

The Twins: Virginia and Jane, 1917

Joseph T. Pearson, Jr., 1876 – 1951

Oil on canvas

Gift of Oliver Pearson



Biography

The Twins: Virginia and Jane, was painted by Joseph T. Pearson in 1917. Joseph Thurman Pearson was born on February 6, 1876 in a small house next to his great-grandfather's property in Germantown, Pennsylvania. He went to elementary school and then a manual training school to learn his father's trade. But Joseph was not interested in the work of a box manufacturer, so his father arranged for him to work with an architect and sculptor in Philadelphia. The architect, Wilson Eyre, recognized Pearson's talent and recommended that he pursue the study of art. He attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and there had the opportunity to study with the American masters William Merritt Chase and Julian Alden Weir. He also traveled to Germany, Italy and Spain to study from more classical painters.

While traveling in Europe, Pearson corresponded with Emily Ruoff Fetter, and he married her on October 7, 1902. He had a large family. His wife took care of the children and was his business manager. Others drove the family car, as Pearson was so preoccupied with the landscape that they feared he would drive off the road. None of his children became artists. Below is a painting Pearson created of his wife, Emily.

Pearson loved painting landscapes. Pearson did not paint his landscapes en plein air as did most of his peers. Instead, he worked in the studio, laboring over paint colors and surfaces on a grand scale. He is known for his fondness for portraying animals in the wild, birds in flight, hunting and equestrian pursuits. He also worked in still life and portraiture. He made many religious paintings as well. In all of his paintings, Pearson experimented with thick impasto, scumbling and layered daubs of pigment. His palette was extremely vivid, at times almost iridescent.

Joseph Pearson was a teacher at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts for 25 years. He was known as a wonderful teacher with many talents. It is because of his work as a teacher that we can attribute Joseph Pearson with training many students and influencing the development of the arts in America. He preferred more traditional painting, so when the Academy leaned toward Modern Art in the 1930's, he quit teaching and returned to his home in Huntington Valley with his family. There he enjoyed rural life. His beloved wife Emily died suddenly in 1947, and soon after Pearson remarried Alice Kent Stoddard. She was a dear friend of the Pearson family and easily settled into life at "Pearsons' Corner."



When Joseph Pearson died in 1951, the family decided to keep his studio in tact in his memory. He did not write about his paintings, so all we know about his ideas and symbolism is either through stories told by family members or informed guesses we make as art historians. The size and subject matter of his work, however, probably tells us that he painted for his personal satisfaction, with not much intention to sell his paintings.

Pearson liked to paint portraits, religious scenes, wildlife and landscapes. His paintings are all very large, some much bigger than three or four of your beds put together. He felt that beauty could be found anywhere, even in the most common objects. In *Virginia and Jane*, do you see details from nature that he has included to add beauty to the work of art?

Is this artist famous?

Many people have never heard of Joseph Pearson. In the 1920's and 1930's, there was a Depression in America. Many people were out of work, and most people did not have extra money to buy art with. Collecting American art became unfashionable, and many institutions sold their American works to purchase art made by famous Europeans. In addition, the modern art styles became popular, so artists like Pearson who painted in a traditional style were ignored. In addition, Pearson did not create a huge body of work in his lifetime (in comparison, Van Gogh created over 900 paintings and 1100 drawings in ten years, and Picasso is in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for making over 147,800 works of art in his lifetime). He was busy teaching college and working on his homestead in Huntington Valley, and did not solely dedicate his life to making art. Lastly, Pearson's art was all very big – and many people were not able to purchase his art because the walls in their houses were not large enough to hold his paintings!

Why does the Michener Museum have this painting?

Pearson's colleague and supporter Roy Wood, Jr. purchased a group of exhibition catalogs published by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, dated from 1890 to 1935. Illustrated in the catalogs were artists whose art was quite good, but whose names were unfamiliar. He became interested in the quality of Pearson's paintings and his extensive biography. He was amazed that an artist he never heard of had created such beautiful work. He worked extensively with the Pearson family to learn more about his paintings. First, he discovered that one of his daughters, Emily Pierie, was still living. He tried to contact her for several years, but had no luck.

In 1996 he visited the former site of the Pennsylvania Academy Summer Art School at Chester Springs, Pennsylvania. Roy Wood was moved to contact the Pearson family again, and luckily Charlotte Stuempfig, Emily's niece and Pearson's granddaughter, answered his correspondence. He was invited to visit Pearson's studio in a converted barn. It had been literally untouched since his death in 1951. Wood found scenes of ducks in flight, portraits of children and family, religious works, still lifes and landscapes, all in desperate need of



conservation. He initiated the restoration of the collection to its original splendor.

He also began the research on a major painting he found in the barn, *The Twins, Virginia and Jane*, which the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, was interested in purchasing for its permanent collection. He assisted in evaluating the painting, and it was purchased for the Michener Museum with funds provided by the Verna Stein Estate and an anonymous donor in 1999.

There are many paintings in art museums that are found in strange places and brought to museums for the world to enjoy. For another wonderful art rescue story, look at Daniel Garber's *Wooded Watershed* at www.michenermuseum.org.

Did the artist know these girls? Who are they?

Pearson was a versatile artist skilled in the craft of still life, landscape painting and portraiture. Like his contemporary associate, Daniel Garber, Pearson's strongest portraiture work is of his family. He executed early portraits of his wife and mother, and accomplished later portraits of his daughters. His early exhibition work featured portraits, but his first round of critically acclaimed success reflected Pearson's interest in landscapes and the outdoors.

Following this triumph, Pearson painted what is known as his best work, *A Picture of the Twins* (also called *The Twins: Virginia and Jane.*). This painting shows two of Pearson's daughters, named Virginia and Jane. This work received critical acclaim. He won the Beck Medal for outstanding portraiture at the Academy Annual in 1917, and the Potter Palmer Award at the Chicago Art Institute Annual of 1918.

The painting now hangs in the permanent collection of the James A. Michener Museum of Art. Why do you think *Virginia and Jane* is known as Pearson's most successful work of art? How old do you think the girls were when he painted this double portrait? What is it about the painting that you find interesting? What do you find appealing? What do you find unappealing?

What's that in the background? I can't tell if they are outside or inside.

People who come to the Michener Museum always wonder about that. In this unique portrait, Pearson shows the twins, Virginia and Jane. They are standing on a brown surface with a table between them. Behind them is a bright cobalt blue surface. Just imagine in real life this painting is huge – so that the surface may be as large as a real wall in your home. Is the blue a sky, a view through a window, a wall, or something else?

On the blue surface you will notice several birds. They appear to be robins because of their brown feathers, golden beak and reddish-orange breasts. Are they resting, or flying? How many can you count?



The birds are surrounded by tree branches. The branches are blooming, and the tiny pinkish white flowers look almost like cherry blossoms. Can you see any tree trunks? Can you tell where the branches are coming from? Are the trees inside or outside? Are the trees real, or wallpaper, or a mural painted on the wall?

Is the background really what the artist saw when he painted this portrait? Or is it something out of the imagination of the artist or of the little girls?

Is that an elephant on the table?

Yes, there is an elephant on the small table between the girls. What does it look like it is made out of? Why do you think it is there? Who put it there? Is it a decoration or a toy?

You may be surprised to see an Asian elephant sitting on an Asian table in this painting of two American girls in pink dresses. But don't be: the cultural exchange between the East and West has been a two-way passage for many years. Starting with the first bolts of silk brought back to the west from China in ancient times, there have always been goods and culture from the Orient that have been accepted into Western society.

There is much to learn about the Asian influence on American life in the 19th and 20th centuries. Read more about it by reading activity sheet below entitled "The Asian-ization of America."

Learn More

Celebrate Asia! Asian influence on American culture started with the first Chinese immigrants to America in 1847. Now we are living in a time that celebrates Asia more than ever before. Can you find things influenced by Asian culture in your home? The below activity "Celebrate Asia" will help you explore the connections.

Compare *The Twins* with *Rae Seated* by Ben Solowey in the activity below entitled "Rae Seated."

Portraits have a personality – what's yours? Check it out in the activity sheet "Portrait Personalities," below.

If you were going to make a painting of a person, who do you think you could best capture a likeness of? A storybook character? A sports hero? A stranger? A friend? A family member? Yourself?

Big and Small! Look around at all the walls in your house. How big is the very biggest painting you could fit on the very biggest wall of your house? How small is the very smallest painting you could fit on the smallest wall of your house?

Related Images



For an in depth view of portraits from around the world, visit the website of the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC at www.npg.si.edu.

To view portraits in the collection of the James A. Michener Art Museum, visit their website www.michenerartmuseum.org. In the Bucks County Database, look for Thomas Hicks, Nelson Shanks, Roy Nuse, Paul Keene, and Mavis Smith, among others.

Related Links

To learn more about the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, visit their website at www.pafa.org.

To understand more about Asian art and Asian influences on American culture, visit the website of the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC at www.asia.si.edu.

