

Illinois Women Artists, Part 34

Nell Brooker Mayhew: The Illinois Years

By Brian Adams, Ph.D., Assistant Director, Statewide Surveys, Illinois State Archaeological Survey

Nell Brooker Mayhew (*nee* Danely) was a pioneering artist who until recently was all but forgotten, even in Urbana, Illinois where she lived with her large family at the dawn of the 20th century. Mayhew was primarily a printmaker and painter, though her works permeated extended into the realms of architecture and interior decorating during the first half of the 20th century. Art historian Alissa Anderson, Mayhew's biographer, states the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement can be seen in the importance of nature in her work and in the quality craftsmanship in her paintings and etchings. Mayhew's work also expresses ideals of the related Aesthetic Movement, and demonstrates the influence of Japanese printmaking techniques and the "Japonisme" style, referring to a taste for Japanese culture which emphasized nature, simplicity and spirituality. Typical of Mayhew's use of the Japonisme style are "...high horizon lines, simple scenes of nature and a vertical, columnar style..."



Mayhew is known primarily for works produced in her adopted home of Los Angeles, California, rather than her works and projects in Illinois. Yet her relatively brief residence in Urbana had a great influence on her development as an artist. Chief among the inspirations she found there were her father's love of nature, especially arboriculture; Urbana architect Joseph William Royer who married Mayhew's sister Adelaide; and, Professor Newton Alonzo Wells of the University of Illinois, a prolific artist who worked in many mediums, and was especially skilled at mosaic work and mural painting.

Mayhew frequently returned to Illinois where she collaborated with her sister and brother-in-law. Some of those projects in her former hometown have recently come to light.



Royer residence, dining room, looking west.



Royer residence, dining room, north wall mural, detail.



Royer residence, dining room, south wall.

Torrey Pine from "Trees, What Spirits Brood in These?" manuscript.



Royer designed a Spanish-influenced Mission style house at 801 West Oregon Street for his family, completed in 1905. Murals located in what is likely the original formal dining room are excellent examples of Mayhew's early style. The murals appear to have been part of the original design of the room, with panels above the wainscoting reserved for the artwork. [Royer residence, dining room, looking west]

The five panels on the north wall might be termed the "village" mural. [Royer dining room, detail] From right to left they depict a view from a birch forest towards an open valley with a winding stream; a curving road along a stream emerging from a forest; a view from an open forest looking towards the stream and a village on the far shore; and a view within a forest.

The three panels on the south wall depict a pastoral scene [Royer residence dining room, south wall] of a grassy ridge with a large tree near the crest and a forest in the distance. The central panel is very similar to two other works by Mayhew, an etching and a painting both entitled *By the Sea*. The three panels of the west wall are separated by two small square windows with lace-like metal work; the central one consists of a landscape with a body of water near the bottom and a partial tree-lined ridge crest near the top.

Mayhew's incorporation and arrangement of pastoral murals in the Royer dining room is a classic example of Gustav Stickley's ideal decorative scheme for such rooms, and could very well have been inspired by examples periodically featured in his publication *The Craftsman*. It is also a prime

example of cooperation between artist and architect favored during the Arts and Crafts period.

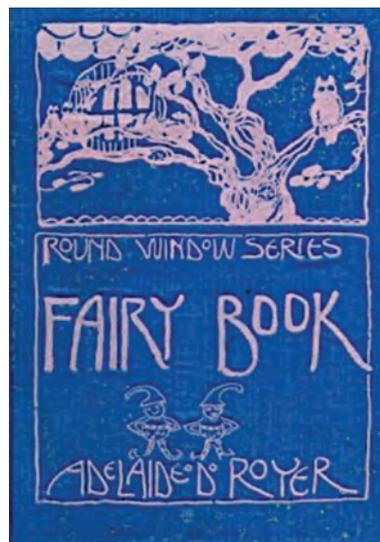
Mayhew apparently also completed a large mural depicting a country scene in the foyer of the Mills-Petrie Memorial Library in Ashton, Illinois, dedicated in 1936. The building was designed in the Art Deco style by Royer's firm of Royer, Danely and Smith, but to date no details about these have been discovered, and they were replaced by later murals in the 1970s.

Mayhew produced illustrations for two volumes written with her sister Adelaide. One is an unpublished volume of poems entitled *Trees: What Spirits Brood in These?*, dedicated to their father, Reverend Alfred Marion Danely. This manuscript was likely prepared around 1919 shortly after the reverend's death, and consists of 21 poems, each accompanied by a tree illustration by Mayhew, and clearly demonstrates the impact their father's love of trees had on them. One poem, entitled "Unity," features the rare and endangered Torrey pine of southern California, Mayhew's adopted homeland, depicted on a rocky promontory overlooking the sea. [illustration: Torrey Pine] Mayhew's image of the Torrey pine tree is an exquisite example of the influence of traditional Japanese prints in the Arts and Crafts movement.

In 1923, Royer designed and built a small cottage in the English Revival style on the lot adjacent to his resi-

dence for his mother-in-law. Historic photographs indicate many of the original Arts and Crafts details survive in the "Mother-in-Law Cottage" to this day. That cottage inspired his wife Adelaide to write a book about the house called *Fairy Book* for which Mayhew did the illustrations [illustration: cover, *Fairy Book*] The book contains tales about the antics and adventures of fairies who by day live in Brownfield Woods, an actual remnant of Big Grove in northeast Urbana, and visit the city at night to dance, swim, and play. Ultimately, the fairies would build the cottage. The stories are full of references to nature, flowers, plants, birds, and streams, themes in line with the Arts and Crafts movement's resistance to the harshness of the industrial world.

Nell Brooker Mayhew was a member of a once prominent Urbana family who were gifted contributors to art and architecture both locally and nationally. However, with Mayhew's move to California in 1908, her artistic contributions were forgotten by the community despite temporary exhibits of her California Mission etchings in Urbana in 1923 and 1933. Relatives gradually moved from Illinois, dispersing across the country, and with them the knowledge and memories of their artistic kin. Despite this, ongoing research once again illuminates the unique contributions of Nell Brooker Mayhew to the artistic legacy of Illinois. 



Cover, *Fairy Book* by Adelaide D. Royer (1925), illustrated by Nell Brooker Mayhew.



"The Grandmother House" from *Fairy Book*.

"Brownfield Wood" from *Fairy Book*.

