

The celebrations of our Centennial Year in 2009 prompted a flood of interest and enquiries, notably from all parts of Canada and the UK. Of particular interest was a query from Kathryn Young, who along with another Manitoba scholar, Sarah McKinnon, was working on a biography of Canadian artist, Mary Riter Hamilton.

Born in Ontario in 1868, and reared in Manitoba, Hamilton was initially a painter of china tea services, who, after early widowhood, aimed to become a professional painter and undertook travel and study in Europe around the turn of the century in the manner of Victoria's Emily Carr and Sophie Pemberton, earning some recognition both in France and Canada. Hamilton spent the Great War years in Victoria – she lived here from 1914 to 1919 – and the writers were interested to know of any links to the Island Arts and Crafts Society during that time.



We were able to establish that she exhibited in three IACS annual shows - 1913, 1914 and 1917 - during her Victoria sojourn, and that she supported herself, with some difficulty, by opening a studio and taking portrait commissions. Some of these portraits of BC lieutenant-governors still hang in Government House. It at this point that she declared it was impossible to earn a living as a professional painter.

Hamilton had an ambition to be a war artist, but tradition at that time was firmly against risking the lives of the fairer sex in a war zone. However, after the Armistice, she received a commission from the Amputation Club of BC (known later as the War Amps) to produce paintings of the battlefields in France and Belgium in the aftermath of war. For three years she lived on that scarred landscape in the most primitive conditions, achieving some 300 images. Reportedly, during this time, she had a Victoria patron sell off some of her paintings to supplement her income. Unsurprisingly the experience left her physically and emotionally drained, and never again able to paint with the same intensity.

During the 1920s exhibitions of her work was held in Victoria in, Vancouver, Paris and London. She returned to Canada in 1925, and unselfishly donated all her work to the National Archives, despite being financially strained and obliged to revert to designing dress accessories to make ends meet. She retired partially blind to Vancouver in 1930.

Her health continued to deteriorate and with the complete loss of her sight in 1948 she was found to be living in abject poverty and passed away at a psychiatric institution in 1954.

This was a sad end to a life of adventure and tragedy, fuelled by a powerful will, with her work perhaps not fully recognized by the artistic establishment.

However, after her death she was remembered here when Colin Graham arranged a retrospective exhibition of her work at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 1959, and her art continued to be displayed both nationally and internationally.



It's good to know that Young and McKinnon launched their meticulously researched work, *No Man's Land: the Life and Art of Mary Riter Hamilton* (University of Manitoba Press), in 2017 – and our Club and our history book earn a mention!

*By John Lover*