

Margaret Miller Cooper (1874-1965)
“A Hartford Biography”
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Margaret Miles Cooper, Peter A. Juley & Son, 1934, Lyme Art Association



Margaret Cooper, Lyme Art Association

Cooper was born in Terryville, Connecticut and lived in New Britain and Old Lyme. She is said to have begun painting when she was 9. She graduated in the class of 1903 from Smith College. She studied at the National Academy of Design, the Art Students League in New York, Pratt, and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. She also studied privately with Henry Snell, Guy Wiggins, Dwight Tryon, Charles Woodbury and Robert Brackman. Her husband, Elisha Cooper was a wealthy New Britain businessman who helped found the

Fafnir Bearing Company. She often painted the local scenes when accompanying him on business trips. She was a founding member of the Hartford town and County Club and often showed in group shows there, with a solo show in November 1940. She showed frequently with the Connecticut Academy of Fine Arts and was its President in 1931. From 1931 to 1956 she exhibited regularly with the New Haven Paint and Clay Club. She showed at Moyer Gallery in Hartford in 1935. She exhibited with the Lyme Art Association from 1925-1963. She also showed at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, the National Academy of Design, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Milch Gallery in New York.

Theodore Parker in the *Courant* remarked: “Mrs. Cooper hardly needs any introduction. She has long been one of the prominent women painters of this locale and an exhibitor in its larger art shows.” She was known as an expert draftsman. She and her husband were major supporters of the New Britain Museum of American Art. Elisha was director of the New Britain Institute where the NBMAA was first located. Cooper’s sons, Stanley, Ford, and Richard donated a significant amount of money to fund what was known as the Cooper Gallery of the NBMAA. Their efforts were responsible for keeping the museum a viable institution during difficult periods. The Gallery name was subsequently changed to provide recognition for more recent donors. The NBMAA holds several of her works. The Florence Griswold has a watercolor and four oils of hers. The Lyme Art Association has several of her works.

In 2001, the NBMAA held an exhibit of women artists. The June 24, 2001 *Courant* review by Owen McNally included a long section on Cooper.

NBMAA 2001 Exhibit Showcases A Century Of Works By 38 Women Artists

“Among the most fascinating of the old-timers in the exhibition is the high-energy, prolific and rich artist Margaret Miller Cooper (1874-1965).

Cooper, like a number of other early artists in the show, was connected with New Britain's industrial elite early in the 20th century, when the city was a booming manufacturing center and hardware capital of the world. Like some of her painter/peers, she was not only well-to-do but also well-educated. Smith and Vassar seem to have been the colleges of choice for young women of the new industrial plutocracy. In 1901, the smart, forthright artist married into New Britain's power structure when she wed Elisha Cooper, a founder of the Fafnir Bearing Co., a once mighty ball-bearing maker that employed many thousands of workers in New Britain through much of the 20th century until it shut down. Financially Independent Cooper, (Lindsley) Wellman says, was chauffeur-driven to her favorite painting sites in the countryside. ‘Her chauffeur would set up her easel and make sure she had her lunch. She really didn't have the least concern about financial independence,’ Wellman says. In this formidable artist's spare time, she designed the original logo for Fafnir, a dragon. But just because the well-heeled Cooper was the antithesis of the classic ‘starving artist,’ she shouldn't be summarily dismissed as a dilettante. In the best sense of the word, museum director Douglas Hyland calls Cooper a ‘hustler who made a real effort to get around and submit her works. She showed at the Corcoran Gallery and the National Academy of Design and painted all the time, just hundreds and hundreds of works. She would go to Florida or Jamaica and come home with five-dozen paintings. She really worked hard at this,’ Hyland says of Cooper, one of his favorite artists in the exhibition. Appropriately enough, her works are being shown in the exhibition in the New Britain's Margaret Miller Cooper Gallery, a gift by the artist's three sons and their families.”

She exhibited two pieces in the first Hartford Women Painters show titled, *"Eight-Mile River"* and *"Black Walnut"*. The *Courant* review said: *"Black Walnut' by Margaret Cooper is one of the best of the landscapes shown, and portrays an old white house dozing under branches of a majestic walnut tree. Along the road, which winds by the house, a horse and wagon, guided by a drowsy individual, slowly approach"*. Cooper exhibited with the Society in every show throughout the 1930's and beyond. In 1951 she won honorable mention for one of her works. In 1952 the Margaret Cooper prize is mentioned. Later the Margaret Cooper prize was awarded by the Connecticut Academy.

The Coopers had homes in New Britain and Lyme. They also spent time in Nova Scotia, Palm Beach, Nassau, and the White Mountains where Margaret painted.

She died in New Britain on May 18, 1965 and is buried in New Britain, Connecticut.

The former North Gallery at the Lyme Art Association was renamed the Cooper-Ferry Gallery in 2000 in her honor.

The Lyme Art Association featured her in a two-person show in September of 1965. The show was reviewed by Nelson Cooke White. He wrote: *"Margaret Cooper was also a distinguished painter, well trained and with her a point of view of her own. Her paintings have an appealing quality which one might call homespun in the best sense of evoking the New England spirit of fine old houses, village street and glimpses of the sea."* (*The Day*, September 10, 1965, Lyme Art Association Archives)



Margaret Cooper, *View of the Travelers Tower with Park River*
Hartford Town and County Club



Margaret Cooper, *Whitman house Farmington (sic.)*
Hartford Town and County Club



Margaret Cooper, *Our Doorway* 1928
collection of David Cooper



Margaret Cooper, *Salt Box* 1940
collection of David Cooper
(exhibited at 1940 Worlds Fair)



Margaret Cooper, *The Black Walnut Tree, Lyme CT* 1937
collection of David Cooper