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Heart of the Academy:

Alice Kellogg Tyler (c.1862-1900), Chicago Art Institute Fine Arts Instructor

Debra A. Corcoran

Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115

Introduction to Alice Kellogg Tyler

According to the *Graphic* (1892 March), many nineteenth century middle class women entered the seemingly innocuous field of art on grounds that their “tender hearts” and “tender consciences” made them excellent guardians of culture. Woman’s strength mistakenly appeared to be seated in emotion while man’s in his rational ability. Most women of the period may have been outwardly composed, but some were internally passionate about their futures in the field of art. As Borzello’s study indicated, nineteenth century women were not victims who overcame obstacles, but resilient survivors who intentionally shaped their own careers with forethought (2000).

Alice Kellogg Tyler, one of the first women to study and teach at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), renamed the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) in 1882, was a nineteenth century career-minded woman. Alice lived during a period of social transition. Her career spanned two eras: that of the composed, submissive Victorian woman and of the spirited, independent New Woman. Aware of cultural standards, Alice possessed qualities that allowed her to negotiate within the previously male-dominated field of art without sacrificing expectations of grace or femininity.

Both ambitious and highly self-critical, Alice was eager to succeed even as an adolescent. In 1875, she wrote in her *Thought Book*, “Am I to go through life trying and not succeeding?”

Although uncertain as to her direction, Alice took advantage of opportunities at the AIC. There she acquired necessary professional skills, developed personal confidence, and gained public exposure as an artist. Ultimately, Alice exhibited alongside some of the greatest European and American artists as she won a degree of celebrity within her brief life time.

However, recognition came with a price. In order to become a professional artist, Alice, like many American male students, spent over a year in Europe away from family and friends. For some years she also placed her career before marriage since self-promotion was so important to an artist. By venturing into public life, Alice encountered choices that women of previous eras never before experienced.

According to Alice’s older sister, Kate Kellogg, a Chicago teacher, nineteenth century society did not

train women to be independent so they feared to demonstrate strength would make them less attractive (1888 April 10). Still Kate told Alice to seize the day, *Carpe diem*, and to hold off on any romantic involvements in order to become the illustrious artist she desired to be.

Courageous and determined, Alice followed her sister's advice and fervently pursued her dream. When Alice died in 1900, the *Chronicle* remembered her as "the foremost woman artist in the west." However, twentieth century art historians later neglected Alice Kellogg Tyler even though she was a role model for other women who studied, exhibited, and taught art. The public lost track of Alice once her works, which had earlier so delighted the press, sat locked in trunks for some eight decades. Prophetically, Alice wrote as a young girl in 1875 to her sister Kate, "It was like writing one's name on the beach and the mighty waters come with a roar and every trace of the name is gone leaving the sand as smooth as if no person had with patient care engraved his name upon it."

The time is now long overdue to un-box the mystery of Alice Kellogg Tyler. Her tale provides insight into the ability and multi-dimensional character of nineteenth century women who studied art. Alice's story is intriguing because she balanced external expectations with internal visions at a time when society was still uncomfortable about women who left their domestic sphere.

After Alice died, Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House, grasped the enriching consequence of Alice's life in a eulogy, "The power of the artist is the power to share and interpret universal life... This artist gave us an impression of the openness and at the same time of the mystery of life; of a spirit of adventure and of a spirit of unusual peace; of unending vitality and of repose; of high courage and of sweet humility..." (Jane Addams, *The Excellent Becomes the Permanent* 51-58).

This paper brings awareness to the contributions of artist and art educator Alice Kellogg Tyler, provides further evidence that nineteenth century women artists did not view themselves as inferior artists (Borzello 2000), and illustrates how an exceptional woman set her own agenda.

The Chicago Academy of Fine Arts a.k.a the Art Institute of Chicago

When a group of businessmen restructured the failed Chicago of Design, they needed the support of many in order to survive. The Chicago Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), later the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC), thus opened in 1879 as a co-educational institution and drew upon women as a cultural and financial resource. The tuition receipts from the multitude of women who eventually enrolled at the academy helped it become what the *Chicago Post* (1896 June 6) called the most comprehensive and advanced school in America.

The school of drawing and painting was at the heart of the original academy. The AIC organized all other departments (such as in decorative designing, modeling, and normal instruction for school teachers) around it (French 1898). Instructors taught in the academic tradition which emphasized the study of the human figure, highly polished surfaces, realistic rendering, and idyllic subject matter.

Because previous experience or training in art was not necessary for admittance into the AIC school, most students began in the regular elementary drawing courses. There they first studied plaster casts of hands and feet and later heads of antique statues. Some students advanced to the highest level of training and worked in watercolor or oil from live models.

Since not all students became professional artists, William M.R. French, the first director of the AIC, recognized the school's valuable "liberalizing influences" (French 1898). He believed behind everything at the AIC was the "general cultivation of the individual." Not only artists, but self-assured young individuals, came into being within the bustling studios and along the chatter-filled corridors. AIC instructors encouraged a spirit of good fellowship while they also provided boys in velvet smocks and cunningly-coifed girls with explicit directions (Chicago Times Herald 1896).

Hence, the AIC was simultaneously a lively social haven, an outlet for creative energies, a site for formal instruction, and a wellspring of practical experiences. The AIC served many women, including Alice Kellogg, as a training ground for professional and self-development.

Alice's Entrance into the Realm of Art

Yet when Alice began her art studies circa 1879, she had no idea as to her life's ambition. "It was simply an experiment" stated the *Graphic*, but later art became her "life's mission" (1892 February 20).

Alice studied under Mr. H.F. Spread, Mr. L.C. Earle, and Mr. J. Roy Robertson, prominent Chicago painters. She proved to be an exceptionally apt student at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA). The *Chronicle* (1900) recalled that at the close of the 1880 school year, Alice won the top prize, three month's tuition, for her oil study from life as well as first prize for a fifteen minute sketch.

By 1881, the CAFA circular listed Alice Kellogg as an instructor, one of their earliest full-time permanent female instructors. In 1896, the *Chicago Post* (March 26) declared her "the head of Chicago painters." Alice Kellogg achieved the title because she did not allow opportunity to slip past her fingertips.

Alice prudently used the AIC as a stepping stone in her art career in several ways. First, Alice acquired fundamentals of art as a student of the AIC. Then she promoted herself in a visible position as an instructor among only male teachers. At the AIC, Alice learned how to speak comfortably before groups and openly associate with the public at exhibitions. Alice gained not only technical skills, but liberalizing knowledge that resulted in her emotional, social, and artistic growth.

By the winter of 1882, Alice Kellogg was ready to extend her formal studies through an informal setting. She helped organize an association of women artists, the Palette Club, originally called the Bohemian Club after a member, Miss Marie Koupal, a native of Bohemia.

According to the *Graphic* (1890), their purpose for Saturday afternoon meetings was social camaraderie, but also improvement of their art work. Club members sketched together and brought their recent works to meetings for serious critiquing. During a sketch trip in July of 1883, they initiated the idea to hold exhibitions. In February 1884, the Palette Club had a very successful first showing at the AIC.

Alice became the club's president in 1892 and was evidently a qualified leader. That year the *Graphic* (April 30) claimed the number of club members increased, the work grew in quality, and the annual exhibition was a profitable venue for the sale of paintings. Also, the *Graphic* (May 7) reviewed the Palette Club's 1892 exhibition as women's works of the highest quality.

While Alice remained active with the Palette Club, she never entirely restricted herself to a local women's group. The prospect to enhance her career in Europe enticed Alice. In 1887, she followed a long-established male tradition to study art in Europe and set sail aboard a steamship with her friend Ida Haskell, also a former student at the CAFA.

Alice's European Experiences Produced Recognition

There in Europe Alice began her studies in Paris under Gustave Boulanger and Jules Lefebvre at the Academie Julian, a center for modernism and Impressionism (Weisberg and Becker 1999). The Julian was the first professional art school to accept women into seriously organized ateliers, or studios. Since women could not attend the free, state-supported Ecole des Beaux-Arts until 1897, the Julian was a unique setting. However, women sometimes paid fees twice as much as the men at the Julian. Since the school offered a program similar to that of the Beaux-Arts, including the chance to draw from the nude, women received equally thorough training.

The Academie Julian also helped students embark on their careers. The *Chronicle* (1900) reported that Alice had been a favorite of the instructors. She must have been extremely talented because the famous drawing teacher Boulanger, who

seldom flattered students, praised her work by declaring, “I have not a word to say.”

Also, the *Graphic* (1892 February) noted that clever Alice was one of the first women at the Julian to have a nude study permanently placed upon the school walls. Not surprisingly then, the Salon, the large winter exhibition in Paris, accepted Alice’s work twice, first for a drawing and then a pastel. This meant a financial lift back home since recognition by the French meant more credibility (Borzello 2000).

However, to have students selected for the Salon also enhanced the academy’s reputation. In April 1888, Alice sensed some of Professor Julian’s “wire pulling” in the jury’s selection of her portrait of her sister Gertrude for the 1889 Exposition Universelle held in Paris. Still Alice wrote in May 1889 that she felt gratified to have competed with men based upon her ability. Alice proudly exhibited in the American section of the fair and was part of a larger show that included the great European masters Millet, Corot, and Daubigny (Blaugrund 1989).

While recognition came relatively quickly to Alice, she wrote in June 1888 that it took a life time to be an artist. In order to continue to develop as an artist, Alice moved to the Colarossi, the Academie Julian’s rival and a less rigidly-organized school, after the death of Boulanger in 1888. There she worked under established artists Gustave Courtois and Jean Rixens. By November of 1888, Alice wrote that she felt a great sense of liberty. She took control of her own method of painting, changing to a lighter palette with freer brushwork.

Prior her departure from Europe in 1889, Alice worked on a painting of a mother and child. Alice wrote in June of 1889 that she considered “The Mother” her best work, an honest effort, something she chose to do for herself alone (June 1889). Alice did not suspect how much recognition the painting would eventually bring her back in the United States.

Of course after such a long sojourn in Europe, a return to the U.S. would be difficult for Alice. She needed to re-establish her career in Chicago. However, when Alice conferred with William French, AIC Director, about the AIC’s plans for her, he was vague. Alice, who liked brutal honesty, was highly critical of French’s indecisiveness and lamented over AIC policies. Alice wrote in May of 1889 that the pretended patriarchal interest at the AIC annoyed her. By She wondered whether she even wanted to find a place back in Chicago (1888 June 16). June, Alice claimed that she would only go back to the AIC if she could do what she felt to be right. Despite the confusion over her return to the AIC, Alice renewed her relationship with the school.

In 1892, the AIC school circular named Alice as an instructor for drawing and painting, life and antique classes. However, she became better known through other pursuits. The Society of American Artists thought so highly of her painting, “The Mother,” that they elected Alice a member of their group. They bestowed on Alice what the *Graphic* (1892 February) described as a rare honor for a mid-westerner, especially a woman.

Century Illustrated Magazine reproduced the same painting for its January 1893 cover before the opening of the World’s Columbian Exposition. While the work, a traditional feminine subject, reinforced public attitude that the home was women’s territory (Carr and Gurney 1993), the painting’s widespread popularity illustrates that Alice herself had escaped woman’s limited domestic sphere. She stepped outside the home to become a professionally-trained artist. Because Alice did

not consider the study of art as ornamental finishing, she made certain that the public did not perceive of her as an amateur.

In fact, Alice became highly respected once her painting, “The Mother,” hung in the Palace of Fine Arts, not in the Women’s Building, at the World’s Columbian Exposition. She was one of only fifteen western American women to exhibit (Graphic 1892 February) along with some of the finest masterpieces by Romantist Delacroix, Realist Courbet, Classicist Ingres, Old Masters from Holland, Belgium, and noted contemporary Americans James McNeill Whistler, Winslow Homer, William Merritt Chase, Thomas Eakins, George Inness, and John Singer Sargent.

Public Persona as Chicago’s Beloved Teacher

Alice’s stature as an artist elevated when she once again exhibited with the masters. Yet at a petite five feet one inch tall, a size three and a half shoe, and weight hardly worth mentioning (Kellogg Tyler Diary 1900), Alice already possessed a hypnotic power over people. As a teacher she had an incredible ability to nurture her students.

For example, AIC modeling instructor Lorado Taft told a story about instructors who had observed Alice correct the work of a not overly-brilliant student. As Alice unconsciously put her arm around the child, who nestled close, one of the instructors remarked, “That’s the secret...If I felt that way I might be able to teach as well” (Taft 1901).

Alice’s personal philosophy concerning art instruction was highly individualistic. As early as 1888, Alice wrote from Europe that a good teacher guided students not always through words, but allowed them to see through her eyes (February 19). She believed a teacher kept the principles of art “steadily before the pupil,” but did not thrust “personal experiences, methods, or means upon him.” Her appreciation for individuality was quite advanced for the era.

Frank and enthusiastic, Taft described Alice as a friend to her students. On an excursion through the Art Palace at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, Taft recollected that Alice was:

“the soul of the group....Our progress was constantly impeded by greetings. Everybody seemed to be a particular friend of hers, and no sooner had we rescued her from one group than, to our amused vexation, she would be surrounded by another admiring band. I believe I never knew any one so much beloved by so many different kinds of people” (1901).

Obviously, Alice Kellogg was a valued teacher, the uncontested heart of the academy. No doubt Alice’s compassion made her an outstanding teacher. However, the CAFA hired her as one of their earliest female instructors because she was an accomplished figure painter in the academic tradition.

Not surprisingly, Alice operated her studio where she gave lessons in drawing and painting. She advertised in the Chicago Art Directory section of the 1895 *Arts* journal. However, precisely because Alice was such a superior artist, her contemporaneous critics felt it unfortunate that she spent such a large portion of her time teaching (Fraser 1893). The *Chicago Times Herald* flattered her in 1896 as “one of the strongest artists that Chicago [had] ever produced.”

Even though art critics thought exhibitions incomplete without her work, Alice declined some shows. Admittedly, teaching consumed much of Alice’s time, but she also felt Chicago had an overabundance of shows. In 1897, the *Chicago Record* noted that Alice and Lorado Taft spoke at a meeting at the AIC. There they discussed a plan for the consolidation of

the city's numerous art exhibitions run by various clubs into a single major exhibition. Alice tried to resolve a problem faced by artists that forced them to hastily create mediocre work.

Alice kept her own standards high right up until her death. When in 1899, the AIC held its eleventh annual water-color exhibition by American artists, Alice Kellogg Tyler won the best portrait of the show for her pastel of Dr. de Bey, the female doctor who tended Alice at her death (Pattison 1899).

Alice's Vow

Alice's 1900 diary reveals that despite a life-threatening illness, she continued to paint. On a gray, rainy day in January, just weeks before her death, Alice painted while her husband Orno Tyler, Secretary for the Story & Clark Piano Company, read Keats aloud. Alice savored the tranquil poetic path that led her to the close of her life. In the end, Alice left the impression that love for her husband and her art both provided solace. Neither outweighed the other in importance. During her life, Alice balanced being an eminent artist and a caring wife, an especially difficult feat for a nineteenth century woman.

However, earlier in her life Alice found it difficult to be both artist and woman. Not unlike other nineteenth century women, she had an almost "schizophrenic" attitude (Rubinstein 1982). In December 1887 while in Europe, Alice admitted to her sister Peggy that she would rather be a loving wife and mother "than the greatest artist in the world." Then later in June of 1889, she vowed to work all her life and enjoy it.

Clearly, Alice worried about marriage, sensing it put careers at risk (Kellogg 1889). When she went to Europe, she chose art over romance with the mystical artist Arthur B. Davies, a former AIC student who later helped bring the radical Armory Show of modern art to Chicago. Yet Alice's letters from Europe during the winter of 1887-88 stated that she frequently received "such good letters" from Arthur and therefore implied a close relationship with Davies. Then in 1892 Alice learned of Arthur's marriage to a physician and at that time their correspondence ended (Williams and McCormick).

It is unclear as to why Alice and Arthur never wed. She remained active in the art world after her 1895 marriage to Orno Tyler. Apparently, Alice found contentment. On the other hand, Arthur Davies' marriage proved not to be wedded bliss. Arthur discovered his wife had killed her former husband and he subsequently went to Italy to lead a hidden existence with yet another love (Perlman 1998). However, his affection for Alice evidently lingered and on December 14, 1893, Arthur wrote Alice that life was mysterious and so lonely. He said, "What wouldn't I give to have you here for a bit." There is no indication that Alice ever went.

One has to wonder what a marriage between two striving artists might have been like. The situation may have been confrontational since Alice once criticized how men reacted to life's opportunities and vowed, "I should like to be a man just to show what a man should be..." (1886 January 3). This may always have been a driving force behind Alice's ambition to be a great artist.

Conclusion

Something inside Alice caused her to study art, travel, compete, and teach. Always a spiritual woman, she remained committed to becoming an artist and believed that God intended her to reach a certain station (Letter #36).

Jane Addams said that Alice's pictures conveyed a message: "Do not consent that life shall become dreary and commonplace" (1932).

Alice Kellogg Tyler did not lead an ordinary life. She filled it with drama and accomplishment. The *Chronicle* described Alice Kellogg Tyler as a pioneer in Chicago art and education (1900). She was on the path to a formidable career when she died after a year of suffering from Bright's Disease (Chronicle 1900)

at thirty-seven years of age. Alice never anticipated that she sadly would not live long enough to reach her artistic zenith as did painters Mary Cassatt or Georgia O'Keeffe.

Unfortunately, Alice's close friend Arthur Davies also was mistaken in 1893 when he wrote Alice: "You are not one of those ill-fated ones who have to die with all their music in them.....May all the coming years 'grant you your heart's desire..." She still had much to give, but on Valentine's Day, Monday, February 14, 1900, Alice died.

Orno Tyler, Alice's husband, privately grieved as multitudes also mourned. In his 1900 account of her final hours, Orno portrayed Alice as both angelic and courageous, "I hoped and expected to find her as well as usual. She met me with a manner and smile sweet beyond thought, but so like a spirit, and seeming to have so little strength....Dr. de Bey came...I went out...And when I returned Alice's sweet blessed life was no longer [visably] with us. She has been so brave and cheery." Orno's last private recollection of his wife was of the solemn ride out to Mount Greenwood cemetery in the carriages and Alice lying with the few daffodils he had given her for a Valentine in her hand.

The public's memory of Alice faded despite the fact that she had left a legacy. She won the highest awards as an art student, exhibited paintings in the most prestigious expositions in the world, instructed at one of the most distinguished American professional art schools, initiated a women's art league that competed with men, received an honored membership in an art society, opened her own studio, and illustrated children's books. Alice felt the influence of the era, but she also played a key role in creating Chicago's cultural image as one of the original students at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts and one of its earliest female instructors.

Alice's importance exceeds her success as a beloved teacher or inspirational role model. Her greatness lies beyond the fact that she was a cosmopolitan artist who intelligently kept up with the "scientists of the brush" at home and abroad (Taft 1901). In her private life, Alice may have wavered between fear of failure as an artist and fear of freedom as a woman, but she still set an ambitious and enthusiastic course during an era that resisted women's professional endeavors. Alice intended to be judged as teacher and artist on her merit. Clearly, she demonstrated her competence.

Alice's life helps dispel a previous widespread conviction that nineteenth century women were unable to do serious art. She alters any previous saccharine preconceptions that all nineteenth century women were timid followers or delicate victims who produced little in terms of art or ideas. Alice Kellogg Tyler is the epitome of nineteenth century women artists who actually thrived in a climate of risk-taking, competition, and exposure.

This study suggests that in the future, historians may want to reconsider nineteenth century women artists beyond their role as supposed self-sacrificing moral guardians and to further investigate the strength of their character.

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