

# The Nettie J. McKinnon Collection: American Masterworks for Illinois Schoolchildren

BY THOMAS CONNORS



For many American public school students, the first glimpse of fine art comes during a field trip to the local museum. But for pupils in School District 102 in La Grange Park, Illinois (16 miles southwest of downtown Chicago), the real thing is even closer. And for those attending Park Junior High School, it's literally down the hall, in the Nettie J. McKinnon Gallery. Comprising works by John Singer Sargent, John Henry Twachtman, Edward Henry Potthast, and John Frederick Kensett, among others, the McKinnon Collection is, if not unique, then certainly a rarity in U.S. public schools. Its driving force, Nettie J. McKinnon (1900-1960), was truly singular in her determination to make fine art a vital part of the educational environment.

Raised on a farm in Iowa, McKinnon became a District 102 school principal in 1929 and held that post until 1960. Almost immediately, she launched her acquisitions program, sending seventh and eighth graders into the neighborhood to sell magazine subscriptions and using the proceeds to purchase art. One of her earliest buys was *The Aspen Road* by Joseph Fleck (1893-1977). Fleck, whose paintings are also owned by the Smithsonian Institution and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, was born in Austria and studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Art and the School of Graphic Art in Vienna. After World War I, he immigrated to the U.S., settling in Kansas City, where he worked as a designer. Entranced by a touring exhibition of paintings by members of the Taos Society of Artists, he relocated to New Mexico, where the light and landscape led him to heighten his palette and loosen his brushstroke.

As McKinnon noted in a catalogue she produced in 1957, "the Class of 1930 gave the first picture," and "succeeding classes, with the encouragement of faculty, parents, and friends,



John Henry Twachtman (1853-1902)  
*Spring Landscape*  
c. 1890, Oil on panel, 18 x 12 in.

have visited galleries, artists' studios, and auction houses in search of worthwhile additions to the collection." One of McKinnon's regular shopping destinations was the Marshall Field's department store, which maintained a serious art gallery right up until the 1950s.

A large woman (her heavy tread earned her the nickname "Cannonball"), McKinnon was a formidable figure to students, staff, and parents alike. According to Joyce Easter Fitch, president of the SaltCreek American Art Foundation (named

after a local waterway), which oversees the collection today, "Nettie believed so strongly in the arts that when a child misbehaved, the punishment was to go with her, and no one else, to either the symphony or the opera. Several former students have told us this, and every one of them said that experience positively changed how they felt about the arts." Commanding as she may have been, McKinnon was also profoundly sensitive to the importance of artistic expression and its impact on impressionable minds:

*A great work of art has the power to change everyday experiences into the realm of the mysterious or the beautiful.... While one may not know the degree of appreciation developed, it is evident that children as art lovers do grow in grace and reverence.... Who can plumb the depths of emotion roused or measure the inspiration engendered as pupils see the serenity in the face and the courage in the figure of Nathan Hale when he was ready to give his life for his country? Can one doubt the admiration shown for Washington and Lincoln as children stop to gaze at their portraits?*

## APPRECIATING WHAT THEY'VE GOT

Having been housed in various school buildings over the years, the McKinnon Collection was put into storage in 2002, when the space it occupied was requisitioned for another purpose. At that time, the school board hired the Chicago-based art consultant Jane Jacob to appraise the artworks for insurance values and to help determine how best to administer it. Formerly deputy director of the Terra Museum of American Art, Jacob researched each piece, had the works professionally photographed, and presented her appraisal. Though Fitch declines to disclose the total valuation, she admits that it "was far more than anyone involved expected."

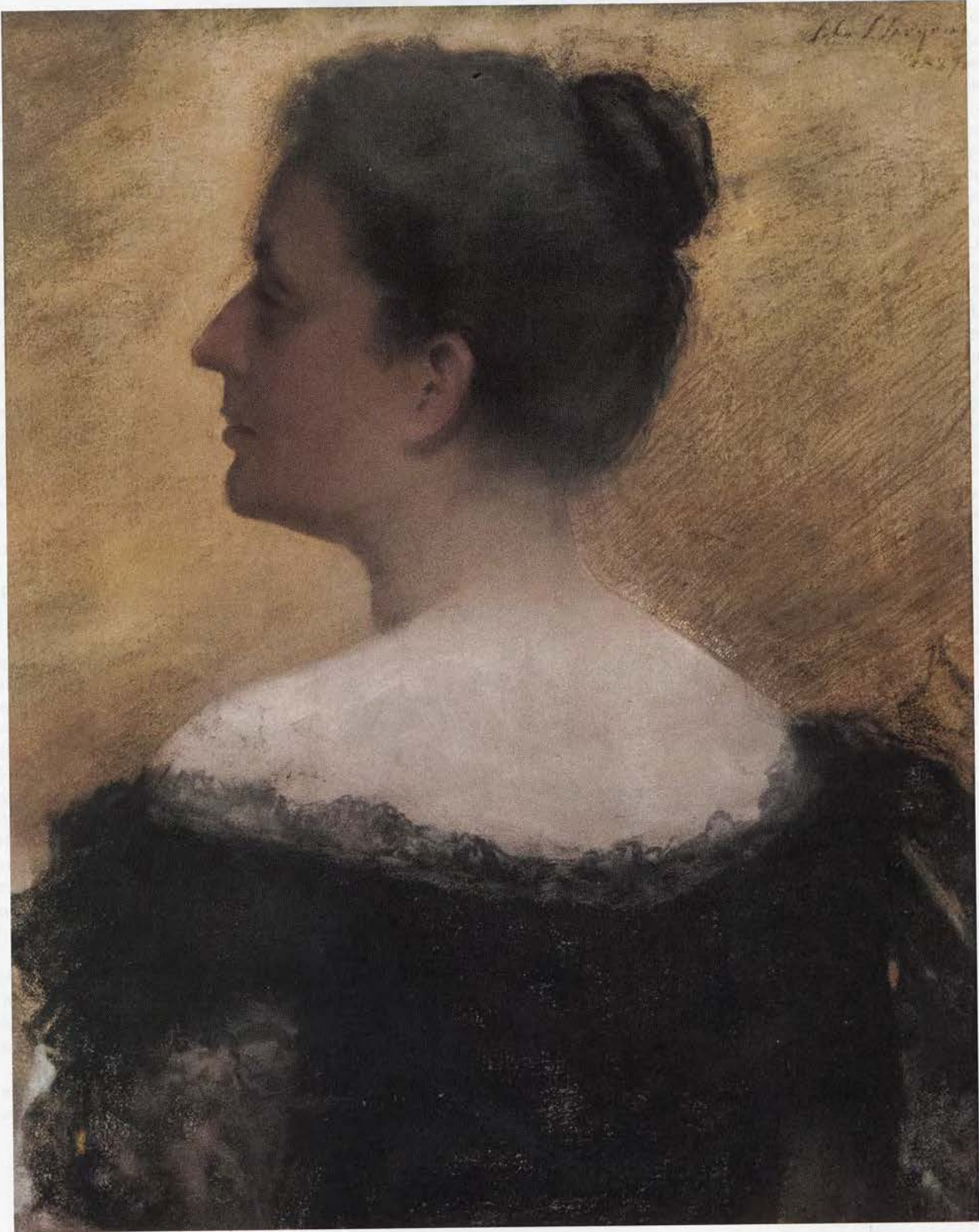


Edward Henry Potthast (1857-1927)  
*On the Beach*  
c. 1915, Oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in.



Herbert Morton Stoops (1887-1948)  
*Wagon Train*  
1913, Oil on canvas, 26 x 42 in.

John Singer Sargent (1856-1925)  
*Mrs. Adrian Iselin*  
1887, Pastel on paper, 24 x 20 in.



Committed to honoring McKinnon's vision and determined to return the collection to view, school officials and community leaders worked to establish the SaltCreek American Art Foundation and identified a permanent home for it at Park Junior High School. With Jacob's guidance, the foundation carved out a suitable gallery space, outfitting it with appropriate lighting, climate control, and security systems. Veteran conservator Timothy Lennon was brought in to treat various canvases. To present the collection more informatively to both students and the public, Jacob produced a docent training manual. "We felt," she explains, "that we could enhance the docents' understanding of not only the collection, but American art generally."

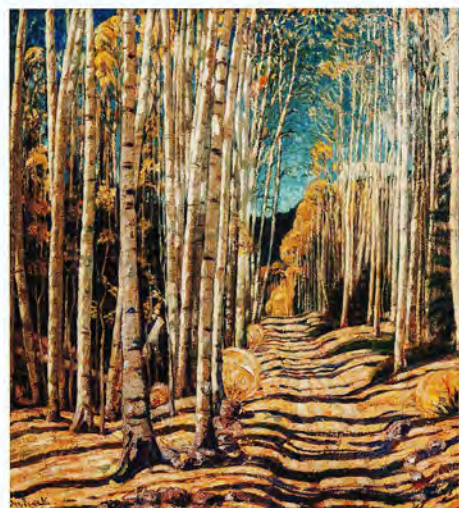
Comprising more than 100 works — roughly half of them on view today — the McKinnon Collection contains portraits, genre scenes, and landscapes, as well as images of the American West such as Herbert Morton Stoops's *Wagon Train* and John Hauser's *Indian on Horseback*. "The collection really is a little jewel," Jacob notes, "in the way that it encapsulates American art history." The facets of this jewel include Sargent's pastel study for his large oil portrait of Mrs. Adrian Iselin (now in the National Gallery of Art); Twachtman's *Spring Landscape* (thin-trunked trees against a neatly tripartite ground of pasture, hills, and sky); and Potthast's *On the Beach*, an idyll of innocence featuring girls in white dresses highlighted with thick slashes of pink and yellow. Two works from different phases of Guy C. Wiggins's career — *Winter in New York City* (c. 1910) and *Poem of Winter* (c. 1928) — exemplify his skill in deploying the absence of color. Chicago-area artists represented include Margaret Burroughs, founder of the DuSable Museum of African American History; Frank V. Dudley, known for his depictions of Indiana's rolling sand dunes; and Adam Emory Albright, whose *Vacation Days* (1907) — two barefoot boys perched on rocks overlooking a lake — is the antithesis of the unsettling and obsessively detailed pictures for which his son, Ivan, later became famous.

#### STUDENTS COME FIRST

The Nettie J. McKinnon Gallery is open to the public by appointment and welcomes individual visitors, as well as groups. Yet students remain the collection's primary audience. "Every one of our kindergarteners comes here," Fitch notes. "Our third graders learn about space and perspective. Sixth graders do a research project on a single work, or on a specific artist. Whatever



Frank V. Dudley (1868-1957)  
*Sand Dunes*  
c. 1913, Oil on panel, 24 x 30 in.



Joseph Fleck (1893-1977)  
*The Aspen Road*  
c. 1930, Oil on canvas, 35 x 32 in.



Guy C. Wiggins (1893-1962)  
*Poem of Winter*  
c. 1928, Oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in.

the grade or age level, we try to bring their experiences to bear on the paintings so that they are immediately engaged."

Language arts teacher Osenia Kuehnle accesses the collection regularly, incorporating it in various ways as she instructs her seventh-grade pupils. "We do a huge unit on poetics, studying word sounds, word connotations, rhyme, and meter," she explains. "The culminating project for that unit is a trip to the gallery. Prior to visiting, we read John Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' examining it as a poem that was written in direct response to an artwork." In the gallery, Kuehnle asks her students to consider the panoply before them and then write their own responses to one work. "I have them choose a perspective," she continues. "They can choose the voice of a person or an inanimate object in the image, they can write a personal response to viewing it, they can write in the voice of the artist, they can speak to the artist, or to one detail in the piece, or they can speculate why the artist chose to create the piece at all. I use a lot of different strategies to inspire kids, but being in the gallery really provides inspiration like nothing else. The poetry they generate from that experience is the best poetry I see from them all year."

Kuehnle's strategy — allowing students to craft a poem from the perspective of their choosing, no matter how unusual — has indeed resulted in some incisive observations, both eloquent and imaginative. While examining a small bronze cast of Frederick MacMonnies's sculpture of the American Revolutionary war hero Nathan Hale (the monumental version stands in New York's City Hall Park), seventh-grader Laura McAllister projected her voice into the rope that binds the patriot's feet, while also reflecting on the noose around his neck, the coil that ended his life:

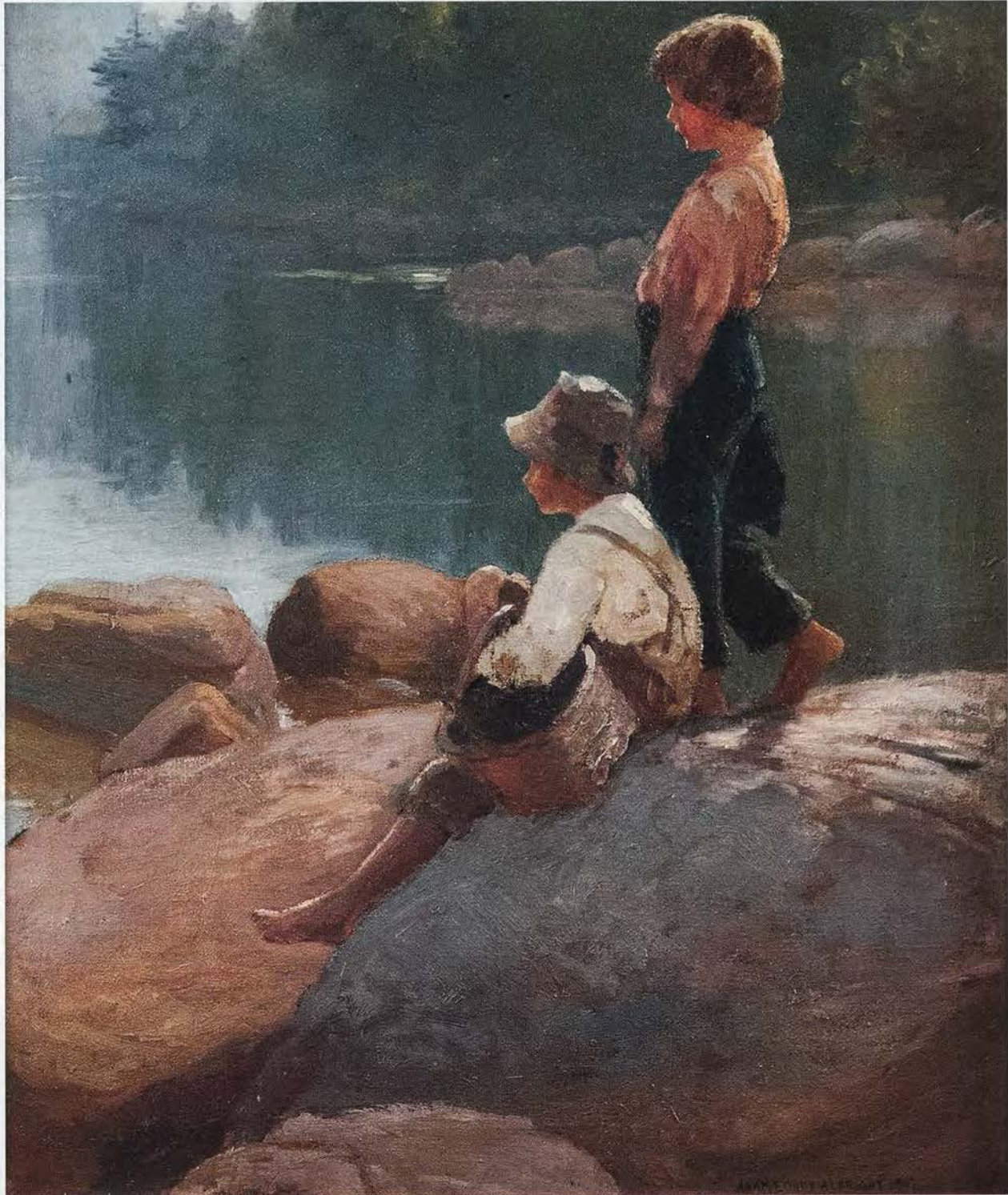
*My own sister is curled as a snake  
Prepared to grasp the life she will take  
As I am set free, a sack goes on his head,  
And though I can't see, I know he is dead.*

How true, as Nettie McKinnon asserted, "that children as art lovers do grow in grace and reverence." ■

Photos courtesy Jacob Fine Art, Inc.

Information: [saltcreekart.org](http://saltcreekart.org)

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Adam Emory Albright (1862-1957)  
*Vacation Days*  
1907, Oil on canvas, 26 x 22 in.