

## **The Story of Miss Florence and the Lyme Art Colony**

The story of Miss Florence and the Lyme Art Colony begins in the village of Old Lyme, Connecticut, located where the Connecticut River flows lazily into Long Island Sound. Florence Ann Griswold was born on December 25, or Christmas Day, in 1850. She was the youngest of four children. Florence grew up in a big yellow house with green shutters on Lyme Street, the main street of the town, with her two sisters, Helen Adele and Louise Augusta, and one brother Robert Harper, Jr. Their father was Captain Robert Harper Griswold, a sea captain who sailed packet boats from New York to London. Their mother, Helen Powers Griswold, took care of the family when her father was away at sea for weeks at a time. At school, Florence developed a great talent for music. She learned to play the guitar, piano, and harp quite well. After one of his voyages to London, her father surprised her with a fancy golden harp.

As she grew older, friends and family began to call her “Miss Florence.” After the Captain retired from the sea, the family began to suffer from lack of money. To help out, the mother and daughters opened up the Griswold Home School to teach young ladies. Sadly, her brother died years before from an illness he caught at sea. The Home School was open for 14 years. At the school, Miss Florence taught mostly music. She and her sisters never married nor had any children.

By the time she celebrated her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, Florence was the only family member living in the house. She did not have a job to make money, but still had many bills to pay (as well as many cats to feed!). She decided to turn her house into a boardinghouse, a place where people could spend the night and get their meals. Her big house was perfect and could hold many people—even in the attic! She charged each person \$7 a week for a room and their meals. She was not unique, however. Running a boardinghouse was quite common during the 1890s

in America. To help her run the house, Miss Florence hired Barefoot Mary to cook, Whistling Mary to clean, and James to do chores and tend the garden.

In the beginning, just regular people came to stay. However, that changed during the hot summer of 1899 when Henry Ward Ranger stopped by the Griswold boardinghouse to meet Miss Florence. He was an artist from New York who was eager to start an art colony, a place where artists could stay and work together. He wanted his art colony to be a place out in the country away from the noisy city where he and his friends could stay together and paint in the fresh air. When he looked around Old Lyme and saw the pretty old-fashioned little town surrounded by beautiful natural scenery, he knew it would be the perfect setting. He told Miss Florence he would come back the following summer and fill her boardinghouse with artists.

Ranger returned to Old Lyme the next summer and brought several artists with him. They most likely boarded the train in New York City and watched from the windows as the landscape changed from the hustle and bustle of a crowded city to the peace and quiet of the Connecticut countryside. After several hours they arrived in Old Saybrook and crossed the Connecticut River to Old Lyme on the ferry named the "Colonial." Once on the Old Lyme side of the river, they would load their trunks and suitcases filled with clothes and art supplies onto a wagon or carriage and travel to the center of town. The main street was lined with old giant elm trees that created a leafy green tunnel that shaded the way to the Griswold House.

The first artists to stay with Miss Florence painted in a style known as Tonalism. They were interested in painting nature using the many tones of only a few colors of color to give their pictures a sense of mood. For example, they might paint a path in the woods using only various shades and tones of greens and browns. They would cover their finished paintings with layers of varnish that were tinted with color to make them look very old. Some people called their style the "baked

apple school” of painting because their paintings were brown and shiny. The artists really enjoyed painting in Old Lyme, and by the end of the second summer, they planned to have a big art show. It was held in the town’s library and was a great success. People from the town and farmers from the surrounding farms came to look at the pictures. Even tourists from Boston and New York came to Old Lyme to buy art. The town was becoming famous because of the paintings.

In 1903, an artist named Childe Hassam brought a new style of painting to town. It was called Impressionism. The Impressionists used bright colors and big and bold brushstrokes to paint the artist’s impression of or feeling for a scene. Hassam had seen this style used by artists in Europe, especially France, where famous artists like Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir painted lily ponds, haystacks and people having fun, using similar bold strokes of vibrant color. A group of artists who wanted to paint in the new style followed Hassam to Old Lyme to stay with Miss Florence. They also brought a sense of youth and playfulness to the art colony. They would organize field days with races and prizes, go to the beach, and dress up in costume and perform skits on Miss Florence’s front porch.

Each day at the boardinghouse would begin with the artists packing up their art supplies for a day of painting “en plein air,” which means painting outdoors in French. To work outside, they would bring their paint box (a wooden suitcase filled with tubes of paint, solvents, rags, and paint brushes), a collapsible easel, a folding stool, and a sun umbrella. They would walk or ride their bike to find a place to paint. Many of the artists liked to paint along the river when the mountain laurel bushes were in bloom. Others would go farther into the Lyme countryside to paint the rocky landscapes or stone walls. If they stayed close to the boardinghouse, they would hear Whistling Mary blow her tin horn that signaled to the artists that lunch was ready. After a hearty lunch in the dining room or on the

side porch, they would return once again to their painting until it was time for dinner.

After dinner and a full day of painting, the artists would gather in Miss Florence's parlor to talk or play music and games. A favorite activity was called the wiggle game. To play, one artist would draw three curvy lines, or wiggles, on a piece of paper. The next artist would use the lines to make a picture. The drawings were often funny and the artists kept them in a scrapbook of wiggles. They would also play cards, hold spelling bees, and listen to Miss Florence play the piano.

Miss Florence's house is special for another reason as well. That first summer, Henry Ward Ranger painted a picture right on the door leading to his bedroom. It was a scene of the Bow Bridge that crossed the Lieutenant River behind the house. It only covered the right side of the door. He then challenged his friend Henry Rankin Poore to paint a picture on the left panel that matched his subject matter, painting style, and color palette. He did, and soon painting on the doors became a Lyme Art Colony tradition.

When all of the doors in the center hall, the parlor, and in the back hall were painted, the artists moved into the dining room. In the dining room, the artists painted on the doors as well as on wood panels that could hang on the walls. Soon Miss Florence's dining room looked like a museum gallery filled with paintings of old Connecticut houses and farms as well as more exotic scenes in Spain, Italy, New York, and China.

One of the most famous panels is titled *The Fox Chase*. This panel is eight feet long and shows the artists running down Lyme Street chasing a fox into the marsh. The idea came from the English prints of fox hunting that hung over the fireplace. Painted right on the brick is the crest of the "Knockers' Club." This club was made up of artists who would critique the other artists. Each of the

artists in the club has a symbol to represent them rather than their name. For example, Henry Ward Ranger's symbol is a star because he was the "star" of the art colony.

People would stop to visit Miss Florence's boardinghouse just to see the painted doors and panels. Always friendly, she would give them a tour of her house. This gave her the idea to use the central hall as a small gallery and shop, and she would sell paintings, antiques, and postcards to the tourists passing through town.

By the 10th year of the art colony, Miss Florence's boardinghouse had been the home away from home for many artists and had welcomed many visitors. It was beginning to look pretty shabby. The carpets were worn and the wallpaper was beginning to rip and curl. The artists did not want their favorite summer painting spot to fall into ruins, but they knew that Miss Florence did not have any extra money to fix up the house. She had just spent the money from a second mortgage by installing a bathroom with running water, a telephone, and electricity. To help her out, the artists secretly began a plan to redecorate her house as a surprise for Miss Florence. They sent her away for a few days and while she was away, the artists worked together, day and night, cleaning and decorating the main parts of the old house. They replaced the dirty carpets, hung new wallpaper, and fixed her broken furniture. When she returned home that summer of 1910 she was very surprised to find the boardinghouse looking so fresh and new.

The artist kept coming to stay with Miss Florence into the 1930s. They built a gallery next door to her house to have the annual art shows. Miss Florence became the first manager of the gallery. She would ring a large bell after selling a painting to call one of the artists over to help her pack it up.

Before she died in 1937, surrounded by artist friends and her favorite cats, she said to a newspaper reporter. “So you see, at first the artists adopted Lyme, then Lyme adopted the artists, and now, Lyme and art are synonymous.”

Today, the Florence Griswold Museum presents the Griswold House as the boardinghouse for the Lyme Art Colony during the year 1910, the height of the Lyme Art Colony.