

## Remembering Alice B. Chittenden

I have always thought of Alice Chittenden as a real working woman artist, a woman ahead of her time, certainly never “just another lady artist”. I often heard her say that her work was a joy to her. I knew that she had the added incentive of financial support for herself and her daughter.

She missed being a “Native Daughter” by a scant two months. Her parents, Mariam Green Chittenden and Joseph Gladding Chittenden, settled in San Francisco in 1858. But, a year later, Mariam made the long journey back to her home in Brockport, New York, to await Alice’s birth, feeling that San Francisco was “no fit place” for her to deliver a baby. Then back she came with her two-month infant in her arms. They made the trip by ship to Panama, crossed the Isthmus by train, and connected with another ship on the Pacific side.

Alice’s artistic gift was apparent before she started school. She once showed me a perfect rose she drew at the age of five. Her love of flowers and nature grew with her frequent walks with her father. Her first wildflower study was a wild strawberry plant she found near Mountain Lake Park, San Francisco.

She graduated from Denman Grammar School (Mason and Bush Streets) in 1876, winning a silver medal for being “at the top of her class”. After two years of studying drawing and painting under Virgil Williams at the Art School, she began painting and exhibiting her work.

She was a well-established artist before her brief marriage in 1886. When she returned to her parents’ home in 1887, she resumed both her maiden name and her career.

Her scrapbook of newspaper clippings contains material collected from 1882 through 1940 and gives a complete history of her accomplishments. Not only were her portraits, landscapes, and flower studies popular in the California art world, but she also exhibited in the Paris Salon in 1908. She was awarded the Mechanics’ Art Institute Gold Medal in 1891 and seven silver medals in other years. She served on art juries frequently and was an instructor at the California School of Fine Arts for more than fifty years. The “Art School” changed its name and associations several times. At one period it was known as the Mark Hopkins Institute and, later, it became affiliated with the University of California at Berkeley. This made Alice Chittenden the first woman faculty member of the University.

Her California wildflower studies were a lifetime project. Each of the 256 paintings was identified by both popular and botanical names, written by Alice’s hand. Alice Eastwood,

Curator of Botany at the Academy of Sciences contributed in both the collecting of specimens and the identifying. She often went on nature hikes with Alice Eastwood and members of the Academy's Botany Club.

She belonged to the Sketch Club and sketching trips were another favorite pastime. She painted Mt. Tamalpais and Marin hillsides from many views and countless times. The inside cover of her sketch-box was decorated with a Tamalpais scene. In 1887 she sketched The Mission Dolores and the Old Granary on 16<sup>th</sup> Street before the construction of the Basilica. In 1910 she sketched Lone Mountain with the temporary housing of the Earthquake refugees.

She was 60 years old when I was born and still had another twenty-five productive years ahead of her. She always had time to share her love of nature with her grand-daughter. Each summer we went on excursions to Marin County via the Sausalito ferry and train. There was always a picnic lunch and a long walk on the trails in Mill Valley, Muir Woods, or Lagunitas. Once we walked around Belvedere to see the beautiful homes and to visit a friend.

Her scrapbook and all of her papers are now the property of the Smithsonian Archives of American Art at Washington DC. Microfilm copies of this material are available at the de Young Museum and the Huntington Library.

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