

Helen Hyde (1868 - 1919)

Helen Hyde, printmaker, painter, etcher and illustrator, was born in Lima, New York on April 6, 1868. She spent a privileged and cultured childhood in Oakland, California. Her maternal grandparents had crossed the continent to California in a covered wagon in the Gold Rush of 1850, but her mother Helen returned to the family home in Lima, where she gave birth to Helen. In 1870, she rejoined her family with her infant child in California.

Helen first learned to paint at twelve years of age from her neighbour, Ferdinand Richardt. This was abruptly ended two years later due to the death of her father and the temporary resettling of the family in San Francisco. Helen and her mother moved to Philadelphia, and after her graduation from Wellesley School, Helen returned to San Francisco and studied at the San Francisco School of Design. Hyde was briefly at the Art Students' League in New York between 1888-1889.

The following year she departed on a four-year sojourn in Europe, which included a year in Berlin studying with Franz Skarbina, three years in Paris studying with Rafael Collin and Albert Sterner, and months in Holland and England. In Paris, Hyde met Félix Régamey who introduced her to "the loveliness of things Japanese", and this meeting was to have a profound effect on her life and work. When her pictures were refused at the salon, she returned home in 1894, determined to give up her chosen profession. Taking up home in San Francisco after ten years of study, the Chinese characteristics of that city interested her and her sketches made in Chinatown became popular. Here she met Josephine Hyde, (no relation), who convinced Helen to specialize in printmaking. At that time she became fascinated with Chinese children and all things Asian. Her interest in the Orient took her to Japan where she planned on visiting for a few months, but ended up staying for fifteen year from 1899-1914. Her experience there brought to the US an interest in Japanese works.

In 1899, Hyde became an ardent student of the Japanese language and of classical brush painting with Tomonobu Kano. Acquiring the Japanese method of wielding the brush, she was rewarded when her master asked her to paint a kakemono for the annual exhibition. In competition with Japanese artists, her picture, *A Monarch of Japan*, won the first prize.

Hyde sought out Oriental subjects in San Francisco's Chinatown and produced her first series of color etchings. She is best known for her Japanese subjects of women and children. One of her most successful etchings is *Little Cherry Blossom*. She was also known for genre, landscapes and interiors.

Hyde's interest in color woodcut caused her to search out Emil Orlik, an Austrian artist working in Tokyo. It was from him that she learned the skills of carving wood blocks. She eventually realized that the results she was striving for were attainable only by working within the Japanese system and she employed Japanese carvers and printers (Shohiro Murate carved her woodcuts for eleven years).

Hyde later painted in Mexico, and she also wrote the *Color Lure of Mexico*. The Japanese influence is evident in these works. While she may have imitated the Japanese in her approach to painting, "Her children are real children, sound in body and healthy in disposition. And above all they are children who do something." She used pastel colors in her works very effectively, she was especially fond of soft pinks, greens, lavenders and yellows. It was said the "color of her prints are their greatest charm. One scholar stated that "as an interpreter of children she has done for Japan what Boutet de Movel did for France".

Outside of a few return visits to the states and trips to China and India, Japan was Hyde's home until 1914 when she returned to the U.S. due to ill health. She lived in Chicago and then returned to California to live with a sister in her final year. Hyde never married, and died in Pasadena on May 13, 1919.

Hyde exhibited both nationally and internationally, and even her beloved Japan honored her work with awards. Other awards included the gold medal at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exhibition in Seattle in 1909 and the bronze medal for woodcut at the Panama-Pacific International Exhibition in 1915.

She exhibited at the California Midwinter International Exposition in 1894; Mechanics' Institute, San Francisco in 1896; St Louis Exposition in 1897; Mark Hopkins Institute in 1898; Alaska-Yukon Exposition, Seattle in 1909 (gold medal); Chicago Society of Etchers, 1911-1919; Paris Salon in 1913 and in 1914; California Society of Etchers, 1913-1918; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1915; Panama-Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco in 1915 (bronze medal); Art Institute of Chicago in 1916 and again in 1920 (solos).

Her work is represented in the collections of the San Francisco Museum of Art; the Boston Museum; the Library of Congress; the Art Institute of Chicago; the California State Library; the New York Public Library; the Mills College in Oakland, California; the De Young Museum and the California Historical Society.

Hyde was a member of the Chicago Society of Etchers, the California Society of Etchers; the San Francisco Art Association; the California Society of Printmakers; the San Francisco Sketch Club; the Chicago Society of Artists, and a life member of the Société de la Gravure en Couleur.

The *American Magazine of Art* closes its tribute to this artist as follows: "There is a charm about her rendition of children, whether they be Japanese, Chinese, Mexican or American, which gives token to her sympathy with childhood; and with her passing has gone from the world of life of cheerfulness and courage and high purpose which, like a flower of sweet fragrance, has added beauty to life."