

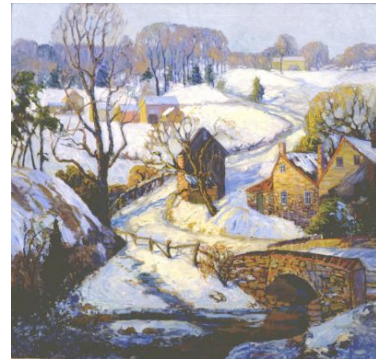
Back Road to Pipersville, n.d.

Fern Coppedge, 1881–1951

oil on canvas

H.38 x W. 40 inches

James A. Michener Art Museum, Gift of Robert J. Lillie



Biography

“People used to think me queer when I was a little girl because I saw deep purples and reds and violets in a field of snow. I used to be hurt over it until I gave up trying to understand people and concentrated on my love and understanding of landscapes. Then it didn’t make any difference.”

These were the words of Fern I. Coppedge, a Bucks County painter who struggled for understanding and acceptance most of her personal and professional life. Like many artists, she sometimes felt misunderstood and “different” from her peers. As a child in Illinois she was dazzled by sunlight reflected on snow. She loved music and nature, and she began taking watercolor classes as a teenager following an inspiring trip to the California coastline to visit her eldest sister in Palo Alto. The shimmering sea and the colorful snowfalls she encountered in nature later became constant themes in painting.

She attended the University of Kansas, where she met her husband, who encouraged her to pursue a career as a professional artist. The decision led Coppedge to train at the Chicago Institute of Art and the Art Students’ League in New York, and to spend summers at the Woodstock art colony. Exposure to the teaching methods of William Merritt Chase, the great American impressionist painter, and four summers studying with John F. Carlson, the en plein air painter, helped Coppedge to develop her own unique painting style. She moved to Philadelphia in 1918 to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, where she met Professor Daniel Garber, one of the leaders of the New Hope School of Impressionism. Extra study at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women (now Moore College of Art and Design) introduced Coppedge to other women artists with whom she would later form The Philadelphia Ten.

In 1920 Fern Coppedge bought a home across from Daniel Garber’s farm in Lumberville, approximately 6 miles from New Hope. It is here, in this geographic area, that many of her most famous paintings were completed. Coppedge settled into the New Hope art community and became a local icon. Many residents recall seeing her trudge outdoors with her bearskin coat, paints, and easel during the snowy winter months. She died in New Hope on April 21, 1951, leaving a legacy of hundreds of paintings.

Why did Fern Coppedge use such bright colors in her paintings?

For Coppedge, nature was a rainbow—snow, skies, water, and earth were all made up of shimmering bits of colors. Purple, red, turquoise, orange, and brilliant yellow were just a few of the colors that she mixed together to create paintings called landscapes. Placing the complementary colors side by side made the paintings appear to come alive with energy and direction. When our eyes “mix” the colors together we see an “impression” of a scene in nature. This style of work is called impressionism.



Where did Fern Coppedge create most of her paintings?

Coppedge painted in the New Hope area, especially along the Delaware River in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Can you locate New Hope on a map of Pennsylvania? The quaint river provided the subject matter for many New Hope impressionist artists. Can you list three common objects in nature that are found in most of her paintings?

How did a woman painter get to be so famous?

Fern Coppedge was one of the very few women painters from Bucks County who gained a regional, even national reputation. To avoid being looked down upon by local male artists such as Garber, Lathrop, and Redfield, Coppedge looked for friendship, support, and a place to discuss and exhibit her work in the company of female artists. Between 1922 and 1935 she showed her work with The Philadelphia Ten, a group of women artists who united in 1917 to promote their work in a male-dominated field. The women artists retained their individual styles and personalities but gained advantages by showing their work together.

How did Fern Coppedge describe her painting process?

Coppedge liked to paint snow scenes of roads, bridges, houses, the Delaware River, and, in the summers, the seaside in Gloucester, Maine. One resident of New Hope recalled seeing her painting while “crouched in two feet of snow with a blizzard raging about her, fingers stiff from the icy blasts. Her canvas was lashed to a tree, and at times it banged and fluttered like a sail.” This is how Coppedge described her painting method:

I may erase most of my sketch, but after I have it the way I want it in charcoal, then I work over the entire canvas with a large brush. I use thin paint in trying to get the right value-test different spots to see whether the scene should be painted rich or pale. Then I proceed with the actual painting using paint right from the tube. I hold the brush as arm's length and paint from the spine. That gives relaxation.

Is every painting by an artist equally “good”?

No! We can see in *Back Road to Pipersville* that in some parts of the painting the perspective seems incorrect. Just like our own drawings, some work is better than others. This is why museums and collectors purchase many artworks created by the same artist over time.

Learn More

Explore the vibrant use of color in art in the activity “Coppedge’s Blue Snow and Red Trees,” below.

I know that the Philadelphia Ten were a group of women artists in the early 1920's. How did they meet and why are they important?

The original group of women studied together at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women (now Moore College of Art), and shared a studio. Three of the women were part of the Exhibition in 1913 entitled “Ten Eastern Women Artists”. They did not use the name The Ten Philadelphia Painters until 1924. The group held one exhibition a year.



The painters that joined the group changed from year to year; there were not always ten. Their final exhibit was in 1941. Some examples of the artists that were not from Bucks County can be found at the Westmoreland Museum of Art, www.wmuseumaa.org, in their collection of Art by Women.

Fern Coppedge puts buildings into her landscapes; was this typical?

Some of the early New Hope artists did not put buildings or people into their landscapes but later paintings included these buildings. Fern Coppedge liked to paint barns and farm buildings even in her early paintings. This allowed her to use a lot more color than would otherwise be in a winter scene. When she moved into New Hope in 1929 she had an architect design a house for her, based on her sketches of local farmhouses, and a studio copied from a carriage shed. Her studio was known as Boxwood Studio.

Fern Coppedge studied at the Art Students League. Is this a school?

It is not a school in the sense that there are no degrees, diplomas, or even a set curriculum. The League was founded in 1875 by a group of students and teachers from the National Academy of Design. They had heard a rumor that the Academy was closing and decided that they would get together and teach each other. Life classes were often not available in other art schools and when they were available, they were not open to women. The Academy was one place that offered this opportunity. The Art Students League has continued to be a place of shared learning for 135 years.

Related Images

We know that Fern Coppedge liked to paint snow scenes. Some of her works are in the collection of the James A. Michener Art Museum at www.michenermuseum.org.

Her work is featured in a PBS *Antiques Roadshow* segment at www.pbs.org.

Other artists in Bucks County also liked to paint stone bridges, such as Andrew Meltzer and Glenna Bye. Their works are featured in the James A. Michener Art Museum's Bucks County Artists Database at www.michenermuseum.org.

Related Links

Bucks County is famous for its wooden covered bridges. The lattice design was first developed in 1820 by Ithiel Town, a New Englander, with overlapping wooden triangles as a major support structure. Originally there were 36 covered bridges. Today, only 12 remain. There were many reasons for building covered bridges. Some say they may have provided shelter for the traveler or they protected animals from their natural fear of crossing water. The bridges have been called "kissing bridges" and "wishing bridges." In truth, the roof was designed to protect the supporting beams on either side from the deteriorating effects of rain, ice and snow. The roof helped the bridge last much longer. The historical value of these bridges is being preserved by several local covered bridge organizations, including the Bucks County Covered Bridge Society. Learn more at www.buckscountycbs.org

Join the Central Bucks Bicycle Club on its annual Covered Bridge Ride.



Learn more at www.cbbikeclub.org.

The modern bridges I see today are made out of steel and look very different from the stone one in Coppedge's painting.

There are many of the stone arch bridges left in Bucks County. This type of bridge lasts a very long time. The only negative point is that the stone bridges are usually very narrow. New bridges are built close by that are wider and allow trucks to pass each other on the bridge. Look at some examples of the old stone bridges at bridgehunter.com/pa/bucks and www.warwick-bucks.org.

Bucks County's stone bridges look very old. Do we know when the first one was built?

No. But there is a stone bridge built in 1300-1190 BCE in Greece and it is still used today! You can see that it is very simple, and there is no cement used to hold it together. Stone arch bridges depend upon the use of pressure from the side supports and a keystone at the top to hold it together.

View it at en.wikipedia.org.

If you want to learn more about how an arch bridge stays up, go to www.pbs.org.

