

Portsmouth Historical Society Presents

Gertrude Fiske: American Master

With Companion Exhibition of *Seacoast Masters Today*

At the Academy Gallery at Discover Portsmouth

Friday, April 6 - Sunday, September 30, 2018

Member's Opening Gala: Thursday, April 5, 2018

Curated by Lainey McCartney

Gertrude Fiske (1879-1961), a Weston, Massachusetts, native who painted in Portsmouth, is an American Master. She was a favored student and then the peer of several American Impressionists, including Edmund C. Tarbell, Frank Benson, Philip Hale, and Charles Woodbury. Robert Henri identified her genius as residing in how she 'sees,' and this gift of 'seeing' made her more independent than many. This independence set her apart.

Fiske was a founding member of the Boston Guild and the Ogunquit Art Association. Furthermore, she was appointed to the Massachusetts State Art Commission in 1930 with exceptional endorsement. She was the first woman ever appointed. This was no small feat considering what a hive of activity Boston was during this period in the greater art world. The appointing board said, "Fiske ranks with the foremost painters in the country.....and there are few artists who have been awarded more prizes than Miss Fiske in the entire country." They went on to say that, "...aside from her teachers, she has always had a strong artistic individuality of her own. There is a note of personal distinction in all of her work – a virile note."

In her lifetime, critics exalted her color sense, vivacity, élan, and original observation. In describing her portraits, a 1920 news article says, "Her frank and telling technique and style are well exemplified in her portraits...To the perception of what constitutes a likeness, which she possesses in a marked degree, Miss Fiske adds an unusual gift for presenting the personal character of the sitter, which gives her work a place by itself." Another article later that same year remarked on her, "adventurous spirit, creative impulse, and indifference to all current aesthetic fads." Artist and writer Chris Volpe asserted recently that Fiske rivals Mary Cassatt, and that "[her] serious studio work probed the psychological and social dimensions of female life with a power and depth that very few artists, male or female, had ever achieved." For the time period in which she painted, her work is considered brave, modern, enlightened, and compelling.

Although a trained and superb technical painter, she was compelled to put aside convention and formulas, in order to forge her own path – in art and in life. Fiske never married, although she was known to have had the opportunity. She maintained rich friendships with fellow painters referred to as “The Pine Hill Girls.” This group of women in Ogunquit lived and painted in close community on Pine Hill Road and trained under Charles Woodbury. This exhibition will be an in-depth exploration of Fiske’s work with a complement of material by several of her female contemporaries lending a deeper understanding of women artists at the dawn of their independence in this country. The social/political energy around women’s rights, at the turn of the century, encouraged a new autonomy, which is seen translated to bolder ideas and execution on canvas. To provide social and artistic context to the Fiske show, works by several of Fiske’s artist contemporaries will be featured in an adjacent gallery at Discover Portsmouth. “Sisters of the Brush and Palette” will include: Anne Carleton, Margaret J. Patterson, and the notable Portsmouth artist, Susan Ricker Knox.

A companion show, “Seacoast Masters Today,” in our balcony gallery will highlight several artists making their name today with the same drive and passion as Fiske and her peers. They are: Amy Brnger, Donna Harkins, Sydney Bella Sparrow, and Pamela DuLong Williams.

A rich lecture series and a catalogue will accompany this exhibition.

About the Exhibition Curator, Lainey McCartney

After graduating from Colby-Sawyer College and the University of New Hampshire with a degree in French Studies and Cultural Anthropology, Lainey’s studies included field work and interviews with the two remaining Canterbury Shakers. She then went on to work as a docent at the Currier Museum from 2008-2013 in various internal and outreach programs. She joined the curatorial and collections staff of Portsmouth Historical Society in 2014 to work with Gerry Ward, the institution’s curator, to update and maintain its collections catalogue, and she co-curated exhibitions at both Discover Portsmouth and the John Paul Jones House. “Gertrude Fiske: American Master” will be the first exhibition she has curated.