

Illinois Women Artists, Part 54

“A Skilled Modeler:” Sculptor Laura S. Kemeys

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Everyone who has visited the Art Institute of Chicago has most likely seen the bronze lions flanking the Michigan Avenue entrance. These impressive and beloved beasts are the work of Edward Kemeys, the first *animalier*—artist focused entirely on wild animals—in the United States. What few people know is that his wife was also an accomplished sculptor of animals. Her story, though incomplete, is worth exploring.



Born Laura Sparks Swing on November 3, 1864 in Fairfield, New Jersey, she was the fifth and last child of Simon Sparks Swing and his second wife, Judith L. Tomlinson (1822-1909); the four of Laura’s nine half-siblings who lived to adulthood were between 21 and 30 years older than she. Simon Swing (1805-1864) had grown up in an equally large family, early settlers of nearby Bridgeton in southern New Jersey. He worked first as an oysterman, then for 20 years “coasted,” or transported goods by his ship between Philadelphia and New York City. The 1860 census lists Simon as a “farmer.” He died at age 58 shortly after his fourteenth child was conceived, so Laura never knew him.

The 1870 federal census shows that Judith Swing and her four surviving children moved the short distance up the Cohansey River to Bridgeton, the most prosperous town in the state at that time, with glass and sewing factories, metal and machine works, and other manufacturers.

The next census indicates that 16-year-old Laura attended “art school,” probably one of the local academies for girls. In 1883, she graduated the “advanced course” from Normal School in Trenton, New Jersey. Over the next 30 months she accepted a teaching position at #1 School in Perth Amboy, was promoted to Vice Principal of the school with an annual salary of \$600 (approximately \$18,000 in 2022), and began dating her future husband. They wed on June 13, 1885 at the Church of the Advent in New York City.

The couple moved frequently. Their first home was “Eagleswood,” built by landscape painter George Inness on the Perth Amboy waterfront. In 1886 Edward had a studio at 138 W. 53rd St. in New York City and they resided at 72 W. 48th St. Four years later they lived and worked at 27 South St. in Morristown, New Jersey; she sold “Fancy Goods,” or ornamental home accessories.

This may have been when Laura began assisting her husband in his work, learning to appreciate his eye for naturalism and love of wild animals. She joined him on his yearly hunting expeditions through the American West to observe, sketch, and dissect animals which served as the models for his popular



Possibly Taos Indian exhibited by Laura Kemeys at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1905



Laura Kemeys assisting her husband, Edward, to sculpt a panther for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

sculptures; Native Americans also provided artistic inspiration.

In 1892, the Kemeys moved to Chicago for a significant commission to create twelve larger-than-life animal sculptures to adorn bridges over the lagoon and canals of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. They lived for the next decade with their son William (1886-1938) and Laura's mother in “the peaceful and charming seclusion of their home” at 7209 Euclid Ave., a few blocks south of Jackson Park on the south side of Chicago.

For two weeks in August 1894, the Kemeys joined eight other sculptors and painters on an “invigorating” camping trip at Bass Lake, Indiana. “Between recreational adventures and spirited antics, painters and sculptors alike engaged in *plein-air* oil sketching of the scenery. Evenings were given over to art lectures illustrated by a stereopticon projected on a makeshift screen consisting of a sheet stretched between trees. Such a good time was had that the artists arranged another merry outing for September. Thereafter such excursions became annual events.”

Laura was described in an 1897 *Inland Printer* article about Edward as “an apt student of her husband's art” and “a woman of remarkable beauty of face, character and physique.” She emerged from the shadow of her famous husband, creating works that were accepted into exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago: *One of King Oscar's Folk* in the prestigious *Ninth Annual Exhibition of Oil Paintings and Sculpture by American Artists* which opened in late October 1896, and a plaster titled *A Little Viking* in the early 1897 *Exhibition of Works by Chicago Artists*. Laura listed her husband and the inimitable Lorado Taft at the University of Chicago as her instructors, and that she was a pupil of the Art Institute of Chicago.

The family, including Laura's aged mother, moved to Washington, DC in 1902, within months of Theodore Roosevelt becoming President. Friends since 1886 with a shared passion for American wildlife, Roosevelt remained

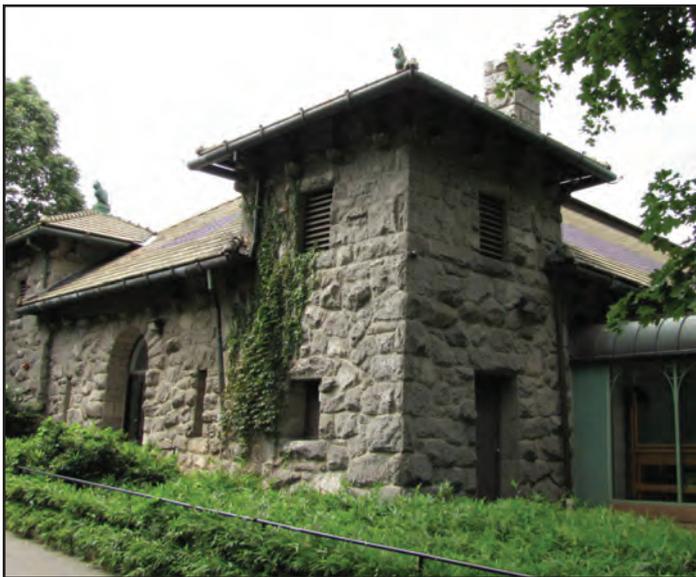


Bear cub on the ridgepole of what was built as the Small Mammal House, National Zoological Park.

Photo by Sarah Stierch on commons.wikimedia.

Edward's most devoted patron as younger, French-trained animaliers were eclipsing him. Edward's studio just south of Dupont Circle was half a mile from the White House, and their home another half mile to the northwest.

Laura was one of 16 female sculptors included in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts' 100th Anniversary Exhibition in early 1905, showing *Taos Indian*. She was already working on a commission for 9 figures to adorn the ridge poles of the Small Mammal House then under construction at the National Zoo (since renamed the Think Tank). An announcement of this project in *The Evening Star* stated that Laura "comes into prominence with ample testimony of ability and not without sufficient apprenticeship. She has an individual way of seeing things, which, combined with a capacity for diligent endeavor, assures not only success in the present undertaking, but promises greater accomplishments in the future." Laura completed the fox and bear cubs, and lynx kittens in 1907, the same year that she was widowed. She organized a large exhibition of Edward's



Lynx kittens atop the Think Tank, National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C.

bronze sculptures and plaster models at the Corcoran Gallery of Art the following year.

In late summer 1908, Laura spent six weeks traveling in Europe, returning from Antwerp to Boston aboard the S.S. *Marquette* in September. Her mother died in 1909, and in 1910 Laura and William moved out of the house they had rented since shortly before Edward's death into a multi-family dwelling on New Hampshire Ave. NW. No occupation is listed for either in the 1910 federal census, but three years later he was working as a stenographer. In 1915, Laura advertised as a sculptor, working from a home studio at 1228 Connecticut Ave. NW.

In 1918, Laura visited William in Manila, Philippines where he held a government position, and together they vacationed in Japan before returning home via San Francisco aboard the *Nippon Maru*. He finally moved out in 1923 to be married at age 36. By 1930 Laura had two grandchildren living in Elizabethtown, New York and she was in New Brunswick, New Jersey living with a commercial manager with New York Telephone Company and his wife.

Laura died on November 5, 1934, presumably in Washington, D.C., and was buried in Arlington Cemetery alongside her husband, a three-year veteran of the Civil War. 

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Fox cub at National Zoological Park. Photo by Sarah Stierch on commons.wikimedia.