

Alice Stallknecht - Artist

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Alice Stallknecht was born in New York City, March 4, 1880 at 133 West 13th Street—the home of her grandfather Henry Platt. Her parents were Frederick and Grace Stallknecht. Alice grew up in West Orange, New Jersey. She was one of the youngest of four girls.



Here's an image of Alice, age 10, wearing a straw hat and holding a doll. She is sitting on the lap of her sister Carrie, age 16. Her sister Laura, age 14, is standing next to them and holding a parasol. The dog is 'Croni—short for Macaroni.

According to the unpublished Autobiography of Alice Stallknecht she and her sister Laura shared a bedroom throughout their girlhood. She remembers sometimes being treated very unfairly by her older sisters and especially her mother. The impression is that Alice often felt unloved and somewhat like a stepchild or Cinderella.



The one family member who showed her real consideration and affection was her father, Frederick Stallknecht. He was a very handsome man and the object of attention of all the Stallknecht women. Here is an image of Frederick and Grace Stallknecht.

Alice's father was a business man but he also painted as a hobby. In her Autobiography, Alice Stallknecht recalls "My father like to paint, and careful and cautious painting he made. I suppose I imitated him. As I grew older I painted and at least this was something of my own"



The first painting Alice ever did was a portrait of a stuffed owl that was in the family dining room. The work is unlocated but here's an image of it. The date is probably early 1890's.

According to her Autobiography, she also made many ink drawings—often copying the work of Charles Gibson. Gibson was an extremely popular illustrator in America in the late 19th and early 20th century.



Alice attended a small private school in Orange, New Jersey named Deerborn-Morgan. Unfortunately for her, there were no art courses offered there at that time. She graduated from Deerborn-Morgan in 1898 and enrolled at The Women's School of Applied Design of New York. The school was located at 200 West 23rd Street in New York City. A picture of the school has not been found but here is an image of Alice at an easel in her home on Scotland Road in West Orange New Jersey c. 1898—about the time she enrolled in art school in New York.

One of the most prominent teachers at the Women's School of Applied Design of New York was an artist named Dan Beard. Beard, an illustrator, was especially well known for drawing animals.



In her Autobiography Alice Stallknecht mentions studying with Dan Beard. Her classes with him may partially account for her continued interest in drawing and painting animals throughout her life. Although it dates from 1931—much later in her career—the painting of a Canada Goose is the current exhibition is an example of animal subject matter in her art.

Alice Stallknecht spent three years at The Women's School of Applied Design of New York. While there she most likely studied a variety of techniques such as printmaking. Several examples of furniture that she decorated are reported to be here in Chatham. As the name of the school suggests, a functional attitude toward art probably was part of the school philosophy, and classes in decorating furniture or other objects may also have been part of the curriculum. This may be a significant factor in her career and perhaps worth further attention.

On September 3rd 1901 Alice married Carol Wight. According to her Autobiography this completed the process of liberation from her unhappy life in West Orange.



After the wedding the couple briefly lived with Carol's parents at 30 Schermerhorn Street in Brooklyn and then moved to Pacific Street in Brooklyn. It was there that their son Frederick was born on June 1, 1902. Here's an image of Alice and Carol holding their new baby.

It was thought that Alice then stopped painting for more than 20 years in order to take care of her family. Recently, however, a group of drawings for an unpublished book entitled, "Years Ago- True Dreams of Childhood.." has been found and is in the current exhibit.



Here is an image of a watercolor illustration from the work which is dated 1920 but appears to be much earlier—perhaps closer to 1910.

In 1920, the Wight's moved to Chatham. Frederick enrolled in the local school. The earliest located work in oil by Alice Stallknecht is a large canvas which is thought to have been done about 1914 for the dining room in the Wight home on Stage Harbor Road in Chatham.



About this time, 1914, Carol Wight purchased a small printing press. Although we don't have any prints by Carol, we do have three linoleum prints by Alice including this one of the Old Mill that is in the current exhibit.

In 1916, Frederick Wight, age 14, graduated from Chatham High School. Fred had begun drawing at an early age. His work, especially his watercolors, seemed to show considerable talent. At this time John Singer Sargent was in Boston, working on and supervising the installation of his murals at the Boston Public Library. Alice wanted to get Sargent's opinion of her son's watercolors, so she arranged a visit to the artist's studio in the Pope Building on Columbus Avenue in Boston. The building still stands.

In a footnote to the Alice Stallknecht Autobiography, her son Frederick recalls the meeting with Sargent as follows "I was fourteen. He spent a long time with me, or with my mother, as I thought, and the murals which he was working on were standing all around the large room. She thought nothing of them one way or another. She was peculiarly insulated from the work of other artists."

The following year, 1917, the United States entered the war with Germany. About this time, Carol took a job in a shipyard in Philadelphia and the family moved with him. In Philadelphia, Frederick Wight and his mother enrolled in art classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art.

In her Autobiography, Alice remembers the classes as follows, " Frederick, who was ravenous to get to art school, went to the Pennsylvania Academy and I did too. What we got out of those dim life-class rooms I never knew. Deplorable creatures stood there posing: their bodies dying down into a shadowless soap color. The experience had changed no more than anatomy itself, but it was strange for me to be drawing again after all these years."



Here is a slide of one of the drawings, which is in the show.

The records of the Pennsylvania Academy show that Alice Stallknecht took classes in October and November 1919. The life classes were taught by Edwin Blashfield—one of the most famous American mural painters of the late 19th and early 20th century.



Blashfield had ties with Cape Cod. A mural that he did in connection with a project in 1905 for the Church of the Savior in Philadelphia is in the Congregational Church in South Dennis. Here is an image of the Congregational Church and one of the Blashfield mural which is just to the left of the altar.



Blashfield had also summered in South Dennis for many years. His house, where he died in 1936, still stands at 64 Upper County Road. Here is a photo showing the house.

With the end of World War I in 1919, the family moved to Baltimore. Carol had studied at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore for a time before he married Alice. He now resumed his studies and in a matter of a few years he completed work on his Bachelor's, earned both a Masters and a Doctorate, and began teaching at Hopkins. At the same time, their son Frederick enrolled at the University of Virginia. Fred's exact program of study is not known but he took some studio courses—especially portrait painting.

Fred graduated in 1923 and went to Europe for two years to complete his art education. Part of the time was spent in Paris at the Academy Julian. In 1925 his mother joined him in Europe (apparently her only trip abroad) and the two of them toured France, Italy and then England. In a letter, Fred recalls the event as follows "She was enormously excited by what she saw but she was not painting, and it did not influence her."

Fred and his mother returned to the U.S. in 1925. They summered in Chatham that year. Fred began a series of portraits of Chatham sea captains. His mother participated in the project by recording their life stories while they sat for her son. It was also about this time that Alice Stallknecht began to paint again.



This life-size female nude is thought to date from the late 1920's. Here's a slide of the painting. A comparison with her earlier nude drawing is interesting.

Roughly ten years separate these two works. Of course one is charcoal and the other is oil—but what a change! The earlier one is extremely well drawn but doesn't seem dissimilar from something by any experienced artist of the period.

In contrast the life-size (the canvas is approximately five and a half feet high) female figure seems unaware of her nudity. Her stance is confident almost defiant. No work by Stallknecht between 1919 and c. 1929 has been located but apparently in that period her style seems to have altered dramatically. Her painting is bigger, bolder. The brushwork is more animated, the color more vivid. Why the change? We don't know. Some possibilities will be suggested later on.

Also around 1929-1930, Stallknecht did a series of life-size or larger portraits of American Presidents. They include portraits of Washington, Lincoln and Woodrow Wilson. All are in the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. There are similarities between the portraits of the presidents and the female nude—mainly in the size and the heavy contours and modeling. This seems to anticipate the figures of Christ in her murals.



In the next two years Alice Stallknecht painted a variety of subjects. This culminated in a one-woman show in May at the Feragil Gallery in New York City. The exhibition consisted of 28 easel paintings. None of the work sold. Some, like the Weir Hand (shown here) are in the current exhibit. The coloring in the Weir Hand seems reminiscent of Matisse.

The drawing in the painting—especially the shape of the head and neck has a little of the flavor of paintings by Thomas Hart Benton. The undulating silhouette that is typical of Benton's work in the 1920's as also found in this Stallknecht painting.



In 1931 or 1932, Alice was also in contact with the Chatham Congregational Church. She evidently had the idea for a monumental mural of Christ Preaching to the Multitude. She must have received encouragement from some person or persons at the Church. More specific details have not yet been found. However in early August 1932, the mural was complete and it was installed in the vestibule or vestry of the church. It was mutually agreed that the work was on loan and (at the request of either the artist or the church) it could be removed at any time. Here is an image of the mural.

Therefore, perhaps beginning in the late 1920's or at least by 1931 or 1932, with her first mural, we have Alice Stallknecht's mature or "Mural" style.



The mural of Christ Preaching to the Multitude was followed in 1935 by a mural titled The Circle Supper. It consisted of a series of portraits of Chatham people that was organized around the theme of a church supper. The Circle Supper gave the artist an opportunity to use the portraits of local men and women that she seemed to do on a regular basis. Here is an image of the work. The mural was installed in the Chatham Congregational Church where it remained until 1943.



Between c. 1935 and c. 1943, Stallknecht also did a series of small oils intended to be used as illustrations for a children's book. Two examples from this group are in the current exhibit. The project was never completed, but the paintings are delightful. The Fallen Pig (shown here) is one of my favorites.



In 1943, the Chatham Congregational Church asked to have the murals removed. They were transferred to a barn on the Stallknecht/Wight property. Alice then painted a third mural cycle, entitled Every Man To His Trade, to hang on the wall opposite the circle Supper. On the remaining wall she hung the life size Presidential portraits that she had done earlier. She also did two new paintings to hang above them—a half length portrait of the current President, FDR, that is in the exhibit and one of Levrett Saltonstall, the governor of Massachusetts unlocated as of now. Here is a photo of FDR.



Stallknecht continued to use her bigger, freer way of painting that she adopted in the late 1920's or early 1930's for most of her work for the rest of her career as an artist. Although there were no more murals, her easel paintings were in the loose, brushy "mural" style. This painting of Two Cats from 1953 is an example of her late work. Here is a photograph of the very humorous subject which is in the current exhibit.

Let me make a few more comments and then conclude.



I'll begin with this image of a Self-Portrait of the Artist from around 1940. The expression on her face seems pleasant but noncommittal—perhaps somewhat enigmatic? It is not easy to see Alice Stallknecht as an artist. Much of the biographical material and commentary on her work has been provided by or was edited by her son, Frederick Wight. Fred had an image of his mother as a very remarkable and original artist (which I think she is).

However her son seems to have made a very determined effort to present his mother as someone who was indifferent or uninterested or at least untouched by what was happening artistically in the world around her. This is hard to accept, especially given the amount of contact with art and art schools in the life of Alice Stallknecht. However, she was not an eclectic or someone whose style was dependent on the work of others. Her art is original and remarkable but it was not created without any thought or reference to the work of other artists.

From a brief review of her life, it is evident that Stallknecht's style developed. Nevertheless, around 1930 when she "returned" to painting again—her method had changed into a broader, freer, more dramatic technique that found its fullest expression in her murals. Unfortunately there doesn't seem to be much (if anything) between her life drawings with Blashfield of 1919 and the big Female Nude painting and life-size portraits of the Presidents c. 1930. Perhaps the trip to Europe was a factor in the transformation. On the other hand, there was no shortage of experimental art in museums and galleries in the United States. Art publications were also full of the latest examples of modern art.

The emergence of Stallknecht's mature manner of painting more or less coincides with the murals. This is partly because of the scale and the larger format of the work. It is also partly because of the subject and purpose of the murals.—story telling of epic proportions in which she selectively uses her considerable artistic skills (which she has acquired through study and experimentation) to create the most dramatic and most memorable series of images she can. To what degree this was conscious or instinctive is difficult if not impossible to determine. What can be said is that in her three Chatham murals, Stallknecht succeeded in creating a marvelous portrait of a New England town.

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