

Docent Tour Packet

*Rebels With A Cause: American Impressionist Women*

September 8, 2017 - December 31, 2017

## Exhibition Synopsis

*Rebels With A Cause: American Impressionist Women* from the Huntsville Museum of Art presents a selection of works by artists active between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. These artists rebelled against the conventions of their day by exhibiting their work alongside their male counterparts, received awards, and cleared a path for future female artists. The collection of art embodies the early influence of French Impressionism and its precursor, the Barbizon Style. The 54 works on display feature characteristics of the American impressionist, but also reach beyond impressionist historically strict definitions to reflect individual artistic approaches.

Today, art historians are rediscovering the significance of these female artists and establishing their rightful place in the expanding narrative of American history. Subjects include accomplished floral and still - lifes, elegant portraits, engaging genre scenes, and landscapes both intimate and panoramic, reflecting the many different regions in the country and world.



Richmond was a specialist in portraits of women from various social strata.

Agnes Millen Richmond, *A Young Friend*, 1922

## Impressionism

*"I never in my life saw more horrible things.. They do not observe drawing nor form but give you an impression of what they call nature. It was worse than the Chamber of Horrors.*

- J.Alden Weir after visiting the 1877 Impressionist exhibition. He later became an accomplished impressionist.

The group of artists who later become known as Impressionist, did something ground-breaking for their time in both their artistic style and in banding together to host their own exhibition. In today's modern era, it is common for artists to host exhibitions of artwork, but in 19th century France there was only one place to exhibit artwork and to establish your reputation as an artist - the Salon. The Salon had a jury who decided which artists to exhibit and was the sole dependent of an artist's reputation and livelihood.

The Impressionist, who later got their name from a critique of their art being seen as merely "impressions" of what they saw, held eight exhibitions of their artwork, rebelling against the establishment of the Salon. Hosting an exhibition outside the Salon was against the connections of the time, but the artwork itself was rebellious against the "fine art" standards set forth by the Salon jurors. Only art deemed "historical in nature" was considered a great painting by the Salon, but the impressionists questioned the long established hierarchy of subject matter. Impressionist put value and worth in art depicting landscapes and contemporary life scenes. Ruth Langland Holberg's painting *Afternoon Lemonade* (pictured below) is one example from *Rebels With A*

*Cause*, that fought the traditional subject matter of the day to depict the casual life of individuals rather than historical paintings.



**Ruth Langland Holberg, *Afternoon Lemonade*, n.d.**

*Please note, we do not have this image in the exhibiton*

## Impressionist use of Light and Color

To critics, impressionist finished pieces resembled the preliminary “impressions” artists would make to preserve an idea of what to fully realize and paint back in their studio. Impressionist, on the other hand, wanted to capture the particular moment in time by completing their artwork *en plein air* (outside) and by attempting to replicate atmospheric conditions of light.

To achieve this, artist’s painted small commas of pure color next to one another. When the viewer stood at a distance their eyes would mix the individual’s marks and the colors would blend optically. This method of painting created more vibrant colors than colors mixed by the palette and allowed artists to capture natural light in real time.

## Impressionism in America

In the turn of the last century, many American artists felt the draw of Europe and chose to study and travel to the museums, the art studios, and attend the prestigious schools of art. No doubt, many American artists visited the Impressionist exhibition. American artists approached impression differently than their French contemporaries, since American artist did not have to breakthrough the Salon bureaucratic art establishment at home.

Many American artists adopted the broken brushwork and light effects but they did not fully abandon figure drawing and composition. American Impressionist applied the style to American subjects including native flora like cosmos, zinnia, and dogwood (pictured below). In keeping with impressionist



subject matter breaking the hierarchy of historical paintings, American impressionist depicted everyday life from napping, reading, country outings, and landscapes that represented travels and American lands.

American Impressionist rapid focus and adaptation of French impressionist styles and the depiction of familiar subjects, has left an indelible mark on American painting.

**Jane Peterson, *Dogwood*, n.d.**

## Where are the women? - adapted from the below article

See resources for full article "A Brief History of Women in Art", essay by Camille Gajewski, Khan Academy.

*"..so long as a woman remains from unsexing herself, let her dabble in anything.."*

Women have always been present in art. Pliny the Elder, a Roman writer from the First Century C.E. claims that the first ever drawing made was by a woman named Dibutades who traced the silhouette of her lover on a wall. This may or may not be true, art has always been a part of human nature, the caves in Lascaux are a great example. But in Western mythology a woman was depicted as the first art maker, so why have her successors received little attention in the narrative of art history? In history some women have broken through this barrier and were recognized by contemporaries or historians looking back, but often time as an anomaly, a woman who overcame the limitations of her gender to be worth noting in a male dominated field.

Women were systematically excluded from the records of art history for a multitude of reasons: art forms like textiles were considered craft and dismissed as not "fine art", many women did not have access to formal education (including art school), men who form the majority of history have dominated both the history and practice of art have considered female artists to be inferior.



*“This is so good you wouldn't know it was done by a woman.”* - a “compliment” from artist and instructor Hans Hoffman to influential abstract expressionist painter Lee Krasner from the mid- 20th century.

By the 1960s, the rise of equal rights and feminist movements, propelled the amount of women teaching and studying in art schools in the USA. These sites become active spaces for feminist activity, encouraged the representation of women in museums and galleries and fostered paved the way for female artists.

The fight for representation is not over. Guerrilla Girls (pictured above) are a collective of women artists and art professionals who work to fight discrimination and raise awareness of the issues that women face in the art world. They reframe the question “ Why haven't there been more great women artists in Western History? “ by asking the more appropriate question **“Why haven't more women been considered great artists throughout western history?”**

The desire for exhibiting *Rebels With A Cause* is to reframe the American narrative in art history and to have ourselves and patrons ask difficult questions about the forgotten women in art and the contemporary role of women in the narrative.

There are no easy answers to the following questions, but they are ones to think about and to pose to your tours. Even young students can grasp topics of gender equality/inequality.

Do you think that courses,books, and museums dedicated solely to women artists might be somehow exclusive? Do they somehow sideline cultural production by women by declaring them something separate from traditional art historical canons?

On the other hand, would simply adding womens names to the canons only enforce a traditional approach to art history without challenging it?

Might labeling “women artists” unwittingly establish misleading links between gender, biography, and creative output?

## Selected Artists Biographies

Please feel free to continue the research of these artists and others in the exhibition. If you find any information send your resources and information to [vpeacock1@uwf.edu](mailto:vpeacock1@uwf.edu). I will compile research for further use.

### Greta (Dietz) Allen

*Evening Shadows*, n.d.

Greta Allen, who is sometimes listed under her married name Dietz, was born in Boston in 1881. At the Massachusetts Normal Art School she took elementary lessons from Joseph R. DeCamp, then Frank Benson was her teacher at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Although her work seems to be only in private collections today, Allen exhibited at the Boston Art Club, at the Copley Society and at the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts between 1897 and 1927. Her *Portrait of a Boy* was featured at the Pennsylvania Academy's annual exhibition of 1918.

Allen, who eventually taught art, had a solo show in 1930 in Milwaukee. The style of her genteel images relates to that of her teacher Benson. Allen was also a talented watercolor painter and we know that she worked at some point in Provincetown. Two works by Allen are in the Louise and Allan Sellars Collection (See *Art by American Women: Selections from the Collection of Louise and Allan Sellars*. Exh. cat. Gainesville, GA: Brenau College, 1991, p. 15).

### Elizabeth Rebecca Coffin

*Evening, Nassau*, n.d.

(1850–1930) was an American artist, educator and philanthropist who is known for her paintings of Nantucket, Massachusetts. Well-educated and accomplished, she was one of the "New Women" of the 19th century who explored opportunities not traditionally available to women and, contrary to the expectations for women in her day, she never married. She was the first person in the United States to earn a Master of Fine Arts degree and was the first woman admitted to the Hague Academy of Fine Arts. She opened a school in Nantucket that had been only open to men and offered several types of trade and crafts work courses to both genders.

Elizabeth Rebecca Coffin, nicknamed "Lizzie", was born September 9, 1850 in Brooklyn, New York into a Quaker family. Her father was born in Nantucket, Massachusetts and her mother in New York City

She studied at the Friends Seminary in New York City before attending Vassar College, where she was taught by the Dutch painter Henry Van Ingen. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree there in 1870. In 1872 she enrolled at the Hague Academy of Fine Arts] the first woman to gain admission to this school. Coffin studied at the Hague Academy for three years[ and received medals for anatomy, composition, perspective and antique drawing. She received her Master of Fine Arts degree from Vassar College in 1876; Coffin was the first person in the United States to have received that degree.

She later studied at the Art Students League of New York, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. She also traveled extensively in Europe and California.

Coffin began to summer regularly on Nantucket, starting in the 1880s, and moved there in 1900. She painted in the American Realist style. Her paintings preserved the way of life of Nantucket, now no longer a whaling port. Her *Hanging the Nets* was exhibited in 1892 at the National Academy of Design and won the Norman W. Dodge Prize for the best picture by a woman. She won the Norman W. Dodge Prize at the National Academy again in 1902. She exhibited at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.

She was one of the "New Woman" of the 19th century successful, highly trained women artists who never married, like Ellen Day Hale, Mary Cassatt, Elizabeth Nourse and Cecilia Beaux. About 1890 Coffin made a self-portrait. Along with Hale and Nourse, these women "created compelling self-portraits in which they fearlessly presented themselves as individuals willing to flout social codes and challenge accepted ideas regarding women's place in society. Indeed, the New Women portraits of the 1880s and 1890s are unforgettable interpretations of energetic, self-confident and accomplished women.

In her later years she put most of her energy into reviving handicraft instruction at the Greek Revival Coffin School. It was built in 1852 for nautical and private education of boys and for descendants of town founder Tristram Coffin by Admiral Sir Isaac Coffin. The school closed in 1898 and Elizabeth

Coffin reopened the school for students of both genders in 1903. It taught males woodworking, mechanical drawing, plumbing and metalworking; Females were taught basketry, cooking, and sewing. Until Coffin taught basketmaking, baskets were traditionally made by boys and retired sea-faring men on Nantucket. Her students included women from the Goldenrod Literary and Debating Society which was established in 1895 for girls. Coffin reopened the school during a period when the whaling industry, which had been the economic backbone of the island, had ended. The trades helped to create new opportunities for men and women.

### **Harriet Whitney Frishmuth**

*Crest of the Wave*, 1925

Born in Philadelphia in 1880 and living nearly 100 years until Jan 1, 1980, Frishmuth devoted herself to sculpture. She followed the usual long, hard road of professional school: years spent in art classes in Paris and New York, anatomy learned by dissecting at a medical school, apprenticeship to established sculptors and then in her own studio the struggle for commissions, progressing from small utilitarian objects such as ash trays and bookends through bolder ventures into life sized figures, memorials, and free standing figures.

She spent much of her childhood in Paris, Switzerland, and Dresden, but European sculpture seemed to have little impression on her. Frishmuth sculpture's present an electrifying sense of motion, smoothly modeled, without abrupt transitions or broken planes. From whatever direction the figures are viewed their outlines are gently curved yet pulsating with life. She used dance poses and moments to express the joy of life, not an easy thing to do in sculpture. She succeeded in realizing a prime concern of her generation - creating a series of works that was not only distinctly her own but also in its freshness and jubilant vitality, distinctly American.

## Anne Wilson Goldwaite

*Bermuda, n.d.*

Anne Wilson Goldthwaite was born in Montgomery, Alabama in 1869 and though she traveled extensively, she always considered the South to be her true home. Her parents passed away when she was very young and she was raised by various well-to-do family members. After officially coming out in Southern society at the age of eighteen, it soon became clear that marriage was not in Goldthwaite's immediate future. At the age of twenty-three, her family sent her to New York City to study art at the National Academy of Design. In 1906, she continued her education in Paris where she associated with some of the great modern artists of the time. Through her friendship with American expatriate and great patron of modern art, Gertrude Stein, she became acquainted with such notable artists as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. While in Paris, she joined a group of young artists who exhibited together each spring and founded the Académie Moderne. The onset of the Great War forced Goldthwaite to return to the United States in 1913 where she participated in the famed Armory Show in New York.

Though she associated with many abstract artists, Goldthwaite remained more expressive in her art. That is, she painted her subjects with loose, artistic brushstrokes to convey emotion, but her subjects remained recognizable and not completely abstracted. After returning to New York, she painted many portraits of her close friends and taught at the Art Students League for twenty-three years. She taught her students to portray their subjects respectfully and she worked as an advocate for both womens' and minorities' rights. Goldthwaite also served as the president of the New York Society of Women Artists from 1937-1938.

Despite her active participation in the New York art scene, Goldthwaite returned home to Alabama every summer. It was here that she painted her best known works depicting genre scenes of the South. Her paintings of African American field workers and of the lush vegetation of the Deep South gained her national acclaim.

## Resources

Tolles, Thayer. "American Neoclassical Sculptors Abroad." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ambl/hd\\_ambl.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ambl/hd_ambl.htm) (October 2004)

Dr. Beth Gersh-Nesic, "Impressionism, an introduction," in Smarthistory, August 9, 2015, accessed December 27, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/a-beginners-guide-to-impressionism/>.

Gajewski, Camille, "A brief History of Women in Art," <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-history-basics/tools-understanding-art/a/a-brief-history-of-women-in-art>

Tate Museum, "Unlock Art: Where are the Women?", video. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/becoming-modern/intro-becoming-modern/v/where-are-the-women>

## Additional Links for further information

The Story of Women and Art: Part 1, 2, and 3 ( BBC Series)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCKab-v\\_o3k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCKab-v_o3k)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEovcPAnRNk>  
<https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/OByNWSIWOnMVL3ROVINtZER5MHc>

The Impressionist: Part 1, 2, 3 (BBC Series)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_eBah6c5kyA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_eBah6c5kyA)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SNcsxUY1TR8>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=va507eoRSqc>

