

BREAKING NEW GROUND

Women Artists in the American West, 1843-1943

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The exhibition, **In Pursuit of Art: Grace French, Pioneer Artist and Teacher**, originated at The Journey Museum in Rapid City, South Dakota, in 2007. The exhibition's publications, educational programs and web site are based on the life and legacy of a woman artist and educator, Grace French. French was born in New Hampshire in 1858 and, in 1885, at the age of twenty-six, moved to Rapid City. Fifty-seven years later, in 1942, she died in Rapid City at age eighty-four.

This essay is intended to provide a context for Grace French and her accomplishments by exploring the challenges and opportunities presented to women artists in similar circumstances. While there have been accomplished women artists in the American West for thousands of years, this exploration is limited to the ones who worked in the European artistic tradition between 1843 and 1943. Through consideration of the environment in which Grace French lived, taught and made art, we may gain a greater appreciation for her life and work.

The Situation "Out West"

Although there were a substantial number of women artists at work in the American West during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they received very little attention until the past few decades. There were a number of factors that combined to limit the exposure of women artists. One was the popularly-held notion that only men could capture the "vitality and virility" of the West in their work. Another reason women artists did not achieve the same recognition as male artists is because they did not promote their work as aggressively and frequently signed their art with monograms, aliases or some form of their husband's name.

In addition, as women artists moved West, especially in the early days, the circumstances of pioneer life intervened to limit the amount of time devoted to creating and marketing art. Maintaining communications and relationships at a distance was extremely difficult before a reliable nationwide postal system. There was also a bias against artists that did not live in or near New York. Even artists that had successfully exhibited work in the East or in Europe became provincials in the eyes of the art world once they moved "out West". As a result, exhibition opportunities in the East, where it counted most, became scarce.

The vast distances, sparse population and late settlement of remote areas delayed the development of cultural institutions that could

exhibit, document, and collect the work of regional artists. Too often, the work of women artists, its aesthetic value unrecognized, has been consigned to family collections and attics. Even the work of Grace French, a well-known artist in her community, was widely dispersed after her death. Several pieces in the exhibition were purchased at garage and estate sales.

Joni L. Kinsey describes the difficulties of doing research on women painters of the Great Plains in the 1980s: "Exceptionally little has been published on the contribution of women to the visual arts in the central United States beyond cursory biographies and modest regional studies, and most existing information lies in the scant files of widely dispersed local museums and libraries. Even the best-funded attempt to gather information about paintings produced in the region requires exhaustive travel over thousands of miles and diligent examination of poorly documented collections."

In view of these circumstances, it is extraordinary that we have any information about women artists of the American West. While the records are incomplete and talented artists remain to be discovered we know enough to be impressed with their achievements.

Scattered Far and Wide

The women artists of the American West were a diverse, independent set of individuals that lived in different places in different time periods. While it is difficult to generalize about them, it is possible to identify trends over time. In the early days, nearly all came with family in the role of wife, daughter, sister, mother or cousin. In most cases, their artistic activities were secondary to their family responsibilities. As the West became more settled, the number traveling alone increased and they were more likely to identify themselves as artists.

At first, the majority of women artists came from the Eastern part of the United States, a few from Europe. As would be expected, those born in the West became more numerous as time passed.

Throughout the period from 1843 to 1943, a good many of the women artists of the American West had studied at major schools of art in cities like New York, Boston, Chicago and Paris. Later it was possible for talented young women to study in colleges throughout the West. Some communities were fortunate enough to have formally trained artists, such as Grace French of Rapid City, who gave private instruction. Artists lacking in educational opportunities were, by necessity, self-taught.

The pattern of settlement in the West for women artists is similar to that of other pioneers. Eliza Griffin Johnston (1821-1896) was the first woman artist whose arrival in the West is documented. She moved to Texas with her husband, Albert Sidney Johnston, in 1843. Eliza Johnston's husband, a general, died during the early years of the Civil War. She then relocated to California where she lived until her death.

By the 1850s women artists reached San Francisco by boat. The Bay Area soon became a mecca for artists, especially women artists. In 1858, the year Grace French was born, San Francisco's Mechanics Institute held an exhibition that included 50 women artists. In the same year, the first California State Fair exhibition also included women artists. The California School of Design was founded in San Francisco in 1874. Its first class consisted of sixty students; forty-six of them were women.

Gradually the Southwest, the Pacific Northwest, the Rocky Mountains and the Great Plains were settled and women artists went there, too. By the 1870s, women artists were documented throughout the West, including Dakota Territory.

Making the Most of It

While the challenges were great and few women artists of the American West attained national or international prominence, in some respects they were afforded greater freedom and more opportunities than in other places. This is not too surprising given the number of "firsts" women in the West attained. According to Virginia Scharff "While American women as a whole did not win the right to vote until 1920, with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, women in most Western states had the vote before 1915. By 1930 the West had sent the first woman to the United States Congress (Jeanette Rankin of Montana), had elected the first woman governors (Nellie Tayloe Ross of Wyoming and Miriam Ferguson of Texas), and had chosen the first woman mayor of a major city (Bertha Knight Landes, Seattle)."

Chronically low population in much of the American West worked to the advantage of college-educated women that were able to relocate. Employers unable to find qualified men for traditionally male careers began to hire women. This was especially true for educational institutions.

As new colleges and universities were opened across the West, women founded departments of art and taught in them. Salaries were often low and sometimes nonexistent. The first three women art instructors at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, taught in exchange for studio space. Emma Richardson, Ada Seaman, and A. Davis taught

sequentially from 1884-1891. Even when salaries became competitive and men took more interest in these positions there were still a greater proportion of women college instructors than in other regions of the country.

In parts of the American West, creating art or even enjoying it was not considered manly. While their brothers remained at home working in the family business, well-to-do young women often went East or to Europe for “finishing”. In the process of becoming a more suitable mate for a wealthy man, some of these young women studied at the finest art schools of the time. They returned home with knowledge of art and an appreciation of culture to places that seldom had cultural institutions.

Women artists, both college instructors and “finished” young women, had proportionately more influence on local educational and cultural institutions in the West than in other regions of the United States. The presence of formally trained artists resulted in positive changes in Western communities. This dedicated group of talented, intelligent, educated women founded art schools, museums, and arts organizations. Then they taught in art schools, directed museums and ran arts organizations – often for little monetary compensation.

A number of the cultural institutions of the American West owe their existence to the energy and commitment of women artists, their students and friends. For example, an art museum for South Dakota became a reality because women with an interest in the arts wanted it. As the General Federation of Womens Clubs (GFWC) in South Dakota went about raising money for a place to collect and exhibit art, they also raised levels of awareness. The South Dakota Art Center (now the South Dakota Art Museum) was opened in 1970 and soon became the first art museum in the state accredited by the American Association of Museums.

South Dakota 1843 - 1943

South Dakota was home to three women artists from this era that received national recognition: Grace French, Ada Caldwell and Myra Morton Miller. As different as their lives were from one another, they shared a love of beauty and the will to make art in an environment that did not sufficiently recognize their abilities or achievements.

Grace French (1858-1942), a native of New Hampshire, graduated from the Lowell School of Industrial Art, Boston, in 1881. She then spent three terms at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, also in Boston, and received private instruction.

French arrived in Rapid City, Dakota Territory, in 1885. She was an instructor at Black Hills College, a private Methodist College in Hot Springs, South Dakota. Her entry in An Encyclopedia of Women Artists of the American West states that she was employed there from 1888 until 1893 when the college closed. Donna Fisher, primary researcher for the exhibition “Pursuit of Art: Grace French Pioneer Artist and Teacher”, has discovered information that indicates these dates may be in error. For details, please see the portion of her essay entitled “A Pioneer of Art Education.”

After leaving Black Hills College, she moved back to Rapid City where she painted the local landscape and gave private instruction in drawing, painting and the fundamentals of art.

Ada Bertha Caldwell (1869-1938), a native of Omaha, Nebraska, graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1897. In 1898, Caldwell accepted a position at Springfield College in Yankton, South Dakota. Two years later she was asked to found the Department of Art at South Dakota College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts in Brookings, South Dakota (now South Dakota State University). She remained as the Head of the Art Department until she retired in 1936. Caldwell died in 1938 and the 1939 edition of the college yearbook was dedicated to her.

Throughout her career Caldwell reserved the time away from her students for further study and sketching trips. Her places of study included: Pratt Institute in Brooklyn; Columbia University Teachers College, NYC; the Art Students League, NYC; the New York School of Design, NYC; University of California, Berkeley; Woodstock Landscape School, NY; Broadmoor Art Academy, Colorado Springs, CO; and in European galleries during two trips abroad.

Myra Morton Miller (1882-1961) was born in western Minnesota, her family moved to Dakota Territory when she was one-year-old. As a girl, Miller took art lessons from sisters Laura and Anna Rogers in Milbank, South Dakota, nine miles from the family farm. She later taught herself photography.

As an adult, Myra Miller farmed 1000 acres near Buffalo Lake in southeast Marshall County with her husband, Charles, and children Roy, Don and Lola. She worked on the farm during the warm months and painted in an unheated room during the winter. Miller, a former teacher, also found time to serve on the local school board from 1922 through 1938 and was active in community affairs.

1843-1943: Study, Work and Accomplishment

The development of opportunities for education, employment, exhibition and recognition for women artists in the American West was slow in coming. The first documented arrival of a woman artist in the American West was in Texas in 1843 however, San Francisco was the “first mecca for women artists in the West”. They began to arrive there in the 1850s by ship.

1857 The San Francisco’s Mechanics Institute held their first fair that included an art exhibition.

1858 The Mechanics Institute exhibition featured almost 50 women among its entrants.

The first California State Fair exhibition was held; it also included women artists.

Grace French born on June 29, in Hopkinton, NH

1869 Ada Caldwell born.

In the 1870s women artists were documented throughout the American West, including South Dakota.

1871 The San Francisco Art Association was formed.

1874 The California School of Design was established in San Francisco. Its first class consisted of sixty students, forty-six of them were women.

French family moves to Franklin, NH

1875 Thomas Scott French, the father of Grace and Abbie, dies.

1878 Grace and Abbie French graduate from high school.

1881 Grace and Abbie received diplomas from the Lowell School of Industrial Art, Boston, then spent three terms at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Grace also studied privately with James M. Stone in Boston.

1882 Myra Morton Miller born in Montevideo, MN, to Charles and Mattie Morton.

1884 Myra moved with family to homestead nine miles southwest of Milbank, Dakota Territory. After completing the eighth grade at

Amsten School, she taught there for a few years. She received her only art training from sisters Laura and Anna Rogers of Milbank.

1885 *The First Annual Exhibition of the Lady Artists of San Francisco*, sponsored by the San Francisco Art Association included 270 works by 81 artists.

Grace French moved to Dakota Territory. At first she lived with her mother, sister and twin brothers on the French homestead near Box Elder Creek east of Rapid City. Later, the mother and daughters moved to the house at 31 Quincy Street, the small house Grace and Abbie later used as a studio.

1888 Grace became an instructor at Black Hills College, Hot Springs, SD.

In the 1890s through the 1930s women enjoyed greater opportunities for exhibiting their work, making sales and gaining recognition. They were represented more frequently in exhibitions mounted by prestigious organizations and institutions such as:

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

Art Institute of Chicago

National Academy of Design

American Watercolor Society

National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors (now the National Association of Women Artists)

National Sculpture Society

In addition, women artists did many of the paintings for advertising the Santa Fe, Great Northern, Northern Pacific and other railway companies.

1891 Le Brun Art Club formed by women in Denver

Sarah Elizabeth French, mother of Grace and Abbie, dies.

1893 Artists Club of Denver, an outgrowth of the Le Brun Art Club, was established.

At the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the first award was given to an artist who worked with western themes. Grace Carpenter Hudson (1865-1937), a native Californian, earned an honorable mention for her oil painting that was hung in the California Building at the exposition.

Black Hills College closed and Grace French's position as art instructor was ended.

- 1894 Grace and Abbie French study china painting in Omaha, NE.
- 1897 Ada Caldwell graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.
- 1898 The Taos Art Colony began in New Mexico. Of the 654 American artists who painted there prior to 1940, 212 were women. A few years later, an art colony was founded in Santa Fe, New Mexico.
- Ada Caldwell begins her teaching career at Yankton College, SD.
- 1899 Ada Caldwell accepts a position as professor of art at South Dakota State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (now South Dakota State University). She founded the Art Department and remained Head until her retirement.
- 1900 The French sisters opened their studio. Grace painted and taught art while Abbie taught music and china painting. At times, they worked on the same project. They also studied china painting that year in Denver, CO.
- Ada Caldwell attended Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY
- 1903 Ada Caldwell took advanced study at Columbia University
-04 Teachers College and attended the Art Students League in NYC.
- 1905 At the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition, Portland, OR, a life-size statue of Sacajawea by Alice Cooper (1875-1937) was given the place of honor.
- 1907 Myra Morton married Charles Miller in Hudson, WI. They settled on a farm near Buffalo Lake, west of Sisseton, SD.
- 1915 At the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco, CA, E. Charlton Fortune (1885-1937) was awarded a silver medal and M. Evelyn McCormick (1862-1948) a bronze medal.
- 1922 Myra Morton Miller served on local school board.
-38
- 1935 Works Progress Administration Federal Arts Project, women artists were employed in all divisions of this New Deal program – easel painting, sculpture, photography, graphic arts and set design. Since judges didn't have access to the names or genders of applicants, women artists were awarded quite a few post office

mural projects. This was remarkable because at that time large projects of this nature were not usually open to women.

1936 Abbie French dies.

Ada Caldwell retires from teaching.

1938 Ada Calwell dies.

1942 Grace French dies.

1962 Myra Morton Miller dies.

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