

Sketch of an Artist: An Introduction to the Life and Work of Roberta Jane Taylor¹

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of the career of Roberta Jane Taylor (1893-1990) and the view of Maritime life provided in her art.

RÉSUMÉ

Laurie Glenn présente une vue d'ensemble de la carrière de Roberta Taylor et de celle de la vie dans les Maritimes, telle que l'artiste la dépeint dans son oeuvre.

On December 12, 1893, Robert Taylor married Alice Bell Fisher of Lower Stewiacke, Nova Scotia, and the couple moved to Amherst Head, a small community ten kilometres east of Amherst, Cumberland County. Having grown up in Maccan, Robert Taylor was a second generation native of the county. He worked for a number of years on the family farm, and after inheriting land upon the death of his parents, he operated a lumber mill. In a local paper the following was reported, "Mr. Robert Taylor has started his saw mill and is doing a rushing business; he has a large number of men employed."² The Taylors' only child, Roberta Jane, was born on 27 August 1905. Roberta, when older, would hear her father praised as a good, hard-working man but she was never to know him. When Roberta was fourteen months old Robert Taylor died in October 1906 of Bright's Disease.

Taylor's childhood was in many ways a lonely one. Alice Taylor would often leave her daughter with

grandparents or other relatives while she visited the United States or Europe and Taylor once described her mother as being "all for travelling."³ Taylor remembered these absences, "My mother was never there to tuck me into bed, I would have to run in and see what time it was and [get] in bed by 9 P.M. and...get ready for bed all by myself..."⁴ Taylor travelled with her mother only once. When she was eight years old they visited New York. It was 1913 and they toured a number of art galleries, including those in Greenwich Village, where Taylor remembered seeing Marcel Duchamp's, "Nude Descending A Stairway #2" (1912) and some Picassos.⁵ Long before this early and exceptional exposure to art, she had already decided what she wanted to do with her life. "I knew from the first I wanted to be an artist... and in school the teacher would let me copy little drawings in chalk on the blackboard...that was my treat for getting my work done."⁶

Taylor attended Acadia Street School in Amherst

during her elementary school years. She excelled in all her studies, a feat which she attributed to an excellent memory rather than interest or ability. She was a shy, introverted child with few friends, and once stated in an interview that one paid a price for doing well in school.⁷ It can be assumed that she was referring to her lack of playmates.

Taylor's high school years were spent at the Cumberland County Academy in Amherst where she again excelled academically. During the presentation of prizes at the end of her grade ten year in June 1920, it was announced that "Miss Roberta Taylor had made the highest grade average on a complete course in the whole province of Nova Scotia, her record being 89.6, a splendid achievement, and an excellent tribute to the academy."⁸

Since the death of her husband, Alice Taylor, a self-employed private financier, had supported her daughter. However, in 1921-22 this business was not very prosperous and Alice Taylor suffered a number of financial reversals, real and imagined, from which she never recovered. Five months after her daughter's high school graduation, she was examined by two Amherst physicians and deemed incapable of managing her personal or financial affairs. She was then transported to the Nova Scotia Hospital in Dartmouth where she stayed for the next three years.⁹ Taylor's contact with her mother during this time was maintained through letters and through regular communication with the hospital supervisor.

Monitored by her guardians and despite some protests from her mother, Taylor wanted to pursue her interest in art. In the autumn of 1922 she enrolled at Mount Allison Ladies' College in Sackville, New Brunswick. For the next three years she studied for a diploma in Fine Arts under such instructors as Elizabeth McLeod and Christian Harris McKiel. In order to fulfil the requirements of the programme one studied, among other disciplines, drawing, design, modelling, colour arrangement, perspective and

etching.¹⁰

The earliest examples of Taylor's art come from her Ladies' College years and consist of still lifes and landscape. Taylor enjoyed the College but found it restrictive, both socially and artistically. The young women's social life was restricted: "...the rules were very strict. We could go down the street into the main part on Saturday afternoons but otherwise we had to walk out towards Silver Lake...they were afraid we might meet a boy when we went downtown."¹¹ The art classes at the College reflected the conventional view of what was proper to teach young ladies: "...they were so old-fashioned that we just had the costumed model and I didn't know anything about drawing from the nude figure or getting anatomy. I lacked that and that's what held me back in lots of ways all my working life."¹² Nevertheless, Taylor did very well at the Ladies' College, winning the Alice Chase Ogden Memorial Prize for the highest average in three years of design.

After graduation in 1925, Taylor wished to continue her art training. Many of her instructors encouraged her to do so and she planned to travel to Paris, France. As Alice Taylor was still hospitalized, the twenty year old Taylor had to consult her guardians. They considered Paris to be too far away, however, and too decadent. Taylor, bowing to their authority, followed the example of many Ladies' College fine arts graduates and journeyed to New York to work and study.

She plunged into art wholeheartedly in New York. In the mornings she studied advertising art at the New York School of Fine and Applied Arts, (later, the Parsons School of Design); she worked afternoons in a department store; and five nights a week she attended life classes at the Art Students League. She maintained this schedule of work and study for four years until she decided she wanted to devote her full attention to art. In 1929, at the age of twenty-four, she entered school full-time, enrolling at the Roerich Museum

School. Here she studied drawing and abstract art for the first time.

New York was perhaps the place Taylor felt she could finally prove herself to her mother. Alice Taylor has been described as a headstrong woman with very definite ideas on how her daughter should behave.¹³ She was strict with Taylor. With her mother's frequent absences and later, her illness, Taylor may have felt cheated of a "normal" family life. Certainly she was convinced that she was not really an addition to her mother's life and it was perhaps in an attempt to prove her worth that she undertook this flurry of creative activity.¹⁴

New York in the 1920s and 30s would have been an exciting place for a shy, sheltered Maritime woman. The city was alive with galleries, shops, restaurants and personalities. Georgia O'Keefe was breaking new ground for a whole generation of women artists and, for that matter, art in general. Charles Lindbergh made his historic transatlantic flight from New York to Paris. Houdini performed in the streets.¹⁵

Taylor, during her school and early working years, lived in residential hotels. Men usually inhabited the top half of the building and women the bottom half. Many such buildings had a social director and Taylor participated in fencing, table tennis, and other activities. She made friends chiefly with women who lived nearby and it was through one of these acquaintances that she was to become familiar with and quickly adhere to the teachings of Christian Science. She attributed her total involvement in art to this religious influence, "I started working and I thought that I wasn't going anywhere and by that time I was going to a Christian Science Practitioner, '...get [involved] in art - have blind trust...' she told me, and I did and I went to a school [Roerich] that I liked very much."¹⁶ Taylor lived in various parts of Manhattan and Long Island and makes reference to feeling shy about people watching her sketch along Riverside Drive. Scenes of New York life and architecture,

however, are virtually non-existent in her remaining work.

After art school and during the 1930s and 40s, Taylor worked as a designer and colourist with a number of greeting card, perfume and fabric companies. Her media and subject matter were very diverse. She designed wrapping paper, advertisements for products and fabric motifs. Her floral geometric design of a three petal pansy was very popular during one season and she remembered being thrilled at seeing it printed on the silk dresses of passers - by on the streets of Manhattan.¹⁷ She was very conscious of her position within the world of design and realized that certain procedures had to be observed...

you didn't take a portfolio - that's a thing you had to learn - [be]cause then you looked like a student...you had to look as if you were a professional. You'd have a design on a sheet of paper and you did it up in a roll and you'd unroll it and let them look over your samples.¹⁸

Taylor was also very proud that it was New York in which she worked, "work had to be perfect - there's a lot of difference working in New York than working anywhere else outside. I met girls that I tried to help get places - they had good jobs in Dallas, in Hartford - places like that - couldn't get a look in New York."¹⁹ New York appealed to Taylor for a number of reasons. On a personal level, she was distanced from her mother's illness and enjoyed a more carefree lifestyle than many women her age in the Maritimes. Also, she lived in possibly the most exciting city in North America and was able to achieve a status and freedom in her creative work that would have been virtually impossible for her in Amherst. Taylor remembered someone once telling her that New York was a "woman's town" and even if women did not get paid

as much as men doing the same artistic work, she felt that intellectually they were considered the equal of their male counterparts.²⁰ It may have been for these reasons that she perceived her New York work as being different and treated it as such.

It is interesting to note that Taylor signed only her commercial work with her second name which was Jane. It is possible that the use of this moniker betrayed how she felt about herself and her development as an artist in New York. Perhaps she felt like a different person in the city and wanted to express her feelings with a more "vital" signature.

Into the late 1930s Taylor continued her personal pursuit of art. She entered a poster contest in conjunction with the 1939 New York World's Fair and her entry was chosen to be part of a United States - wide travelling exhibition. As well, she accomplished what she may have considered her greatest success. Four drawings were accepted by The New Yorker magazine for publication. Two appeared in 1939 and two others in 1940. Taylor said of the experience, "to be in The New Yorker was the ultimate down there."²¹ (See Figure #1)

Despite the life and recognition she enjoyed so much in New York, Taylor moved home to Amherst in 1940, citing her mother's health and her own uneasiness about being in a major city during wartime as the reasons for her return. Since 1925, Alice Taylor had been a resident at the Cumberland Home in Pugwash, Cumberland County. She had finally been released at the age of seventy - one and took an apartment in Amherst on Eddy Street.

Upon her return to her home town, Taylor applied for various art - related positions and was finally hired by the Canada Car and Foundry as a draftsman designing airplane parts for the locally built Anson aircraft. As in New York Taylor was proud of the work she did at the plant. "I liked the job - it was...a change for me. When I first went they laughed at the idea of me being there because I was a woman and then later,

when we got to know each other, they were very kind and became good friends."²² It may be assumed that she was the only woman working in the drafting department at the time. It was during her employment at the plant that Taylor painted the delightful Street Scene in Winter (1942) (See Figure #2) which was later to tour in the 1947 Nova Scotia Department of Education Travelling Exhibition. In the accompanying catalogue, she stated that her "aim with this painting was to express the solidity, the movement tempered with restraint" in what she saw.²³ The scene is a late winter afternoon in an Amherst neighbourhood. Taylor captures the appearance of bright sunlight on snow while using shadows to add depth. Unlike the majority of her work, human figures are present, walking and driving along the street. It is an early example of the interest in architecture that Taylor was to express in so many of her later works.

In 1946, at forty - one years of age and with her position at Canada Car no longer available because of the return of the men from the war, Taylor was offered a position teaching art at Kings Hall, a private school for girls in Compton, Québec. Kings Hall was founded in 1873 as a school for the daughters of the Protestant elite in the province. Many of the students achieved matriculation here in order to pursue further study at McGill University in Montreal. While the school was situated in the lovely Eastern Townships and Taylor is remembered by staff members as going for long walks there, no paintings or preliminary works from this time are known to exist. The 1947 Kings Hall yearbook states that "Taylor taught seven separate classes and a diverse array of subject matter, from greeting cards and travel posters to Halloween decorations and nature studies. These are rendered in poster paint, crayons, watercolours and pencil. A special art class is held every Wednesday afternoon for those interested in developing their talents further, the girls did figure sketchings and imaginative sketches of street scenes. Experiments with oil paints on paper were carried out,

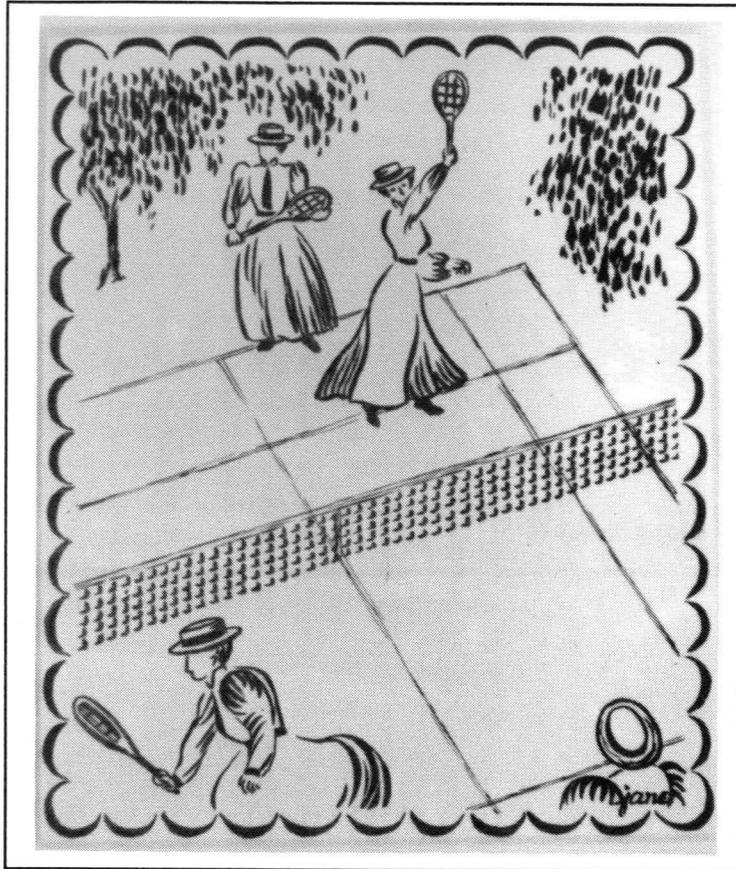


Figure 1. Tennis Players, c. 1940, pen and ink.
The New Yorker. Cumberland County Museum Collection
Photo by Marion Petite

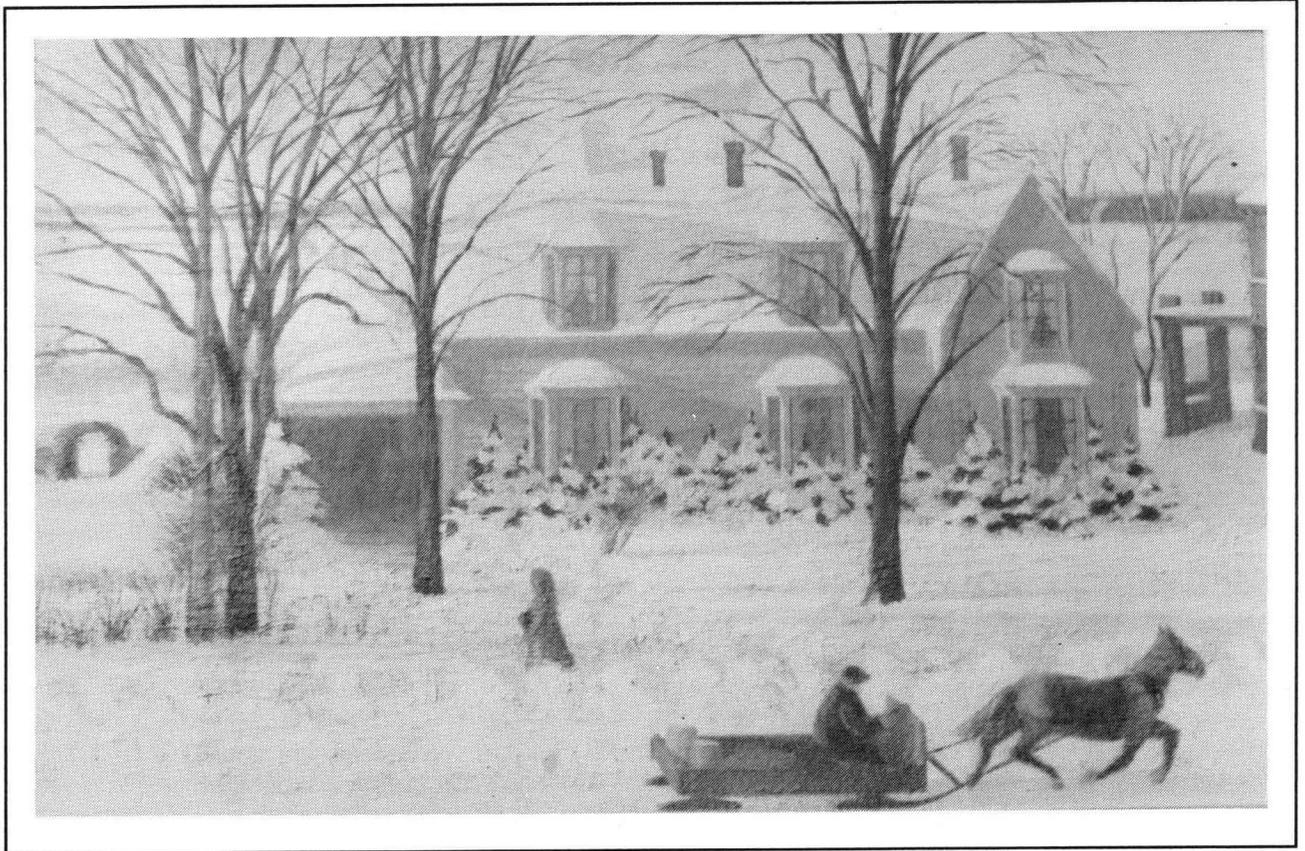


Figure 2. Street Scene in Winter, 1942, oil on panel. Collection of Arena and Frank Howatt, Amherst, N.S. Photo by Marion Petite.

using life models".²⁴

While at Compton Taylor, as usual, kept to herself. Polite and friendly with the pupils and staff, she remained very much a loner. One colleague during that time has but one memory of Taylor, that being the closed door of her bedroom in the staff house.²⁵ Taylor returned to Amherst once more in 1948. One year later, in July 1949, her mother, at the age of eighty, died at home.

The majority of Taylor's art work in existence today is from the 1950s and 60s when she was painting her Maritime surroundings, concentrating on what may well have been her two favourite subjects: architecture and sky studies. She would often sketch on her own, going to the Tantramar marshes outside of town for inspiration. She would also take part in group painting excursions around the Maritimes. Most expeditions would be led by Sarah Hart, an art instructor from Mount Allison University. These outings took Taylor to Alma, New Brunswick, Cavendish, Prince Edward Island, Peggy's Cove, Cape Split and Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, as well as other Maritime locales. Much of Taylor's land and townscapes are rendered at a bird's eye view; the viewer looks down on the scene or is level with its highest point. Much of her work was done impasto; that is, thick layers of paint were built up to achieve a jewel-like appearance, very much a traditional approach to painting and one she would have been introduced to at the Ladies' College. Roberta also painted the homes and surroundings of working people. In Coates' Barn (1963) human involvement in the scene is evident with rows of hay waiting to be put into the barn, but the field workers are not seen. Throughout her art the appearance of humans and animals is minimal. Those that do appear are always secondary to the main theme; they are at a distance, obscured and looking away from the viewer. Taylor may have thought that her lack of study of the human figure prevented her from attempting such subjects.

Taylor's paintings of the barn and sky on the Tantramar marshes are among the most striking of all her work. Purple skies dominate the low horizon of the land in almost all scenes. Clouds (1957) emphasizes the colour shapes of a stormy sky. The solid land forms are simplified, contrasting dark against light and cool against warm shapes. Most of her preliminary sketches of these skies are labelled as to date, time of day, and weather conditions. Taylor also painted her home town of Amherst. The Kite ca. 1940 (See Figure #3) is a bird's-eye view of the downtown. Very reminiscent of the "Ash Can School" of painting from pre-World War I New York, the only human activity evident in this scene are the clothes drying on the line and the kite, whose owner is beyond the range of the viewer.²⁶ The roofs of the structure are the dominant feature with the marshes in the distance. Paramount Theatre ca. 1950 (See Figure #4) is fashioned with muted oils. There is a sense of movement with the oncoming car and the theatre patrons, while the geometric lines of the surrounding buildings are the dominating feature. The lit store window across the street is an example of the attention to detail inherent in her work. Taylor's fascination with architecture dictated the creation of a large number of paintings which focused on roof and architectural outlines and this continued for the rest of her painting career.

The most striking aspect of both Taylor's work and her life is the changes in scope; as she grew older, her world grew increasingly smaller. After painting and experiencing New York and Quebec as a young woman, and the Maritimes and the town of Amherst in her middle years, during her late sixties and seventies Taylor increasingly concentrated on what she saw from the window and back porch of her Rupert Street home. There are a number of finished works focusing on the homes and neighbourhood she observed there. The watercolour Backyards From Roberta's Porch ca. 1970 (See Figure #5) was reviewed in "Arts Atlantic"

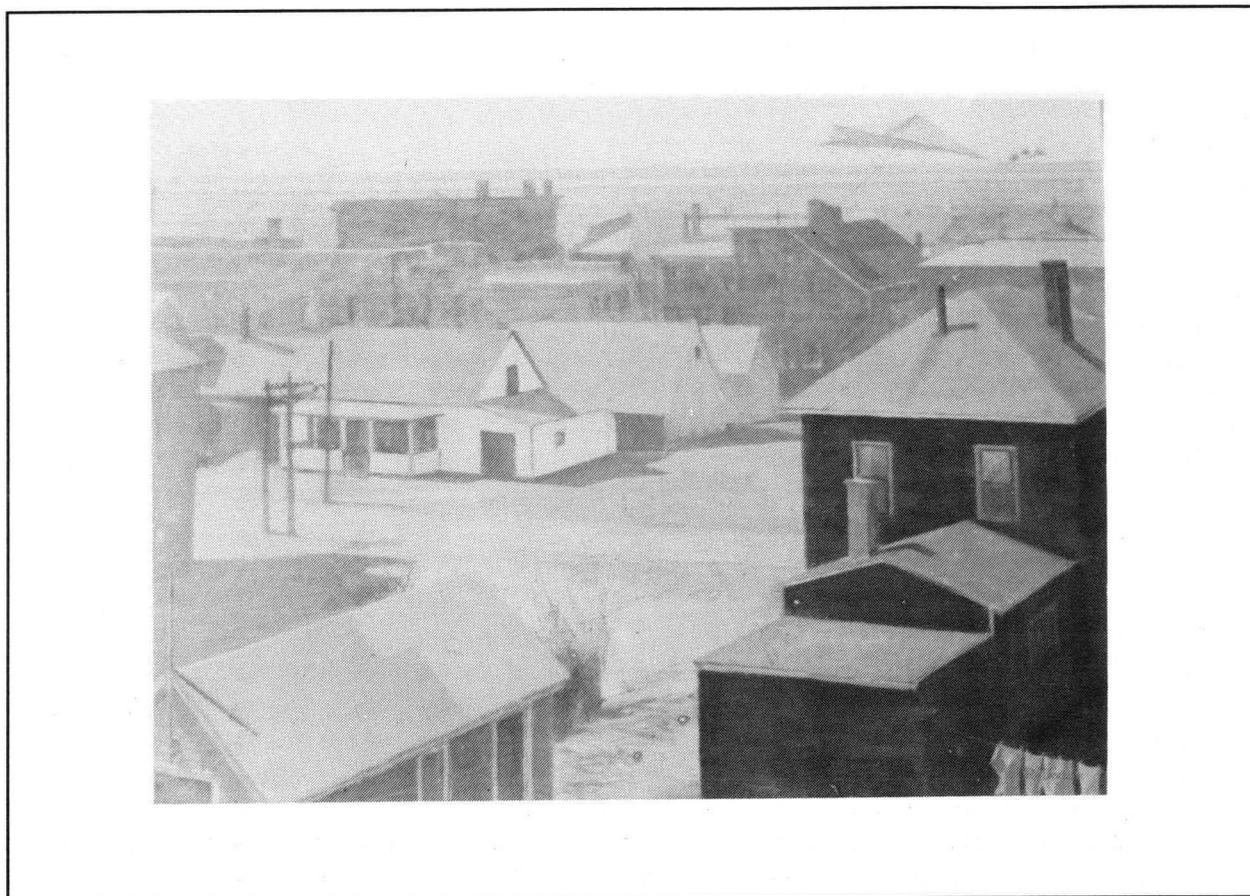


Figure 3. The Kite, c. 1940, oil on canvas. Cumberland County Museum Collection. Photo by Marion Petite.

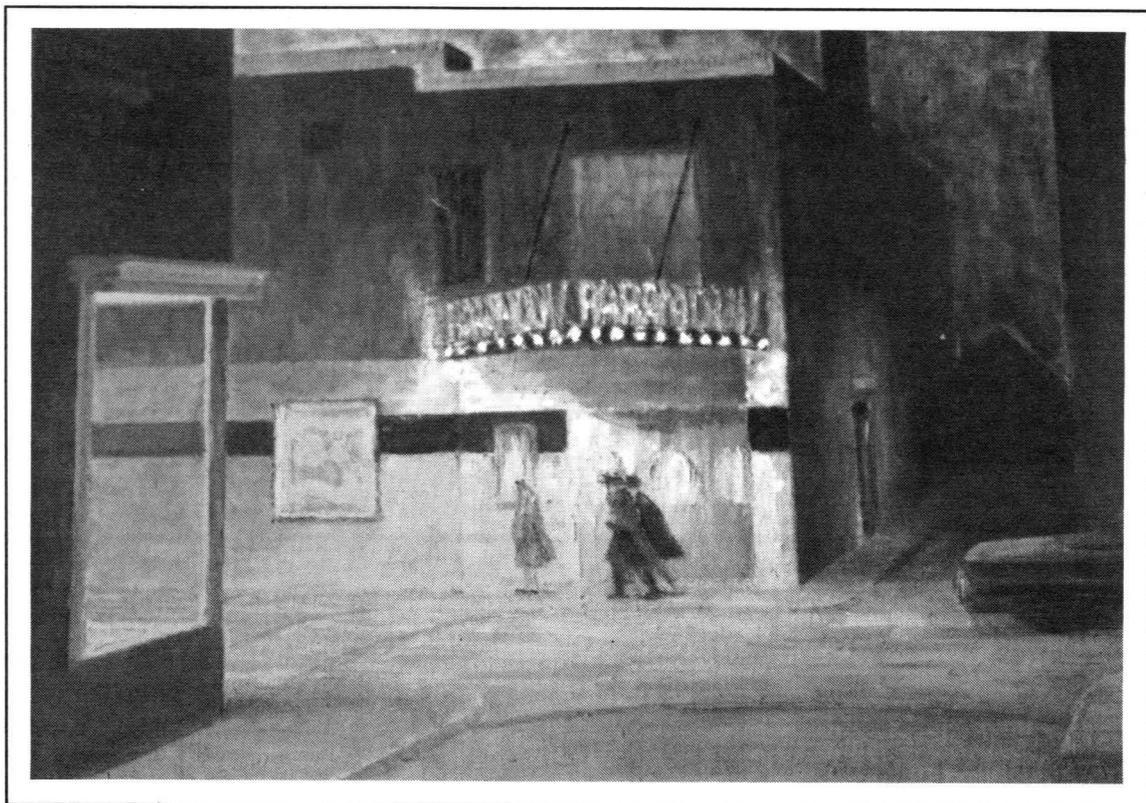


Figure 4. The Paramount, c. 1950, oil on canvas. Collection of Peter Latta and Diane Type. Photo by Marion Petite.

as part of her 1991 retrospective exhibition. Reviewer Shirley Hallee stated, "The sky and the shapes of the houses become a flat abstract design, the painting has a light, airy quality because of the bright coloured rectangles hanging on the line. The snow on the ground is totally unpainted, resulting in a fresh, clean composition." ²⁷ Backyard Incident, painted at approximately the same time, shows a brother and sister at play, the figures again looking away from the viewer, preoccupied, little more than abstract studies while the neighbourhood architectural shapes encroach on their activity.

Although in life as well as art Taylor withdrew from people, she found great pleasure in nature, as is apparent from her detailed sketches of flowers. Her friend, Blanche Cannon, would often bring her bouquets, which Taylor studied in detail and committed with watercolours to the pages of a sketch book. Daisies, wild roses, dandelions and other wild flowers were documented as pseudo - botanical studies and are glowing examples of her sense of colour and the meticulous handling and care of her work. (See Figure #6)

Although reclusive by nature, Taylor contributed to the organization of the Maritime arts community. She held memberships with the Amherst Art Association (1958 - 1963), the Sackville Art Association (1968 - 1981), and the Maritime Art Association (1964 - 1972). It was in the latter organization that she was particularly active, serving over the years as Corresponding Secretary and Exhibitions Coordinator. It was through the M.A.A. that she received the greatest recognition for her work in the Maritimes. A number of her paintings were exhibited with this organization, some receiving special attention. One, entitled, Cavendish (1962), was purchased by the M.A.A. to hang in a provincial building. Oatfield (1959) was purchased by the Nova Scotia Government but was destroyed during a 1960

fire in Pictou, and Winter Night (1959) also became part of the collection of the provincial government.

From approximately 1962 - 1974, Taylor taught art at the local elementary and high schools and supplemented her income by working as a sales clerk at a local dress shop. By 1980, well into her seventies, she was slowly losing her sight. Her faith in Christian Science teachings prevented her from allowing the removal of the cataracts that had begun to form on her eyes.

Until 1988 she lived in her own home on Rupert Street, trying to maintain an independent life regardless of her fading sight. She even prepared her own meals, patiently but stubbornly, taking hours to do so. She had committed to memory the location of all her furniture and household effects and knew the contents of each cupboard and drawer so that she could still "see" her home. As with her entire life, Taylor took a determined and methodical approach to a condition that had been dealt to her. Finally, at the insistence of friends, she moved to the Gables Nursing Home, Amherst, where she remained for the last three years of her life. She died 17 August, 1990.

Roberta Taylor was a female artist in a small Maritime community. She dedicated her life to art and the degree of that dedication and how she pursued it are worthy of note. Through her art Taylor has given us a glimpse into Maritime life, work and architecture during the mid - twentieth Century. Her work, unfortunately, like that of many regional female artists, has remained largely unknown and unacknowledged in the county and province where she lived and painted for the majority of her life. She is but one example of the rich artistic tradition inherent in Maritime culture. There is still much to be done in order for the work of other female artists to be properly acknowledged and studied, the result of which will add yet another dimension to the Maritime cultural experience.



Figure 5. Backyards From Roberta's Porch, c. 1970, watercolour. Collection of Peter Latta and Diane Tye. Photo by Marion Petite.

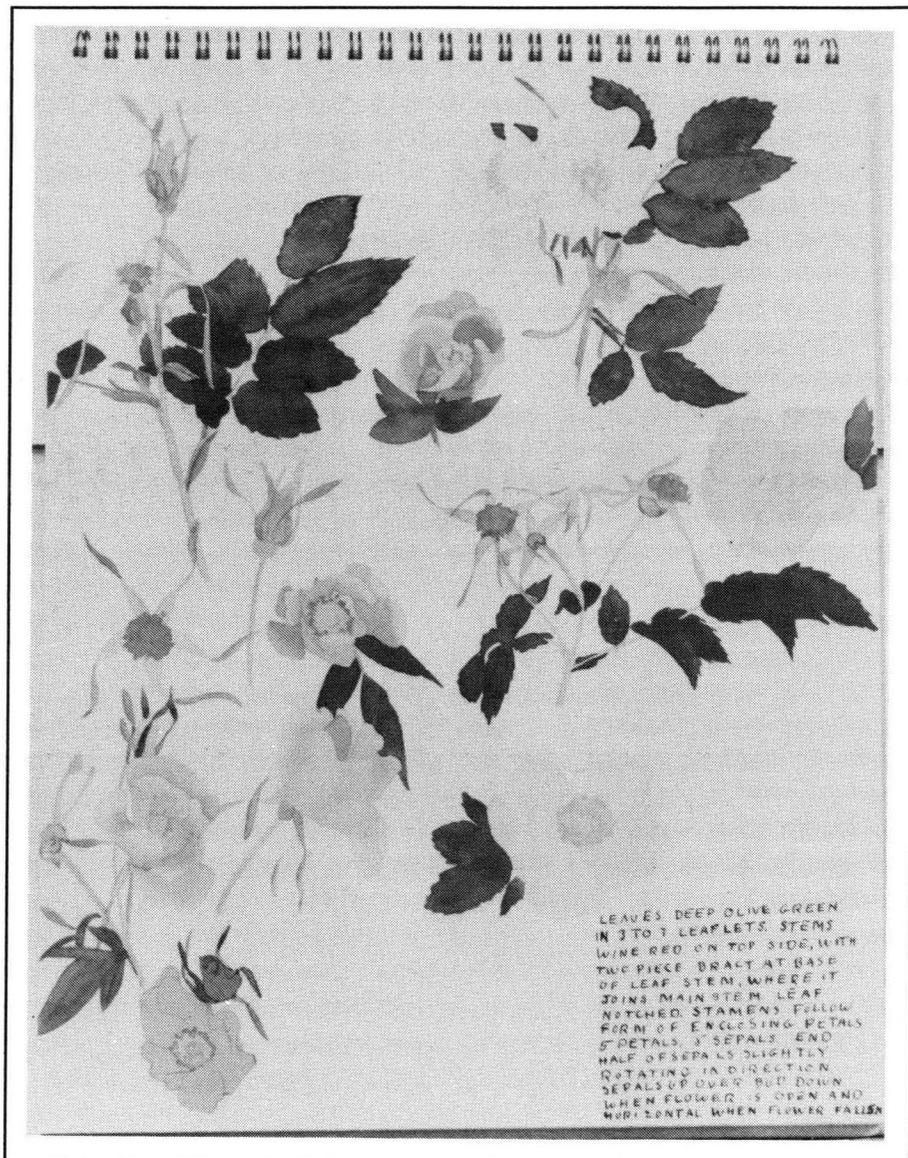


Figure 6. "Wild Roses", Flower Studies Sketchbook, watercolour on paper. Cumberland County Museum Collection. Photo by Marion Petite.

NOTES

1. Most of Taylor's finished works, in excess of 200 pieces, are in private collections throughout North America. Hundreds of preliminary sketches and studies, which the artist donated before her death, are housed at the Cumberland County Museum, Amherst. They cover the entire scope of her sixty year career and provide excellent insight into the artistic process in general, as well as the development of this particular artist.
2. "Head of Amherst Notes", Amherst Daily News. 19 April 1906.
3. Interview with Roberta Taylor. 19 March 1987.
4. Ibid. 1987.
5. Interview with Roberta Taylor. 30 September 1989.
6. Interview with Roberta Taylor. 19 March 1991.
7. Taylor. 30 September 1989.
8. "Presentation Exercise at Cumberland Academy". Chignecto Post. June 1920. n.p.
9. Appointment as Trustee and Conveyance of Land. John G. Walter et al to Alice B. Taylor. Book 191, Page 616. Registry of Deeds, Amherst, Nova Scotia.
10. Mount Allison Ladies' College Calendar. 1923-24. 26-27.
11. Taylor. 30 September 1989.
12. Ibid. 1989.
13. Interview with Timmy Howatt. March 15, 1991.
14. Ibid.
15. Interview with Roberta Taylor. n.d. 1989.
16. Taylor. 13 March 1990.
17. Ibid. 1990.
18. Taylor. 30 September 1989.
19. Ibid. 1990.
20. Howatt interview.
21. Taylor. 19 March 1987.
22. Taylor. 30 September 1989.
23. Travelling Exhibition Catalogue.
24. Joanne Hewson, "Art", Kings Hall Yearbook. Compton:Kings Hall. 1947. n.p.
25. Interview with Barbara Minard. 9 January 1992.
26. Michael Greenhalgh and Paul Duro. Essential Art History. Great Britain: Bloomsbury. 1992. 48, states that the Ash Can School was established in New York in 1907 to break with the academic values of the National Academy of Design. As its name suggests, the school was essentially realist in outlook, focusing on scenes of everyday life.
27. Shirley Hallee, "Roberta Taylor: A Retrospective (1905-1990)", Arts Atlantic 42 (Winter 1992) : 4.

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