City of Bloomington Boasts of Many Talented Female Artists at the Turn of the Century
By Candace Summers, originally published in The Pantagraph on September 27, 2020.

Photo 1: This oil-on-canvas still life 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 is framed in a gilded gesso wooden frame with an ornate raised edge. Signed by E.A. Howard and framed by Mandel Bros. in Chicago, it was purchased by Helen or Lewis Stevenson in the 1890s and displayed in their home.

Photo 2: Oil-on-canvas still life 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 house.

Evergreen Memorial Cemetery, Bloomington’s oldest cemetery, is the final resting place for many monumental women artists in McLean County history. This year’s Virtual Evergreen Cemetery Walk features two outstanding women actively engaged in the arts in our community. One of those women is Emily Howard, who dedicated her life to not only establishing her artistic identity, but to helping people understand that “art has its positive influence, not only in developing character but in making life better and more useful.”

Howard’s early life, however, reads more like an adventure novel. She was one of seven children born to missionary parents Rev. Hosea and Theresa Howard in Burma (today known as the country of Myanmar) on October 30, 1836. Her father was a missionary for the Baptist church, and when Emily was about 15 or 16 years old, the family left Burma on account of her parents’ poor health. They boarded the ship the Madura bound for the United States on March 1, 1850, on what should have been a routine ocean voyage.

The first twenty days of sailing were uneventful. However, on March 20, the ship encountered bad weather, which turned into a hurricane three days later. According to an account written by her father Hosea, the ship was tossed about for several days, until finally the masts were destroyed. When it appeared as if the ship was at the point of breaking apart, and “it seemed that the crew must take to the boats, there was a cry of ‘A sail in sight!’” Passengers and crew were
rescued by the United States ship *Columbus*, and were taken to the Isle and France (today known as the Republic of Mauritius off the coast of Madagascar) landing on April 5. The family remained there until they secured passage to the United States.

Emily Howard attended and graduated from a girl’s school in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, before going on to teach music and painting at “first-class schools,” and to some of the finest families in New York City while her family lived on the East Coast. In 1858, the family moved to Bloomington where her father practiced as a homeopathic physician. Howard resumed teaching music, giving lessons in piano, melodeon, organ, and voice cultivation to young women at her father’s office located on West North Street (today Monroe Street). By 1869 she taught music, French, drawing, and painting at the Bloomington Female Seminary operated by Rev. Robert Conover, which was considered “one of the prominent educational institutions of Bloomington in that day.”

Howard showed a talent for painting at an early age, and her skills developed with remarkable success. She continued to hone her skills throughout her life, taking lessons from artists such as Albert W. Kenney, who regularly traveled to Bloomington and elsewhere to instruct and exhibit the works of the area’s members of high society. While Kenney had a studio in Bloomington in 1886, and with artist Frederick Warren Freer in Chicago. She also traveled to the East Coast and Chicago to “refresh herself in a new atmosphere, and take a few lessons from eminent artists.” She preferred painting still-lifes (focusing on fruit, and flowers), and landscapes, but did dabble in paintings that included human figures too.

She hosted art receptions at her home 403 E. North Street over the years. In 1883 she exhibited paintings created by herself and her students. Works of art on display included oil landscapes, china, crayon, pastel, and satin. It was reported that over 300 people were in attendance and thoroughly enjoyed the displays created by Howard and her students.

Her superior skills as a teacher of the arts was recognized and affirmed when she was hired by Illinois Wesleyan University in 1883 to teach guitar. By 1891, she was made director of the school of painting and was an instructor of landscape and still life in oil in the Wilson College of Arts.

Her work could be found displayed all over the city of Bloomington and at art shows throughout the region. If you were walking by Danley’s Temple of Music on the 300 block of North Main Street in downtown Bloomington shortly before Christmas in 1877, you would have seen three of Howard’s paintings on display, which the *Pantagraph* proclaimed was “very creditable work.” During an 1883 display at the Chicago Art Store at 103 E. Front Street, it was noted that the pieces she displayed included several landscapes and floral pieces, two figure pieces, “one of which is a child crying,” a Limoges (porcelain), and three paintings on velvet. It is worth noting here that Howard taught this new method of painting on velvet, which became quite popular at the time (including being utilized by her good friend and fellow artist Almira Ives Burnham). At an 1884 exhibit at the Washingtonian Hall, it was noted that the exhibit (which included several oil paintings created by Howard) “strikingly illustrates the remarkable advancement in the last year or two made in art by Bloomington people,” thanks to teachers like Emily Howard. Her art
could also be found at exhibits throughout the region, including in Peoria in May 1885 at the sixth annual Central Illinois Art Union exhibition.

And her artwork could be found in many homes in Bloomington-Normal and abroad. During the holiday season in 1891, her work was displayed and for sale at A.T. Fagerburg’s located at 514 N. Main Street in downtown Bloomington. Admirers of her work stated that “it strikes one looking for a beautiful Christmas present that one of these paintings is as appropriate and acceptable as could be found. Many people yearly buy the work of foreign artists, while if they had seen Miss Howard’s they would have preferred to recognize and encourage home talent” instead. In 1887 her painting, “A Study of Books,” was sold to a gentleman in St. Louis. He so admired her work that he purchased additional paintings from her as well. Additionally, one of her works was the foundation for the art collection at Withers Public Library (today Bloomington Public Library). The History Club, wishing to honor a local artist, purchased one of Howard’s paintings and donated it to the library in 1906.

The Museum is fortunate to have two of Howard’s paintings in its collection, both still-lifes of fruit (as seen above). Both of these paintings came as a donation from Timothy Ives in 1996, and were displayed at the Stevenson House (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.

Emily Howard is one of eight feature characters in the 2020 Virtual Evergreen Cemetery Walk. Tickets are on sale now and can be purchased by visiting the Museum’s website mchistory.org. Tickets are $25 household General Public and $20 household Museum Member (use coupon code CEMWALKMEM2020). Ticket holders will have the option to view the Walk in its entirety as a full-length video, or watch each performance individually, as many times as they want between October 3 and November 2.

Howard will be featured with fellow artist Almira Ives Burnham, whom she shared a studio with at one time. Born in Burma to missionary parents, Howard and her family were shipwrecked upon their return to America. Similarly stricken by disaster, Burnham suffered a house fire the week after several of her paintings were destroyed in a train fire coming back from the Illinois State Fair in Peoria. With humor, stubbornness, and quiet defiance, these friends refused to let misfortune define their lives—preferring dedication to their art.