Arizona’s Pioneering Women Artists
Museum of Northern Arizona November 17, 2012 – May 12, 2013

Gallery text panels

**Arizona’s Pioneering Women Artists** [title]

[also on the title wall in some manner]
THE DESERT

I hear the city's surge and roar
Where tides of nations meet,
And as I look with jaded eyes
Across the crowded street,
I dream of far off desert wastes

Where Solitude had birth,
And where, untamed of human hands,
There lies the virgin earth.
'Tis there that, furrowed like the sea
The desert stretches wide;
There, shriveled by unnumbered suns,

A thirsting land has died;
'Tis there upon the azure hills,
Above the dusky dunes,
The rubric of the sunset lies
In rose and silver runes.

There sing the fleckered mocking birds
The minstrels of the night ;
There timid quail brood o'er their nests
In undisturbed delight;
There dawn-winds sweep the somber plain,

And call the morning star,
But I have wandered many a day
How far, my Heart, how far!

—Rose Trumbull, Scottsdale Poet
quoted in George Wharton James, *Arizona: The Wonderland*, 1917

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<th>Arizona’s Pioneering Women Artists: 1905 - 1940</th>
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<td>Arizona was the final territory to join the United States by 1912, before the much later addition of Alaska and Hawaii. Coincident with that position Arizona was also one of the last territories to receive significant visits and depiction by artists. While it is not notable that all of the earliest artists to visit</td>
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Arizona were men *it is notable* that most of the earliest professional artists to *settle* in Arizona, and to make a living here as artists, were women. *Arizona’s Pioneering Women Artists* pays tribute to those adventurous and often independent women who chose to stay in the territory and to make their living depicting the beauties of the southwestern landscape and the people they met here.

Until the 1970s discussion of women artists and representation of their work was notably lacking in standard publications on art history. Recognition and discussion of women artists working in the Western United States, still popularized as a harsh land and the domain of tough livestock and tougher men, was equally slow to be addressed. The landmark exhibition, *Independent Spirits: Women Painters of the American West, 1890-1945*, produced at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Los Angeles in 1995, re-introduced the public to an extensive group of dedicated and talented women artists who worked in the West and who had been largely unknown and forgotten for many years. Accompanying the Autry exhibition, Patricia Trenton’s book *Independent Spirits: Women Painters of the American West, 1890-1945*, was the first to bring comprehensive attention to women artists working in the West.

Since the Autry exhibition and the publication of Trenton’s book appreciation for the early women artists of Arizona has steadily increased. All of the painters represented in *Arizona’s Pioneering Women Artists* studied at art schools and subsequently pursued careers as professional artists. They all established active exhibition and publication records in the West and in eastern art centers. Two of them, Mary-Russell Ferrell Colton and Jessie Benton Evans, were more than critically acclaimed painters — they were active leaders in the development of Arizona’s nascent cultural community.

Two of the most viable venues for artists to exhibit their work in Arizona during the early twentieth century, and both inaugurated by women, were the Arizona State Fair and the Arizona Artists Arts and Crafts Exhibitions held at the Museum of Northern Arizona. The Woman’s Club of Phoenix, part of a national women’s club movement, began sponsoring and organizing an annual art exhibition at the State Fair in 1915. At the Museum of Northern Arizona the annual Arizona Artists Arts and Crafts Exhibitions were established by the Museum’s co-founder and first curator of fine arts, Mary-Russell Ferrell Colton in 1929 and took place until 1935.

The majority of works of art and design objects in *Arizona’s Pioneering Women Artists* come from the collection of Fran and Ed Elliot of Sedona. As a collector Fran Elliott has also followed an independent path. After moving to Arizona in 1988, she began collecting the work of the overlooked
and unappreciated women artists of the state. The catalog that accompanies this exhibition includes an essay by Betsy Fahlman, Professor of Art History at Arizona State University, titled “Making the Cultural Desert Bloom,” and the “Directory of Women Artists Active in Arizona before 1945: Painters, Sculptors, Potters, Printmakers, Photographers,” compiled by Lonnie Pierson Dunbier, founder of AskArt.

*Arizona’s Pioneering Women Artists* is a glimpse into the early history of Arizona when ranching and agriculture were the primary industries. Life was slower and residents lived in a closer relationship with the desert and plateaus where they settled. The artists brought together again for this exhibition celebrated the beauty and the harsh nature of the Arizona landscape and the people who had made their lives here for many centuries. As a comprehensive perspective on Arizona’s early women artists this exhibition and associated catalog will shine new light on the accomplishments of Arizona’s early women artists and arts scene.

*Arizona’s Pioneering Women Artists* was produced in collaboration with the Arizona Committee of the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

**Kate Thomson Cory (1861, Waukegan, IL — 1958, Prescott, AZ)**

Kate Cory arrived in Arizona in 1905 at the invitation of painter Louis Akin. Akin invited her to join him in establishing an artist’s colony at Hopi. However, once Cory arrived in Arizona she realized how unrealistic his idea was and that she was the only other artist of the proposed colony, aside from Akin himself. Inspired by the Hopi people, their culture and the striking landscape they dwelt in Cory wound up living on the Hopi mesas for seven years. She was a prolific photographer and painter. She made more than 600 photographs that depicted daily life in the Hopi villages in a realistic and respectful manner. One the paintings Cory made while living at Hopi, *Arizona Desert*, was exhibited in 1913 New York Armory Show.

Cory moved to Prescott in 1912 where she became an active member of the cultural community and played an important role in the founding of the Smoki Museum in 1935. She continued to paint Native American subjects along with a growing emphasis on landscapes.

Kate Cory exhibited works in the 1929, 1934 and 1935 Arizona Artists Arts and Crafts Exhibitions at the Museum of Northern Arizona.
Marjorie Thomas (1855, Newton Center, MA — 1978, Mesa, AZ)

Marjorie Thomas arrived in Arizona from Boston in 1909 with her mother and brother Thomas. Seeking a healthier climate for Thomas who suffered from tuberculosis, they settled in the area that is now Scottsdale. Sister and brother each homesteaded neighboring parcels near what is now Cheney Drive and Scottsdale Road, north of Indian Bend Road, and built rudimentary cabins. When her brother died in 1915 Marjorie moved a short way south to Indian School Road where she lived until 1950 when she returned to the East.

Marjorie Thomas painted a wide range of subjects but she had a warm place in her heart for animals, which she depicted with great empathy as can be seen in her painting Noon Hour, c. 1930s. In 1929, Thomas accompanied Zane Grey on what would be his final trip, of the many that he made, to Rainbow Bridge.

Mary-Russell Ferrell Colton (1889, Louisville, KY — 1971, Phoenix, AZ)

Museum of Northern Arizona co-founder Mary-Russell Ferrell Colton spent much of her youth growing up in Philadelphia where she went on to study at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women. In 1917, with some of her fellow students Colton was a founding member of the women artists’ group The Philadelphia Ten. She first visited Arizona and Flagstaff in 1910 while on a trip through the West and in 1912 she returned on her honeymoon with her husband Harold Sellers Colton. The Coltons continued to visit Flagstaff and the Southwest on an annual basis and in 1926 permanently settled in Flagstaff. The Colton’s were part of a group of Flagstaff citizens who founded the Museum of Northern Arizona in 1928. Colton served as the first curator of fine arts at the new museum and among the many programs that she initiated were the annual Arizona Artists Arts and Crafts Exhibitions that were presented from 1929 – 1935. The exhibitions were important in their mission of bringing together in Flagstaff works by artists from all over the young state and they helped foster Arizona’s growing cultural community.

In addition to her role as the curator of art at the Museum of Northern Arizona Colton was a gifted painter. As a young artist she documented her extensive travels in the Southwest. Later, despite her busy life as an administrator at the museum she continued to create colorful canvases that depict the landscapes and people of the southern Colorado Plateau.
Jessie Benton Evans (1866, Uniontown, OH — 1954, Phoenix, AZ)

Jessie Benton Evans began her art studies at the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1890s. Later, while traveling in Italy Evans painted scenes at many of the locations she visited. Commissioned to create paintings of Southwestern subjects for the Santa Fe Railway she first came to Arizona in 1911. Evans was attracted to the desert landscape with its clear atmosphere and warmer climate and she decided to stay in Phoenix. She purchased forty acres at the base of Camelback Mountain where she built an Italianate Villa that she named “Casa del Deserto.”

“Casa del Desert” became a desert sanctuary with gardens filled with fountains and flowers. It also became an intellectual and artistic oasis for the blossoming cultural community of Phoenix. Evans hosted regular salons that featured talks with visiting artists and musical and theatrical performances in which her guests would participate. Sunshine in the Garden, c. 1935 and Southwest Garden Party c. 1935, record the bohemian atmosphere of Evans’s home. Evans traveled widely in Arizona but her favorite subjects were close to home in the desert and mountains around Phoenix.


Lillian Wilhelm Smith (1882, NYC — 1971, Prescott, AZ)

Lillian Wilhelm Smith grew up in New York City and studied painting at the Art Students League. She made her first visit to Arizona in 1913 when Zane Grey invited her to join him on his first trip to Rainbow Bridge. Smith did sketches and watercolors on the trip and became the first Euro-American artist to depict the natural landmark. When Grey’s Rainbow Trail was published in 1915 it featured an
Lillian Wilhelm Smith was drawn back to the desert Southwest and in 1916 she moved to Phoenix. In 1924 she married Jesse (Jess) Smith a cowboy and guide whom she had probably met at the Wetherill-Colville Guest Ranch on one of her many visits there. Together they traveled extensively in Arizona and managed two guest ranches first in Tuba City and later in Sedona.

Smith was a prolific artist working in a broad variety of media that included: paint, printmaking, photography, and ceramics. Among her most striking creations were designs for three sets of fine china that she based on Apache, Hopi and Navajo motifs.

Lillian Wilhelm Smith exhibited in all seven Arizona Artists Arts and Crafts Exhibitions at the Museum of Northern Arizona from 1929 - 1935.

**Claire Dooner-Phillips** (1887, Los Angeles, CA — 1960, Prescott, AZ)

Claire Dooner-Phillips grew up in Los Angeles. She painted California landscapes and taught school to make a living before moving to Prescott in 1922. Like Kate Cory, who she certainly would have known, Dooner-Phillips became an active leader in Prescott’s cultural community. In addition to painting...
Dooner-Phillips was an active print maker and four of her etchings are on display. Claire Dooner-Philips exhibited works in the 1930-1935 Arizona Artists Arts and Crafts Exhibitions at the Museum of Northern Arizona.

**Susan Ricker Knox** (1874, Portsmouth, NH — 1959, Concord, NH)

Susan Ricker Knox studied painting in Philadelphia at the Drexel Institute, at the Cooper Union School of Art in New York, and continued her studies in Europe from 1906 to 1907. After her return to the United States she established a studio in New York City and spent her summers painting in Maine. Her usual subjects were Impressionist paintings of women and children that were popular during that period. In 1921 Knox shifted her focus and painted a series depicting immigrants at Ellis Island. She began to spend winters in Arizona by 1928 and painted southwestern genre scenes of various tribal subjects such as her *Pima Family Life*, c. 1930. Susan Ricker Knox Evans exhibited works in the 1932 and 1935 Arizona Artists Arts and Crafts Exhibitions at the Museum of Northern Arizona.

**Erna Lange** (1896, Elizabeth, NJ — 1984, Phoenix, AZ)

Erna Lange, like Lillian Wilhelm Smith, studied painting at the Art Students League in New York City. Lange went on to study in Paris between 1924 and 1929. She first visited Arizona in 1930 and moved permanently to Arizona in 1940 where she settled in Phoenix in the area of Dreamy Draw.

Nora Lucy Mowbray Cundell, a native of London made her first visit to the western United States in 1934. While staying at Vermillion Cliffs Lodge, she was captivated by the landscape and space of Marble Canyon. She returned the Marble Canyon again in 1935. Between 1936 and 1941 she exhibited eight of her Arizona landscapes at London’s Royal Academy. In 1940 she published her memoirs in,
Unsentimental Journey. Following the Second World War she returned to Marble Canyon to paint.

**Marjorie Reed** (1915, Springfield, IL — 1996, Vallecito, CA)

When Marjorie Reed was twelve years old her family moved from Illinois to southern California where she would go on to study art at the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles. She lived and worked at Grand Canyon for a couple of years. Reed became best known for her paintings depicting scenes of the Butterfield Stage, a subject that occupied her from 1938 to 1981. Reed did paintings depicting scenes in each of the states along the route of the Butterfield Stage. Her work, such as *On the Butterfield Trail*, c. 1950, depicted a stagecoach in the often desolate landscapes they traversed.
Marjorie Reed at Ginger Renner’s Desert Southwest Gallery in Palm Desert in 1954. Photograph courtesy Blue Coyote Gallery.