

Emily Howard (1836-1914)

At the turn of the twentieth century, when the public reception of visual arts in Bloomington, Illinois could be characterized as “tepid,” or indeed, “positively cold,” and “comparatively few people ... [knew] to what extent genuine and meritorious works of art” were produced in the city, there remained a commitment on the part of local artists—largely women—and the media to elevate the appreciation and patronage of painting to levels achieved by music and literature.¹ One such artist, **Emily Howard (1836-1914)**, actually embodied the elevation of two of these kindred forms of artistic expression—namely music and painting.

Emily Aminta Howard was the first of seven children born to Baptist missionary parents, Reverend Hosea and Theresa Howard, in the former nation of Burma (now Myanmar).² Emily was born on October 30, 1836 in the city of Moulmein (now Mawlamyine). Howard’s parents were affiliated with the Missionary High School in that city, and it has been said that her father was a “pioneer in the establishment of education to supplement preaching” that was “employed in all the mission stations of the world.”³ The Howards conducted their work at the missionary school for the first 16 years of Emily’s life, until her parents’ ill health necessitated the family’s return—or first voyage, in the case of the children (Emily, sisters Mary and Louisa, and brothers David, Hosea, Jr., and Charles)—to the United States.⁴

If ill health and six adolescent children was not enough to make the months-long journey by ship from southeast Asia to the eastern coast of the United States harrowing enough, the Howards were unfortunate to encounter hurricane-force winds and waves that ultimately sank their ship the *Madura*, with much of the cargo still onboard. Quite a bit is known of the events leading up to and following that fateful day at sea on March 20, 1850 because of a letter scribed by Rev. Howard to fellow missionaries of his who remained in Burma, which was subsequently published with permission by the *New York Recorder*, a Baptist newspaper of the period.⁵ In this letter, drafted from Port Louis on the Isle of France (today known as the Republic of Mauritius off the coast of Madagascar) on April 20, 1850, Rev. Howard details how, having been on the sea since March 1, the ship with its crew of 24 and 12 passengers, entered turbid waters with waves “high, irregular, and often conflicting with one another.”⁶ These conditions persisted from roughly March 11 until March 20, when a “heavy lurch” of the ship sent a cask of water through a skylight immediately above the cabins below.⁷ Broken glass and bent metal rained down on the passengers—mildly injuring Rev. Hosea and Charles Howard, and water flooded the cabins. However, the worst was yet to come. Three days later on March 23, the *Madura* found itself in the midst of a hurricane and without a mast, sails, rigging, and bulwarks—which had all been carried away by the storm.⁸ All was not lost, however. Fortunately, two U.S. ships—the *Blanche*

¹ “An Art Loan Exhibit, Bloomington Ladies Arranging a Display of Miniatures,” *Daily Bulletin* (April 9, 1899); *Daily Leader* (December 16, 1896).

² “Former Local Artist Dead,” *Daily Bulletin* (June 11, 1914).

³ “What They Say,” *Pantagraph* (June 12, 1914).

⁴ *Ibid.*; “Miss Emily Howard Dead,” *Pantagraph* (June 12, 1914).

⁵ *An Account of the Shipwreck of Rev. Hosea Howard & Family: As Published by M.B. Anderson, in the New-York Recorder, 1850* (New York: E.H. Tripp, Printer & Stationer, 1856).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

and the *Columbus*—came upon the floundering *Madura* and saw to its rescue.⁹ After multiple trips from the sinking ship, passengers and crew of the *Madura* eventually found themselves at the Port of Louis on April 5 awaiting passage to the United States. Rev. Howard concluded his account saying, “On the whole, though we have been cast down, we have not been destroyed or forsaken. . . .and all, as a family, appear cheerful in the thought of being once more on the great deep.”¹⁰ The Howards eventually arrived in Bloomington, Illinois eight years later in 1858 by way of New York City and Massachusetts.

Having attended school in Pittsfield, Massachusetts and having taught classes in piano, vocal performance, and otherwise while living in New York City with her family, Howard was prepared to establish herself as an accomplished instructor immediately upon her arrival in Bloomington.¹¹ A March 1859 advertisement suggests that Howard was actively recruiting students in piano, voice, melodeon, and organ.¹² By the mid-1860s, Howard had expanded her class offerings to include oil painting, crayon drawing, and guitar.¹³ Howard appears to have conducted these early lessons from her father’s office at 36 W. North Street, who was practicing as a homeopathic physician at the time.¹⁴ Following her father’s death in 1868, all subsequent newspaper adverts direct prospective pupils to the Howard family residence at 403 E. North Street (later renamed Monroe Street).¹⁵

In addition to private lessons, Howard was hired to teach music, French, drawing, and painting at Conover’s Bloomington Female Seminary from at least 1869 to 1871.¹⁶ Conover’s Female Seminary was established in 1856 by Reverend R. Conover and his wife, M.H. Conover.¹⁷ The school was located at 507 E. Grove Street, and was said to be the second best residence in Bloomington at the time (second only to the home of Asa Moore, a preeminent industry and horse railroad man).¹⁸ The scholastic year was divided into two terms of 16 weeks each, with two weeks vacation for the holidays.¹⁹ A “regular course” cost \$12 in advance per term (approximately \$340 in 2017 dollars), with additional costs for subjects ranging from Latin or Greek, French or German, Drawing, Painting in oil or watercolors, Music on piano or guitar, with an additional cost for extra practice on piano.²⁰ Boarding costs included furnished rooms,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Miss Emily Howard Dead,” *Pantagraph* (June 12, 1914); “Miss Howard,” *Pantagraph* (March 14, 1859).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Miss E. A. Howard, Music, Painting and Drawing,” *Pantagraph* (October 15, 1866).

¹⁴ “Deaths, Howard,” *Daily Pantagraph* (July 15, 1868); Rev. Hosea Howard died on July 14, 1868 at the age of 69.

¹⁵ “Miss E. A. Howard,” *Pantagraph* (September 26, 1876); “Professional, Miss E.A. Howard,” *Pantagraph* (June 9, 1900).

¹⁶ “Commercial Notices. Bloomington Female Seminary,” *Pantagraph* (November 18, 1869); “A Tale That is Told,” *Weekly Pantagraph* (March 9, 1894); “Conover Seminary of Early Days,” *Pantagraph* (July 3, 1915); “Miss E. A. Howard,” *Pantagraph* (May 27, 1871).

¹⁷ “A Tale That is Told.”

¹⁸ Ibid. The house at 507 E. Grove Street was demolished in 1894.

¹⁹ “Conover Seminary of Early Days.”

²⁰ Ibid.

fuel and gaslights, and washing.²¹ Students could also board with private families for a lesser charge. In the eighteen years that the school was in existence, more than 500 young women attended courses in some capacity.²²

In 1883, Howard began teaching guitar in the then department of music at Illinois Wesleyan University, and by 1891 was appointed Director of the School of Painting and instructor of landscape and still life in oil in the College of Arts.²³ Howard continued to offer private lessons while employed at the university.²⁴

To the fortune of her fellow residents of Bloomington, Howard did not limit her creativity to the instruction of her students. She knew that “art has its positive influence, not only in developing character but in making life better and more useful,” and thus regularly performed concerts and exhibited her works throughout the region.²⁵ In February 1870, Howard performed a rendition of “Home to our Mountain” at a concert benefitting Marie Litta, world-renowned opera singer, Bloomington-native, and cousin of Howard’s close friend and fellow artist Almira Ives Burnham.²⁶ Howard also lent her musical talents, often as a substitute, to various local churches.²⁷

In February 1883, Howard hosted her first major art exhibition from her parlors at East North Street.²⁸ Over 300 hundred people attended to view the “beautiful display of finely executed paintings, productions of Miss Howard and her students.”²⁹ The exhibition featured works of oil, china, crayon, pastel, and satin; with a vocal and instrumental performance by Howard and her students to complete the reception.³⁰ Howard’s sister-in-law, Mary Howard (married to brother David) of St. Louis, and friend Almira Burnham, assisted with affair.³¹

Following that reception, Howard continued to exhibit her works locally—contributing a number of pieces to an exhibition just two months later at the Chicago Art Store at 103 E. Front Street.³² The *Pantagraph* article denoting the hundreds of contributions to the loaned art exhibition extended a full column and included reference to Howard’s “several landscapes and flower pieces, two figure pieces, . . . a Limoges [porcelain] and three paintings on velvet, the last of which are perfect.”³³ Howard successfully marketed this “highly popular” velvet painting technique, even instructing her friend Burnham in the style.³⁴

²¹ Ibid.

²² “A Tale That is Told.”

²³ *Wesleyana* (1895); “Faculty of College of Arts,” *Pantagraph* (June 19, 1891).

²⁴ “Miss E. A. Howard, Instructor of Oil Painting,” *Pantagraph* (December 23, 1891).

²⁵ “The Woman’s Club,” *Pantagraph* (February 8, 1900).

²⁶ “The Benefit Concert,” *Daily Leader* (February 23, 1870).

²⁷ “Concert,” *Pantagraph* (January 26, 1875); *Daily Leader* (February 10, 1879); *Daily Leader* (September 29, 1882)

²⁸ *Pantagraph* (February 23, 1883).

²⁹ Ibid, “Successful Reception,” *Pantagraph* (February 24, 1883).

³⁰ “Successful Reception.”

³¹ *Pantagraph* (February 23, 1883).

³² “Art Reception: The Loan Art Reception Proves to be a Magnificent Success,” *Pantagraph* (May 14, 1883).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *Pantagraph* (April 2, 1883).

At another exhibition less than one year later in March 1884, Howard's talents were singled out again in a newspaper report saying, "not to allude to the work of private individuals, it may not be deemed inappropriate to allude to the oil paintings of Miss Emily Howard...as particularly meritorious."³⁵ In May 1885, Howard showed at the sixth annual Central Illinois Art Union in Peoria, Illinois, as well as at the Bloomington Art and Loan Exhibition at Rink Hall.³⁶ In December 1891, Howard's contributions to an exhibit hosted at A.T. Fagerburg's at 514 N. Main Street were equally spotlighted and not without praise.³⁷ Among the "most admired works" in the exhibit were Howard's, whose "special ability lies in still life."³⁸ In the eternal spirit of supporting local, the *Pantagraph* went so far as to suggest that, "many people yearly buy from foreign artists, while if they had seen Miss Howard's they would have preferred to recognize and encourage home talent."³⁹

As equipped to preach on what she practiced, as she was to practice what she preached, Howard presented a paper to the Women's Club on February 19, 1902 on the subject of "Painting in the United States as Influenced by Foreign Study."⁴⁰ In this talk, Howard explained the evolution of American art across three periods, beginning in 1684—when "America was still young and there had been no time and no means for any great development either in taste or serious study—to 1825—when art showed a "decided advancement, more distinctly American, especially in landscapes—to 1876—following the Centennial Exposition (World's Fair) in Philadelphia, where the "display of fine arts, both foreign and domestic, together with the national prosperity of the United States, had much to do in stimulating a new activity in the study of painting."⁴¹ In this period, Howard noted the "influence of younger men" who had "tired of the old methods."⁴²

Though more often the master than the apprentice, Howard was not above enhancing her artistic prowess through study with fellow experts. The opportunity for her to do so under competent instructors, however, was rare and she was often left to "dig it all out herself."⁴³ The teaching of artist Albert W. Kenney was one exception. Kenney lived and worked in Elgin, Illinois, but regularly traveled to Bloomington and elsewhere to instruct and exhibit the works of the area's members of the elite.⁴⁴ While under Kenney's instruction in 1886, Howard embarked on the creation of a seemingly personal work to those familiar with her life's story. As reported in the *Pantagraph*, "The sketch of this scene must have been taken directly after a storm. The heavy sky still clasps the bosom of the sea in a mystical mantle of surf and spray. An old wreck has been driven in among the rocks near the shore, around which billowy torrents beat and break

³⁵ "Washingtonian Art Exhibition," *Pantagraph* (March 13, 1884).

³⁶ "Bloomington's Contribution," *Daily Leader* (May 20, 1885); "Art and Artists," *Daily Leader* (May 27, 1885); "The Art Exhibit," *Daily Leader* (May 28, 1885).

³⁷ "An Array of Art," *Pantagraph* (December 10, 1891).

³⁸ "A Local Artist's Work," *Pantagraph* (December 12, 1891).

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ "Great Future is Art," *Pantagraph* (February 20, 1902).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ "Art in Bloomington," *Daily Bulletin* (April 16, 1899).

⁴⁴ "Kane County History: Museum Lands Painting by Elgin Artist Albert Kenney," Beth Nawara (January 25, 2019), <https://kanecountyconnects.com/2019/01/kane-county-history-museum-lands-painting-by-elgin-artist-albert-kenney/> (Date accessed August 25, 2020).

with a power and fury known only to the sea...a few tireless sea-gulls are seen hovering about the old wreck.”⁴⁵ Howard’s artist compatriot, Almira Burnham, was also a student of Kenney’s; and both women showed in an April 1886 student exhibition.⁴⁶ The exhibition featured 73 paintings almost all done by local women, six of which were Howard’s.⁴⁷ Howard is also reported to have studied under such “eminent artists” as Frederick Warren Freer (1849-1908) of Chicago.⁴⁸

Howard and Burnham showed together a number of times, often at Strickle Bros. art store at 415 N. Main Street in Bloomington.⁴⁹ It was also reported that the two artists briefly shared a studio in the late 1890s, though the location remains unknown. In 1896, the *Daily Leader* made note of the “rare beauty and merit” of the works on display in these two painters’ shared studio, while in the same figurative breath making a promise to its readers to “lend its influence in bringing this important factor of civilization [i.e. visual art]...more prominently before the people.”⁵⁰

In May 1906, the History Club purchased one of Howard’s paintings with the intent that it serve as the “nucleus” of a public art collection for the Withers Public Library.⁵¹ Elements of this collection are now preserved within the permanent collection of the McLean County Arts Center. Other prominent purchases of Howard’s work includes the sale of a painting titled, “A Study of Books,” to a resident of St. Louis, Missouri, by way of an art dealer in the same city; as well as the sale of a painting depicting a basket of corn—which was intended to adorn the walls of the Corn Belt Bank in Downtown Bloomington—to a man of Boston, Massachusetts.⁵²

Howard served on the board of Withers Public Library and was an early member of the Bloomington Art Association after its reorganization in 1922, of which her friend Almira Burnham was a charter member.⁵³

Emily Howard died in Louisville, Kentucky on June 10, 1914 of “infirmities of old age” following a “long period of illness.”⁵⁴ In 1909, Howard had moved to Kentucky to live with her sister Mrs. Louisa Clelland, but was residing at a care facility at the time of her death.⁵⁵ An earlier attempt to preserve her sight through surgery having failed, at the end of her life Howard was completely blind.⁵⁶ However, though a tragic condition for an artist, it was said that she was “always cheerful” in spite of her “affliction.”⁵⁷

⁴⁵ “A Master Amongst Us,” *Pantagraph* (April 2, 1886).

⁴⁶ “Art Amateurs,” *Daily Leader* (April 16, 1886).

⁴⁷ “Art Amateurs,” *Weekly Leader* (April 22, 1886).

⁴⁸ “Art in Bloomington,” *Daily Bulletin* (April 16, 1899).

⁴⁹ “See Them,” *Pantagraph* (April 8, 1892); “The Art Exhibit,” *Pantagraph* (December 3, 1895).

⁵⁰ *Daily Leader* (December 16, 1896).

⁵¹ “50 Years Ago,” *Pantagraph* (May 6, 1956).

⁵² “A Study of Books,” *Pantagraph* (April 16, 1887); *Daily Leader* (May 30, 1895).

⁵³ “The New Library Building,” *Weekly Leader* (May 25, 1882); “Bloomington’s First Art Club,” *Pantagraph* (May 12, 1922).

⁵⁴ “Former Local Artist Dead,” *Daily Bulletin* (June 11, 1914).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ “With the Sick,” *Weekly Pantagraph* (January 13, 1905).

⁵⁷ “Miss Emily Howard Dead,” *Pantagraph* (June 12, 1914).

A testament to their friendship, John H. and Almira Burnham were the first locals of Bloomington to be notified of Emily Howard's passing.⁵⁸ John Burnham served as one six pallbearers at Howard's funeral, and the couple offered to host Howard's relatives who had traveled for the funeral for the duration of their stay in Bloomington.⁵⁹

Howard's funeral was held at First Baptist Church on the afternoon of June 12.⁶⁰ Reverend J.L. Jackson officiated.⁶¹ Those present at the funeral included Howard's sister Louisa, her brother Hosea, Jr., and Mary Howard, wife of her late brother David.⁶² Howard was preceded in death by a brother who died in infancy in Burma, her sister Mary (1862), father Hosea (1868), mother Theresa (1875), and brother Charles (1908).

Howard's mother Theresa, described as a "woman of rare mental ability and great worth," was the first teacher hired at Bloomington's first school for colored children, after its incorporation in 1860. She taught there for two years. It is possible that Emily shared her mother's compassion for all children regardless of color, as in 1887 Emily was one of three to serve on the "committee on colored children" during a citywide baby show hosted at Turner Hall in Bloomington. Winners in this category included local children Alverta Duff, Jesse Savage, and Roy Williams.⁶³

In September 1882, Emily's brother Charles was "declared insane" before Judge Reuben Moore Benjamin of Bloomington. According to a report printed in the *Daily Leader*, Charles's condition was attributed to an "attack of fever" fifteen years prior to this declaration. He had been committed to the Illinois Central Hospital for the Insane in Jacksonville, Illinois once before, but was released when his condition improved. However, the "cure was not permanent" with the "malady having returned with a renewed violence." The article indicated that Charles would be "sent to Jacksonville" as soon as an order for his admission was obtained. It is not clear what impact Charles's condition and related circumstances had on Emily and her other siblings. Charles spent the last eight years of his life in residence at the McLean County Poor Farm. He died on March 19, 1908.⁶⁴

Emily Howard is buried next to her parents and her brother Charles at the city cemetery (now Evergreen Memorial Cemetery) in Bloomington.

The McLean County Museum of History holds two paintings of Howard's in its permanent collection. Both oil-on-canvas, still life paintings came as a donation from Timothy Ives in 1996, having been displayed at the boyhood home of former Governor of Illinois and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai E. Stevenson II, located at 1316 E. Washington Street in Bloomington. One features a glass of water next to a bunch of grapes, draped over three red apples, with a few grapes loose from the bunch. The painting, purchased by Helen or Lewis

⁵⁸ "Former Local Artist Dead."

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ "Funeral of Miss Emily Howard," *Pantagraph* (June 13, 1914).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² "Former Local Artist Dead."

⁶³ Transcriptions of the McLean County Historical Society Vol. II: School Records and Other Papers (Bloomington, Illinois: Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co., 1903); Board of Education Record of Meetings. Bloomington, Illinois. April 8, 1857 – April 9, 1874 (Bloomington Board of Education Archive), 85; "Our Babies," *Weekly Pantagraph* (May 27, 1887).

⁶⁴ "Charles M. Howard," *Daily Leader* (September 20, 1882).

Stevenson in the 1890s, is framed in a gilded gesso wooden frame with an ornate raised edge by Mandel Bros. in Chicago. The second is of a metal pan turned on its side and spilling out eight peaches onto the grass. The painting is framed in a gilded gesso over wood frame with a molded edge. It once belonged to Alice Fell and was later displayed at the Stevenson home.

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