Painter Almira Burnham embodied refined society of Victorian era

By Bill Kemp (originally published September 12, 2010)
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Caption Photo 1: This photo of Almira Ives Burnham was taken around 1885, in what is presumably her studio at her home on 302 North Main Street. There are many fine examples of her still-life work in this image, including one that looks similar to the photo of her work included with this article.

Caption Photo 2: One of three oil-on-canvas paintings created by Almira Ives Burnham, which are housed in the permanent collections at the McLean County Museum of History.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, Bloomington’s “haves,” comprised primarily of an educated, comfortably stable and earnest upper-middle class, participated in an endless array of music, literature, theater and fine arts programs, ranging from afternoon teas and informal poetry readings to evening chamber concerts and gallery openings.

Before electronic, homogeneous mass media (from motion pictures to television to the Internet) thoroughly overran our culture, leisure activity was vastly more localized, participatory and communal.

Bloomington and its quiet “suburb” to the north were home to a surprising number of societies and clubs peopled with the wives, sons and daughters (and occasionally a husband or two) of refined society. There was Ashton’s Mandolin Orchestra, the Linden Literary League, the Amateur Musical Club, the Normal Art School and a dozen or more such high-minded associations.

Bloomington’s archetypal artiste of this late Victorian era was Almira Burnham, a matronly sort whose discerning eye and steady (if not overly inventive) brushwork produced hundreds of oil-on-canvas landscapes and still-lifes. She also painted on china, which was popular at the time, and occasionally dabbled in watercolors, and was best known for her eye-catching dewdrops, glistening on her still-life flowers, seemingly wet to the touch.
Almira Sarah Ives was born in northern Illinois in 1840, and was 12 years old in 1853 when her family settled in Bloomington. Thirteen years later she married Capt. John H. Burnham, a 1st lieutenant in the 33rd Illinois Volunteers during the Civil War, a regiment closely associated with Illinois State Normal University. After the war he worked as an agent for the King Bridge Co. of Cleveland, OH, and many of the iron bridges in Illinois date to his 35 years with the firm.

When Capt. Burnham wasn’t immersed in the world of structural iron he turned to the past, helping to establish the McLean County Historical Society and becoming one of the most important amateur historians in the area. For her part, Almira was soon recognized as a leading local light in the area of decorative and fine arts, and in 1888 she helped start the Bloomington Art Association.

The Burnhams, who never had children, would spend summers in New England, where Almira would paint picturesque coastal scenes under the watchful eye of the “famous” French artist de Blois (first name unknown). She also studied with Daniel F. Bigelow, described as the dean of Chicago landscape painters, and Albert W. Kenney of Bloomington.

During the twilight of the Victorian era, the women dominated the Bloomington art scene. For instance, an 1886 exhibition at Albert Kenney’s studio featured 73 paintings (10 of which were Burnham’s), almost all done by local women, such as Dora Graham, Ella Perry, Sarah Wright and Kathryn Campbell.

In October 1892, the Burnham residence on E. Mulberry St. and that of neighbor Gen. George F. Dick were gutted by fire. An undersized water main hampered the ability of firemen to fight the blaze, so the gathered crowd “set to work at once removing the furniture,” according to The Pantagraph. Also saved were many—if not most—of Almira Burnham’s paintings.

“Perhaps the name best known in the city as an artist and lover of art is Mrs. J.H. Burnham,” noted the mysterious “Mme. Annette,” a local newspaperwomen writing in 1899.

Burnham was a colleague (and likely friend) of the more adventurous Ada de Conville, an artist with a studio in the Eddy Building downtown. “I believe in a Bohemian life,” de Conville told Mme. Annette. “To me it is an ideal life, where one meets people of broad culture, and lives in an artistic atmosphere, that beautifies and expresses life.” One imagines Burnham nodding in agreement, though she might have balked at de Conville’s celebration of impressionistic art, as well as the human form au naturale.

Around 1905, the Burnhams moved to 1321 E. Washington St. where Almira’s paintings “hung from floor to ceiling on every wall.” Though John Burnham passed away in early 1917, Almira remained active in the art community until called home by pneumonia on December 6, 1932.

The McLean County Museum of History holds three Burnham oil paintings in its art collection, including a still-life of four pink roses, painted circa 1890 (see accompanying image). Donated by Timothy Ives in 1996, the painting hung in the Franklin Park home of U.S. Vice President Adlai E. Stevenson and his wife Letitia Green Stevenson. It includes Burnham’s dewdrops, though these dainty splashes of reflected light are hard to see in newsprint.

Burnham’s estate included some 400 paintings, many of which were given to family and friends, and thus it’s safe to say that there are a fair number of Almira Burnham works in and around the Twin Cities.
Almira Burnham will be one of eight feature characters in the 2020 Evergreen Cemetery Walk. Due to the continued Covid-19 pandemic, the video production of the Virtual Evergreen Cemetery Walk will be viewable through the online platform Teachable. Teachable will allow the Museum to present this year’s production in a way that is accessible to both the general public and the many student groups who annually participate. 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. 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).

Burnham will be featured with fellow artist Emily Howard, 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.