

Rediscovering Mary Rogers Williams

BY EVE KAHN



You have likely never heard of the painter Mary Rogers Williams (1857-1907), whose work has scarcely been shown since her death. Here is just a partial list of the accomplishments of this baker's daughter from Hartford, Connecticut, a woman who truly invented herself. Williams studied with James McNeill Whistler and knew Albert Pinkham Ryder. Her landscapes and portraits, mostly pastels in tonalist and impressionist veins, won acclaim when exhibited at such venues as Manhattan's National Academy of Design, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the Paris Salon. And from 1888 to 1906, she ran the art department of Smith College in Massachusetts under the renowned painter Dwight W. Tryon.

During her vacations and an 1898-99 sabbatical, Williams traveled in Europe, as far south as Rome and as far north as the Arctic. Along the way, she bicycled, learned French and Italian, and attracted crowds while sketching outdoors. Thousands of pages of her letters survive, addressed mostly to her sisters and to her Hartford artist friend Henry C. White (1861-1952). In these letters, Williams describes everything she saw abroad: murky Gothic churches staffed by caretakers demanding tips, a soldier's gold epaulets, delivery wagons laden with radishes, a Norwegian cliff's "dainty waterfall that came fluttering down like a pretty ribbon." In them, she also often doubts herself. Mailing letters, she wrote, gave her "one moment when I feel sure that I've done just the right thing."

Art journalists of her time praised Williams's "rare poetic instinct and feeling" (*Quarterly Illustrator*) and her talent for evoking "a smoky veil that hangs like a dream of sea fog over the surface of things" (*New York Sun*). Her sudden death in Florence, of an unknown ailment, left only her sisters to perpetuate her legacy. Alas, they had little money and few connections in the art world. And so the painter, and her lively prose, vanished from the historical record. Eventually the sisters entrusted to Henry White approximately 70 of her paintings, plus all of her letters neatly bundled. Thanks to the White family's ongoing stewardship of these items, Williams's first-ever retrospective, "Forever Seeing New Beauties": *The Art of Mary Rogers Williams*, is set to open this October at the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut.

AN UNPROMISING START

Williams's correspondence documents some entire days in her life — who was posing for her, how much she paid for lunch, which dresses she was mending, which flowers were blooming outside her window. Yet still there are maddening gaps in her biography. We know that she was the fifth of six children of Edward Williams (1822-1871) and Mary Ann French Williams (1824-1861), part of a hardworking Episcopalian clan that a local newspaper once described as "good Connecticut stock."

Portrait of Henry C. White
c. 1896, Oil on canvas, 36 x 20 in.
Private collection



Edward's ads promised custom cakes and ice cream "at short notice, and on reasonable terms," shipped as far away as Washington, D.C. He had just one caveat: "orders on the Sabbath day will not be attended to."

In 1852, the couple's two children, Joel and Sarah, died within weeks of one another. The Williamses proceeded to have four more children: Lucy (1853-1912), Abby (1855-1895), Mary, and Laura (1859-1943). After Mary Ann's death, Edward's widowed sister, Eleanor, moved in, and she remained after he died. Fortunately, he had invested well, so the inheritance enabled his daughters to finish their studies at Hartford Public High School and keep a live-in Irish housekeeper.

Lucy and Abby became teachers, while Laura managed the family affairs. Mary, nicknamed Polly, was the only sister who moved away from the family home. (Her letters promise that she was wasting no money on taxis and other luxuries.) Henry White described the sisters as a "highly intellectual and exceptionally talented" quartet who loved children and stocked their home with "dolls and toys to be ready at a moment's notice for a small visitor."

Around 1880, Mary studied with the early Impressionist James Wells Champney, who was teaching at Hartford's Society of Decorative Arts. "Mr C. guided my infant feet in the path of Art," she once told Henry. By 1885, Mary listed herself in the "artist" category in local directories. Champney had also taught at Smith College, and his successor at the Society of Decorative Arts, Dwight W. Tryon, soon headed to Smith as well. Tryon apparently brought Mary with him. She ran the department while he visited every few weeks to critique students. ("Severe discipline" was Henry's term for Tryon's routine.)

At Smith, which has always focused on educating women undergraduates, Mary taught art and art history, organized exhibitions, cataloged the collection of plaster casts of ancient and Renaissance sculptures, and advised the president, L. Clark Seelye, on purchasing art for the college, including paintings by Childe Hassam and by Tryon himself. Mary's 1898 article for a Smith journal praised Tryon: "He is above all a poet of nature,



Mary Rogers Williams

Photograph taken by Horace L. Bundy
and Arthur R. Newell

c. 1905, Paper mounted on cardstock, 10 1/2 x 8 in.
Private collection, Promised gift to Smith College

and sings her moods with brush and color." Privately, however, she resented his absences: "Perhaps he is making a gradual disappearance like the smile of the Cheshire cat," she wrote Henry. Tryon, when not on vacation, often begged off teaching because of illness: "It is astonishing how often he has the gripe," Mary wrote.

She described her existence residing in Northampton's 18th-century and 19th-century houses as "my quiet convent life." And she told Henry, "I get desperate about not having any time at all to paint." (During semesters, she did produce some portraits of prominent New Englanders, including the New Haven antiquarian George Dudley Seymour and President Seelye's wife, Henrietta.) "When the girls ask me to take them out sketching," Mary wrote, "I feel as if I'd like to spill them all and run far, far away."

At every chance, Mary visited her sisters and Henry in Hartford and looked out for scenery worth sketching. Her artworks and letters record long hikes along Connecticut pastures and beaches and travels to Provincetown, Nantucket, and Monhegan Island in Maine.

FREEDOM IN EUROPE

Almost every summer (aside from a break around 1895 as Abby was dying), she crisscrossed Europe by steamship, ferry, train, horse-drawn carriage, bicycle, and foot, with watercolors and pastels in hand. The known paintings from those journeys include scenes of Norway, Germany, England, Switzerland, France, Belgium, and Italy, plus some portraits of peasants and expatriate Americans.

In Europe, she wrote Henry, "one can bury one's New England conscience, and just revel in doing pleasant things." She usually traveled there with a sister or two, plus a friend from Hartford or Smith. Even so, she felt a little homesick: "I want to buy you every pretty thing I see," she wrote to her sisters. Mary mailed home

Portrait of Nelson Cooke White, Age 3
1903, Plaster, 7 x 5 in. (not including
wooden frame)
Private collection





New England Pasture

c. 1897, Pastel on toned paper, 8 1/2 x 11 1/2 in.
Private collection

dried flowers and concert programs. She longed for more letters from home, and fretted that her own writings were boring, while detailing fees paid for customs, transport, clothes, theater tickets, antiques, and stationery. She mouth-wateringly described hotel meals, then confessed to craving Connecticut succotash and scenery. The Rance river in France, she wrote, “winds about like the Connecticut [River] and is not a bit more beautiful, rather different in detail however with its castles fishing boats and quaint houses.”

Mary described street and church processions, ballet sets and costumes, and conversations with waiters and dressmakers. She lamented bad smells, muddy streets, American blowhards who monopolized dinners and mangled foreign languages, mosquito and flea bites, churches renovated with “gaudy modern atrocities,” money collectors’ “jingle of sous and centimes” during church services, and art students producing “awful copies” of Old Masters.

Mary also evaluated exhibitions. Some Corots at the Louvre “make a rainbow in my soul every time I look at them,” she wrote. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes was “the only mural painter who satisfies me.” At London’s Dulwich

Picture Gallery, she sniffed, “No fine examples of the early Italians.” At the 1899 Paris Salon, she scorned the crowds attracted to “the weird, the fantastic or the vulgar.”

Mary made intellectual expatriate friends, including the Beaux-Arts-trained architect Alfred H. Gumaer (later a professor at the University of Pennsylvania), the watercolorist Florence Vincent Robinson, and the British historian Jean Carlyle Graham Speakman. The Boston philanthropist Mabel Eager, Mary wrote home, “is just the kind of girl I like to be with — quiet & sensible and bright and thoroughly kind-hearted.”



Assisi

1904, Pastel on toned paper, 7 x 10 in.
Private collection



Untitled (Angel on Horseback Statue)
n.d., Pastel on toned paper, 8 x 6 1/2 in.
Private collection

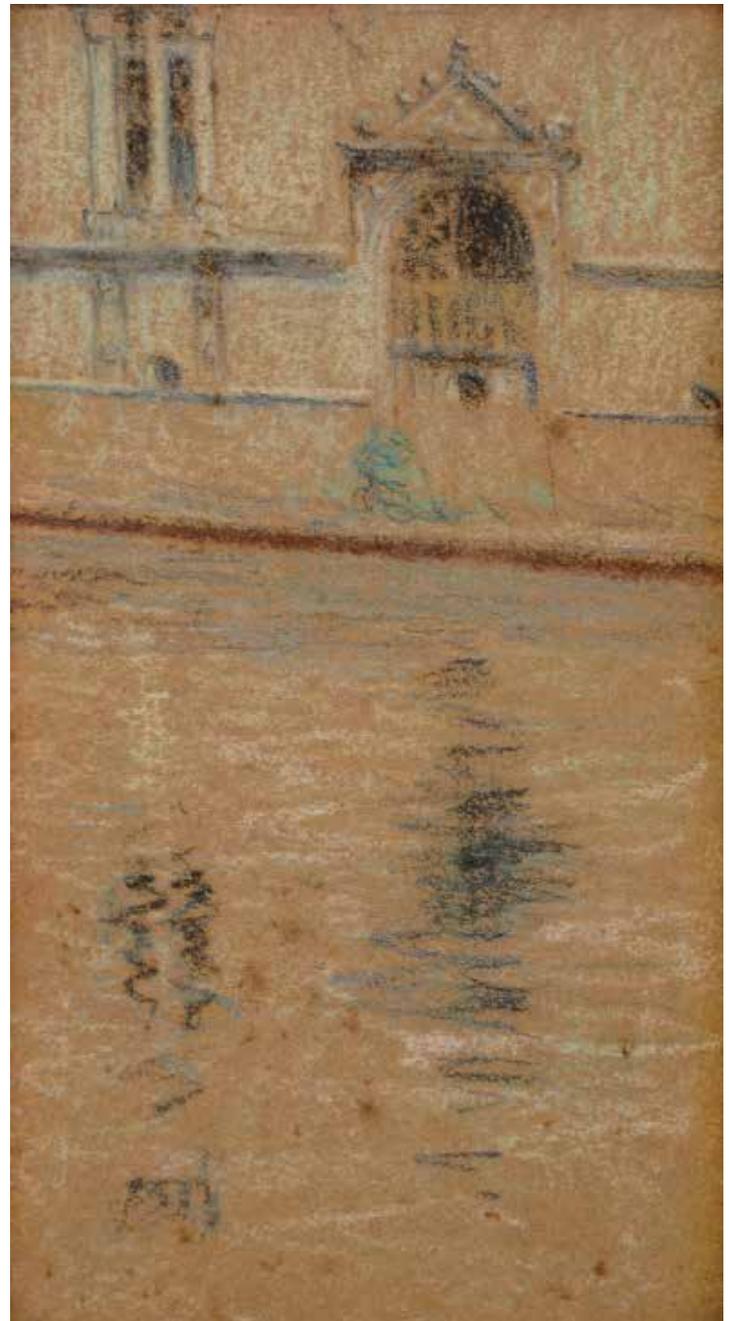
Was Mary a lesbian? Maybe. (She certainly was not in love with Henry; they were just intellectual soulmates.) She longed to try on men's clothing, whether regimental uniforms or "classic Greek costume — brown and white — without a hat, and shod with sandals." She definitely liked to regale her sisters with sightings of celebrities, including performances by the actresses Sarah Bernhardt and Ellen Terry, and royals passing by. King Leopold of Belgium, whom she met on her steamship journey in the Arctic, was "so kind and sociable and loveable," she wrote home. (In fairness, she could not have known that he was a vicious dictator.)

In 1891, she and a Smith friend audaciously knocked at Whistler's door in London, explaining that they were American artists and fans "in pursuit of the 'dainty Goddess'" of art. He showed them his studio and garden and asked about their travels. Mary found him "so interested and interesting" and recalled that he "laughed in the most bewitching way when we paid our little compliments. O, he is a rare dear, and I adore him."

During her 1898-99 sabbatical in Paris, while she was living in a Left Bank studio near countless other bohemian expats, Mary took a few of Whistler's classes for women. There she found him pompous and useless, with white-streaked hair "most carefully arranged," enjoying his students fawning over him. "He criticized my color he wishes everything dark & rich. The class really are silly over him; what fools women can be," she wrote home.

INSIDER/OUTSIDER

While barreling around Europe and teaching at Smith, Mary stayed in touch with Henry White. "I wonder if we shall go on forever seeing new beauties," she wrote him, before heading off to the Arctic. Henry and Mary painted one another's portraits, commiserated about philistines who did not buy their work, and exchanged art supplies. Mary introduced Henry to her artist friend Albert Pinkham Ryder, whose New York apartment was famously dim and chaotic. Ryder inspired her to



Azay-le-Rideau (a chateau near Tours, France)
c. 1902, Pastel on toned paper, 9 x 5 in.
Private collection

rework her canvases often, she told Henry: "It seems just as well for me to keep scrubbing at the old things so I keep on à la Ryder, 'tho I may never arrive anywhere; it is a long, exciting and endless voyage."

Mary and Henry gossiped about their Connecticut artist colleagues as well, especially in the circle of Florence Griswold, who ran a boardinghouse at Old Lyme. They shared tips on which artist was getting



A Profile

c. 1895, Oil on canvas, 21 x 16 in.

Private collection

does not recall that of any other painter.” *The New York Times* found her pastels “curious in their shadowy quality.” In an 1894 *Quarterly Illustrator* feature titled “Woman in Art,” the novelist Elizabeth W. Champney (the wife of Mary’s Hartford mentor) called Mary “a woman of conscience as well as feeling, and of a fine scorn for all shams. When asked what style she proposed to adopt, she replied: ‘If I cannot have a style of my own, I trust I may be spared an adopted one.’”

In 1906, Mary wrote to Henry from Smith: “I’ve got into some trouble here.” She had asked President Seelye for a promotion to associate professor, and he indignantly demanded her resignation. Despite Henry’s assertion to a college trustee that Mary ranked as “one of the very best instructors in art in any of our public institutions,” she was “summarily dismissed.” She started preparing, with some relief, to move back to Europe. “I’m enjoying the thought of my freedom immensely,” she wrote Henry.

Mary resettled in Paris and shared a studio with another “Smithie.” She nearly ran out of money and spent her days mending her clothes, yet told her sisters she was content. In July 1907, she sublet the studio, packed her paintings into its closet, and headed off to a Siena palazzo. There she gilded an old board to use as a background for a copy of a 13th-century panel painting. She sneaked out of the palazzo late one night to see a comet pass through “a gorgeous sweep of the sky,” she wrote home.

In September 1907, after treating a sore throat with quinine, saltwater, tea, and vinegar, she headed to Florence. She stopped by the Uffizi and then mailed a letter: “I’m going out towards Fiesole this afternoon to try to find a sketch; it is a gorgeous day and will be fine to be out.” A week later, her sisters received cables about her dire illness. The death certificate specifies no cause. Mary was buried in a Protestant cemetery at the outskirts of Florence, under the very kind of cypress trees she liked to paint.

PRESERVING THE LEGACY

Lucy and Laura tried to maintain her reputation. They gave half a dozen pastels to Smith and helped raise \$500 for Smith to purchase a canvas, *Evening*, which she had showed often but kept reworking. (Henry considered it “perhaps, her masterpiece.”) Mary was given small posthumous shows at the Water Color Clubs in New York and Philadelphia and, in Hartford, at the Art Society and Wadsworth Atheneum. Henry’s 1908 review of a show grieved for “the charm of her personality, her beautiful character, her wonderful refinement and exquisite and unerring artistic taste.”

Lucy and Laura made ends meet only with assistance from Henry and his artist son, Nelson Cooke White. When the sisters’ home was razed to make room for a new wing of the high school, Henry had a Dutch Colonial Revival house built for them. The Whites took over the care of Mary’s artworks and correspondence. Henry wrote that it gave him pride to “protect these things for a time and see that the right people enjoy them and the right institutions have the loan of them.”

Two institutions are known to own Mary’s paintings today. The Connecticut Historical Society has one of her Seymour portraits. Smith has *Evening* and most of the sisters’ donated pastels, and it was recently given Mary’s 1895 oil portrait of her Northampton landlady, Mary Smith Tenney. Most of Mary’s other works (65 in total) have long been nestled together in a former boathouse that the Whites still use as a painting studio, across the street from a carriage house where Mary stayed and painted.

Henry’s grandson Nelson Holbrook White, who lives much of the year in Florence, remembers hearing how much his grandfather and

divorced (Walter Griffin), which one Miss Florence was perhaps in love with (Allen Talcott), which ones were braggarts and hacks.

“I find him repulsive,” Mary wrote to Henry, after spending the day at Smith with the society portraitist Charles N. Flagg. She mocked Childe Hassam for repetitively painting Old Lyme’s First Congregational Church, and she recalled that William Merritt Chase “looked at my work in his dramatic way and then said fiercely ‘Too much timidity!’ Well, I dont care, I have lots of good times here and in Italy.”

Henry’s wife, Grace, an insurance heiress, occasionally suggested eligible bachelors for Mary to consider. Mary calmly replied that she envied Henry and Grace their “joys unnumbered” as a couple, but she was resigned to being an “old maid.”

With no “significant other” for support, Mary exhibited her pastels and oils in impressive quantities. Between 1895 and 1899 alone, she showed seven portraits and landscapes at the Pennsylvania Academy, about 15 scenes of Norway at the New York Water Color Club, and three views of Connecticut pastureland at the Paris Salon. In 1897 she organized an exhibition for herself and Henry at a Hartford showroom and at James D. Gill’s gallery in Springfield, Massachusetts. In 1902, the Macbeth Gallery in New York advertised a show of her landscapes as “poetic in sentiment and crisp and free in treatment.”

Mary’s reviews were raves, mixed with some puzzlement. *The Buffalo Evening News* observed, “Strange (for a woman) in art, her work



father admired Mary. That's one reason he has been supervising a slow but steady campaign to have all of them restored. On their mostly original frames, faded inscriptions identify titles, past owners, exhibitions, and prices paid. The handwriting belongs to Mary, her sisters, and various Whites. A few other collectors own her works, which typically sell for just a few hundred dollars each.

Dozens of Mary's paintings are untraceable, including portraits of women in black, white, and gray gowns, and landscapes painted in Massachusetts, Connecticut, France, Belgium, and Italy. Please e-mail

Marine with Sailboats
n.d., Watercolor on paper, 10 1/2 x 20 1/2 in.
Private collection

me (evenkahn@gmail.com) if you come upon works signed "Mary R. Williams" or "M.R. Williams," or if you stumble upon Henry White's portrait of Mary, last seen at a 1989 auction.

Few other women artists of her time exhibited so widely, to such enthusiastic reviews; had so many interesting friends, fierce opinions, and far-flung adventures; and left such detailed accounts of their lives. And few fell into such deep obscurity. Thanks to her loyal friend Henry and his family, Mary's story can now be told. ■

Information: *Mary Rogers Williams's* is one of three retrospectives on view at the Florence Griswold Museum October 3-January 25; the others are focused on the sculptors Mary Knollenberg (1904-1992) and Kari Russell-Pool (b. 1967). 96 Lyme Street, Old Lyme, CT 06371, 860.434.5542, flogris.org

EVE KAHN has been the antiques columnist for the *New York Times* since 2008, and she has contributed hundreds of articles to other sections of the *Times*, as well as publications including the *Wall Street Journal*, *Art & Auction*, and *Travel + Leisure*. On October 30, she will present a lecture on Mary Rogers Williams at the Florence Griswold Museum.

A selection of Williams's letters and other memorabilia preserved by the White family. Photo: Kimberly Schneider

