

Dewing Woodward

Williamsport's bold vagabond artist

By MARY L. SIEMINSKI
Special to the Sun-Gazette

When Williamsport native Dewing Woodward died in 1950 at the age of 94, her obituary in the New York Times called her "one of the nation's leading painters."

Her paintings were held by the Baltimore Museum of Art, the University of Miami, the Sub-Treasury Department in Washington, D.C., the Deschanel Collection in Paris and many others. Eleanor Roosevelt had singled out

Williamsport Women

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two of her paintings, "Flamingos" and "Great Blue Herons," for display in the Sub-Treasury Building.

Today, it seems that few people locally are familiar with her, although she was quite

prominent in her time. Apparently her friends and relatives were scandalized when she moved to Paris, as well as when she opened an art studio in Provincetown, Mass., and later, when she and her companion, Louise

Johnson, established the Blue Dome Fraternity, an artist colony in the Catskills, where she taught nude painting in the outdoors, or "en plein air."

Martha Dewing Woodward was born in Williamsport on June 6, 1856, just at the beginning of Williamsport's great Lumber Era. She stopped using the first name Martha midway in her career, when she found that her artwork was not receiving the attention that it deserved because of her gender.

She chose to use her more androgynous middle name, Dewing.

Martha was the youngest of the eight children of John Vanderbilt and Wealthy Ann York Woodward.

The Woodwards were one of the founding families in Williamsport.

Their home was "Springside," located at 721 Fifth Ave., often cited as the oldest house in Williamsport.

According to A Survey of Historic Sites and Landmarks of Lycoming County, prepared by the

Lycoming County Planning Commission in 1971, it was built in 1803 as a log house and enlarged in Southern style before 1845 by Cornelius Woodward. Later, the Woodwards built a studio for Dewing above the kitchen in the large home.

"Woodward" is a common name in Lycoming County. In addition to the artist, Dewing Woodward, there is Woodward Township, Woodward School and the Woodward

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Lifestyle

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THE BLUE DOME FRAT

AN OPPORTUNITY for studying the figure in the open air under delightful conditions. Desirable for professional workers and for beginners. Men and women. Professional workers study as they please. Students will have four criticisms weekly from DEWING WOODWARD. This Fraternity includes the DEWING WOODWARD SCHOOL for painting the figure in the open air, at BEARSVILLE-IN-THE-CATSKILLS. Write to L. L. JOHNSON, Shady, Ulster County, New York



PHOTOS PROVIDED

At top is an advertisement for the Blue Dome Frat as it appeared in the Magazine of Art in 1915. Above left is a photo of the Woodward home, 721 Fifth Ave., provided by the Lycoming County Historical Society. Above right is a photo of Dewing Woodward, about 1925, provided by the University of Miami Libraries, Coral Gables, Fla., archives.

Guards, a local militia unit active during the Civil War. Apollos Woodward, the artist's grandfather, was a teacher in Williamsport's first school, built in 1796 or 1797.

The late Ralph Rees, Bucknell University English professor, did extensive research on Dewing Woodward. His research was published in the November 1991 issue of *Bucknell World*. The article, "The Search for Dewing Woodward: Revealing a Life and the Difficulty of Documenting That Life," also is available online in the Lycoming County Women's History Collection (www.lycoming.edu/orgs/lcwhc).

This article draws extensively on Rees's work.

Martha Woodward — or Mattie, as she was called then — started painting as a child. When she was 11 years old, she painted a portrait of her father that was said to be very advanced.

She attended the Hattie Hall Seminary for Young Ladies in Williamsport. It is unclear where she received her early art education, but later she studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art and at Académie Julian in Paris.

Her outstanding talent clearly was recognized, because when she was 26, she was appointed art professor at the Female Institute at Lewisburg, associated with the University at Lewisburg (later Bucknell). She taught there for five years. From 1882 to 1892 she was the head of the art department of the Women's College of Baltimore, which became Goucher College.

Paris Years

In 1892, Martha went to Paris. Rees writes, "There is one report that her family was so shocked by this move, they almost disowned her, even though she was 36 years old at the time." Martha spent 11 years on and off in Paris. She called those years the happiest in her life. She studied and served as an assistant critic at the Académie Julian. She had a studio, exhibited, and, in 1894, won the very competitive Grand Prix de Concours de Portrait.

The Williamsport Sun-Gazette and Bulletin in June 1894 reported that her painting was exhibit-

ed in the Paris Salon. In an interview published in the *Miami News* when she was in her late 80s, she noted that she was particularly proud of that prize, won for a portrait of an elderly woman; she feared that it might have been destroyed in World War II ("Dewing Woodward Active in Art Despite Her Years," Nov. 30, 1944).

The artist returned to the United States from time to time during those Paris years. In 1897 she established the Dewing Woodward School of Drawing and Painting on Cape Cod in Provincetown, Mass. The school was the first summer school of art in Provincetown.

According to Rees, she also established the Dewing Woodward School of Drawing and Painting in New York City and taught at the Ethical Culture School in New York.

In the census of 1900 for Provincetown, Woodward is listed as living with Laura Johnson, an art student. Seven years later, in 1907, Johnson and Woodward established the Blue Dome Fraternity in Shady-in-the-Catskills, near Woodstock, N.Y.

In 1908, Dewing published "Some Adventures of Two Vagabonds: By One of 'Em'" (Broadway Publishing), under the pseudonym Wealthy Ann York, which was actually her mother's birth name.

A Williamsport Sun-Gazette and Bulletin article headlined "Williamsport Lady the Writer of a New Book" gives the details: "The author is ... Miss Martha C. Woodward, formerly of this city. The 'vagabonds' in the book are Miss Woodward and Miss Johnson, also of this city, who is a sister of Mrs. Charles Lose. Miss Johnson also is an artist, and the two ladies have lived together for a number of years at Provincetown, Mass., where they painted the fisher folk, and in Paris."

Laura Louise Johnson was one of the six daughters of Henry Johnson and Margaret Green. Henry Johnson was a lawyer and state legislator who moved from Muncy to Williamsport.

Their home was the stately Queen Ann style Victorian at 901 West Fourth St., directly across from the Lycoming County Historical Society.

Blue Dome Fraternity
Dewing Woodward
and Louise Johnson

founded the Blue Dome Fraternity for the purpose of painting the nude figure outdoors. The "Blue Dome" was the sky. En plein air painting had been popular in France when Woodward and Johnson were there. The students who lived and worked at the Blue Dome mostly were women.

It was near the Brydcliffe Art Colony, in Woodstock, New York, which also attracted independent, strong women. Woodward and Johnson spent summers there for ten years.

They hired female models, who posed in the nude and scandalized the surrounding countryside. Woodward's coterie included many well-known people in the arts.

In 1916, the New York Tribune devoted an entire page to "Miss Woodward and the Blue Dome Fellowship."

Pat Horner, in an article on the Blue Dome in the Woodstock Guide, said, "One picture showed a band of skittish nudes engaged in a harvest dance."

Another showed several models against a tree whose spirit they seemed to symbolize." According to the Tribune article, to discourage voyeurs, the art school was located in a remote part of the Catskills, which could be reached only "on foot or by stage."

In 2006, the James Cox Gallery in Willow, N.Y., sponsored a Blue Dome Fraternity revival weekend.

According to their website, "Artists from New York, the Hudson Valley and Woodstock gathered to paint various tableaux that were staged across the gallery's sylvan grounds. Picnics sur l'herbe, stream bathing and garden arabesques were each staffed with live models and posed by an experienced stylist. The weekend produced over ninety paintings that were exhibited at the gallery through the month of July."

Florida Years

Sadly, in 1912 the Blue Dome studio burned and Dewing lost everything, including many of her works. In 1919, she moved to Florida and continued to be active in the arts in Miami and Coral Gables. She headed the art department at the University of Miami from 1926 to 1928.

In the 1930s, she was hired by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to paint murals in

a number of public buildings and to paint miniatures of historic antiques, according to Rees.

Her art style, according to Rees, "has been described as modern and quite like that of Toulouse-Lautrec."

She painted landscapes, bird studies, portraits and nudes. Her drawings, mostly in silverpoint, are precise and accurate."

Woodward remained active in the arts in Florida well into her 80s and was characterized in the story about her in the *Miami News* as "delightful," with a joy for living and a wonderful sense of humor, still volunteering at the local arts and crafts center.

Rees's research confirmed that she was a generous, warm, caring person.

Ninety-four-year-old Woodward died at her home in Florida. Her cremated remains were buried in the family plot at Wildwood Cemetery.

In addition to those pieces of her art that remain, she left an important legacy in the form of the many students she influenced and the opportunities she provided to other artists.