the Spring of 1877 at the age of 30, Evans left Cleveland for a year of study in Paris. Through an introduction from Edward F. Noyes, Minister to France and former Governor of Ohio, Evans became the pupil of the renowned master of French academic painting, William Adolphe Bouguereau.

Evans’ aspiration to study abroad, even belatedly, was typical of his generation of American artists. The timing of his choice, however, may also reflect the increasing pressure he felt from the European training his younger contemporaries in Cleveland were receiving, or his possible disappointment in not having a work accepted at the Philadelphia Centennial the previous year. It is significant that considering the predominantly German flavor of the art communities of both Cincinnati and Cleveland that Evans chose Paris rather than Munich to distinguish himself.

Evans could not have selected a better master than Bouguereau to further the prospects of his career. Bouguereau paintings were immensely popular in the United States and it was precisely those qualities that Evans’ work shared with Bouguereau’s that brought him to local prominence. The Mother’s Treasures, executed while the artist was in Paris, was greeted by critical success upon Evans’ return to Cleveland and became one of his best known works. The sale of the painting to a prominent Cleveland collector in September of 1878 as related in the local press reflects the state of art criticism in Cleveland in the late 1870s.

Sale of a Twenty Thousand Dollar Painting: Yesterday the sale of Mr. Evans’ famous painting, "The Mother’s Treasures," was effected between the artist and Mr. T. D. Crocker. The picture was painted while De Scott Evans was abroad and under the immediate influence of the French painter Bouguereau. There is much in the picture that reminds one of the works of that great master, both as to coloring and the type of subject chosen. The pose, action and drawing of the figures are all excellent. The technique throughout is very fine indeed. The rug on which sit the mother and her babes, is soft and yielding. The stones of the pavement in the immediate
foreground are hard and gritty, and very realistic, while the silken Turkish mantle on which the mother reclines has all the sheen, luster and brilliancy of real silk. Mr. Evans certainly excels in his delineation of draperies. His silks, satins and velvets, it seems, could not possibly be painted better. There is no greater excellence in "The Treasures" than its perspective. The pavement, rug, etc., recede with a levelness that is wonderful. It is hard to realize that the base of the column on the right is on the same surface, and no farther away than the group of figures, so perfect is the perspective deception. Taken throughout, the picture is a charming one, and does the artist great credit. Mr. Crocker is to be congratulated on so valuable an acquisition to his gallery of paintings and should be followed by others in the good example he has set by patronizing home talent.

(Cleveland Leader, September 19, 1878)

Upon his return from Paris, Evans opened a new studio in the 300 block of Euclid Avenue. Increasingly, his work was patronized by prominent area families including the Brushes, Crockers, Hinds, Babcock's, Boyntons, Gliddens, and Garfields. Symptomatic of Evans' new status, the artist's name with the designation PORTRAIT PAINTER appears in bold face type in the city directory for several years beginning in 1878. In 1881 Evans began to exhibit regularly at the National Academy of Design in New York.

It was while working in Cleveland that Evans defined his artistic identity as a genre painter. It was there that he began to explore the subject that would cause a New York critic to later dub him "the painter of pretty women." Like many of his contemporaries, Evans chose his subjects from the leisureed world of well-to-do women and children; men rarely intrude unless their presence is necessary for the narrative. Evans was particularly successful in this post-Civil War era that has been named the Gilded Age for its flagrant materialism and ostentatious display of wealth largely because of his ability to paint Victorian bric-a-brac, ornate drapery, and costume. These trappings of femininity, and femininity itself, were his subjects, and his paintings of modish young American women are silent testimonials to his technical abilities.

The richly anecdotal genre painting, The Taxidermist of 1881 introduces the subject and style for which Evans became noted. The setting of this painting, which Evans exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1882, is the dark interior of a taxidermist's shop. Two fashionably dressed young women have brought their dead pet bird to the old taxidermist, who displays a sample of his work, obviously assuring the young women that he can do the same for the poor dead creature they have brought to him. One of the women turns away, unable or unwilling to observe the necessary details of the transaction. Lurking in the shadows of the shop are the various trophies of the taxidermist's trade, including a stuffed owl and parrot (both of which appear in other paintings by the artist). Against the darkened surroundings, the costumes of the young women stand out in meticulous detail, capturing and reflecting the little light that is present.

In The Taxidermist, Evans displays his virtuosity in depicting details of costume. Such loving attention to details of dress is rarely missing from his paintings of young women and was considered by his contemporaries to be synonymous with his work. Cromwell Childe said this of his skills:

It follows without saying that he who can successfully portray the maid of our times must be a consummate master of "stuffs." The painting of fabrics, one is tempted to declare without fear of contradiction, is Mr. Evans' chief hold as a man of art. His canvases show that he has studied textures thoroughly and well. The sheen of
silk, the soft folds of crepe du Chine, the cool of the challie, dear to the heart of women nowadays, are all shown with something better than photographic accuracy; one feels the texture as if it was under his hand.

His modelling may at times be at fault, but the fault is seldom glaring. All this is swallowed up, when it does occur, in the charm of the blending of colors, those pale harmonizing tones that seem to belong especially to girlhood . . . .

And all his pictures, modern though they are, seem to call back a memory—that ever-present one to most men—of "the girl I used to know."

(Childe 1893)

An elegant, contemplative retreat from the noise and rush of the marketplace, the world of women that Evans depicted seems to have encouraged passivity and self-absorption. It was designed, as Thorstein Veblen observed in Theory of the Leisure Class in 1889, for the pleasure of the men who created it.

An important preoccupation of Victorian women, the pursuit of cultural pleasures, was a recurrent theme in Victorian painting. Evans’ work was no exception. As seen in two paintings of 1887, The Reading and The Connoisseur, the women in his paintings entertain themselves with music, dramatic readings and art appreciation in the omately decorated, eclectic settings of Victorian America. These elaborate and often exotic studio costume pieces epitomize the Victorian maxim "beautiful things, beautifully seen." The artist’s favorite beautiful things—a red and white Oriental vase, a figurative wall tapestry, a white shag rug, and a lute—in fact, reappear again and again as props in these works. The women, too, in a sense are props themselves; though they are seemingly engaged in cultural activities, their actions are almost never quite as significant as their decorative purposes. The woman in The Connoisseur, pretending to examine a painting through a magnifying glass held at too great a distance, is simply a beautiful object among other beautiful objects. She becomes a piece of art herself and the viewer the connoisseur.

Children, too, become decorative objects in Evans’ work. The two little girls in Dressing the Dolly from 1884—no doubt Evans’ own two daughters, Mabel and Blanche—are posed prettily in the corner of the artist’s studio. They play an odd game of dress-up with a stuffed taxidermist’s owl, which stares toward the viewer with sightless eyes. Executed the year following the appearance of John Singer Sargent’s Daughters of Edward Darley Boit (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), Evans’ painting is a haunting reflection of that masterpiece. In spite of the macabre undertones of the picture, the artist’s bravura display of color and texture were intended to overpower and enthrall the viewer.

As counterparts to his portrayals of modish young women in sophisticated urban environments, Evans also painted scenes of rural America. The rapid growth in urbanization and the changes brought about by technological progress after the Civil War had triggered in many Americans the yearning to return to the simplicity of country life. Artists such as Evans responded with idyllic images that celebrated not only the simple life but the solid, noble virtues of America.

Such an ambience pervades in The Old Spring House (Flirtation), exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1883, and purchased by the Garfield family. In this anecdotal depiction of a country courtship, two young lovers have paused in their daily routine to meet in the shelter of a spring house. The young woman sits in the lighted doorway, her water bucket set aside, playing with the strings of the apron in her lap. Directly behind her rises the path to the farmhouse.
The house and apron strings may suggest the ties to home and family. Hat in hand, the man stands in partial shadow, a polite but attentive suitor. The cat at the right, which has crept past the two to get a furtive drink from the bucket, confirms the slightly clandestine but essentially innocent nature of the lovers’ tryst. The strength of this scene is in its narrative content, but there is an equal interest in evoking a particular mood and expressing a longing for the simple virtues of country life.

Evans also produced rural scenes that are far less idyllic, such as Grandma’s Visitors from 1883, which shows his understanding of both pastoral and urban lifestyles. In this painting, which recalls the pure light and sharp contrasts of Winslow Homer’s plein-air pastorals of the 1870s, the worlds of town and country converge. Evans depicts two children in city clothes who have come to visit their grandmother on the farm and are entranced by the opportunity to feed the chickens. Their grandmother, not sure that they are safe in this unfamiliar environment, watches them from a distance. The scene perhaps touches on Evans’ own realities. Raised in rural Indiana, he spent his adult life primarily in the urban centers of Cleveland and New York, and no doubt occasionally took his family home to Indiana to visit his mother.

As Evans became more deeply involved with genre painting, the distinction between his portraiture and genre painting became blurred. In 1881, Evans received the commission that would occupy him until his departure from Cleveland in 1887. Winter Evening at Lawnfield, perhaps the artist’s most celebrated portrait, shows the family of President James A. Garfield gathered in the parlor of the family home, Lawnfield, in Mentor, Ohio. A fire burns in the hearth, casting a warm glow on the scene. Perhaps inspired by the portrait-interiors of Eastman Johnson, Evans typically renders the parlor in meticulous detail, recording exactly how it looked in 1882 before the house was remodeled. Most of the artifacts in the painting can still be seen at Lawnfield today. According to newspaper notices of the time, the artist spent a week at Lawnfield in July, 1882, as the guest of Mrs. Garfield in order to perfect the details in the picture.

The painting is a commemorative portrait. It was commissioned after Garfield’s assassination and was originally intended to hang in the reception room of the Garfield monument in Lakeview Cemetery in Cleveland. The posthumous portrait of the President was based on photographs and earlier portraits. Here Garfield stands presiding over his family as the Victorian patriarch. As he reads to them, his adoring daughter and wife listen intently and his two elder sons turn their gaze toward their father. At first the picture seems to be of a contented family gathering, but Garfield’s death is felt as a strong undercurrent in the painting. His rigidly posed figure divorces him from the vitality of those around him. Physically separated from the others, he is illuminated by an aura of light from the lamp above him. Although his image dominates the scene, it is his wife and mother who occupy the center of the composition. Seated back to back, they represent the new center of the family, the ones who must now shoulder the weighty responsibilities of the lost father. The country, too, has lost a leader, and something of the national consternation, tinged with anger, is perhaps expressed in the face of the son on the left. The artist has made a direct allusion to Garfield’s assassination if the picture of the man in a tall stove-pipe hat, which the youngest son places in his grandmother’s lap, is interpreted as a portrait of Abraham Lincoln.

The painting was completed in 1889 after Evans had moved to New York. Few facts surrounding the commission are now known. Why the painting never reached its original destination at Lakeview is unclear. According to tradition the President’s widow, in spite of her previous appreciation of Evans’ work, did not like the painting when it was completed and returned it to the artist. If this tradition is true, Evans’ falling-out with the Garfields during his last years
in Cleveland may well have influenced his decision to move to New York as much as his image of himself as the "young Lochinvar" from the West. *Winter Evening at Lawnfield* returned to Cleveland in the 1960s when it joined *The Old Spring House* in the collection of the Western Reserve Historical Society--where it has become the showcase example of Evans' art in an Ohio public collection.

De Scott Evans epitomized mainstream nineteenth century American painting. He is memorable less for his outstanding artistic achievement or innovation than how accurately the style and subject matter of his paintings reflected his response to the leading artists of his day. During his years in Cleveland he helped to create an artistic environment that supported local genre painting, as well as portraiture. The foundation he helped lay enabled Cleveland to evolve an arts community that would rival Cincinnati by the end of the century.
Fig. 1 "A New Variety, Try One," n.d.
Oil on canvas, 12-1/8 x 10 in.
Courtesy of Columbus Museum of Art
Fig. 2  "The Connoisseur," 1887
Oil on canvas, 43-1/4 x 24 in.
Photograph courtesy of Richard York Gallery
Fig. 3 "The Old Spring House (Flirtation)," 1883
Oil on canvas, 45-1/2 x 30-1/2 in.
Courtesy of Western Reserve Historical Society
Fig. 4 "Winter Evening at Lawnfield," 1881-1889
Oil on canvas
Western Reserve Historical Society
Photograph Courtesy of Ohio Historical Society