

Illinois Women Artists, Part 31

Grace Ravlin (1873-1956)

A wartime interlude – an artist returns home

By Alta Ann Parkins Morris, with Kristan H. McKinsey

n.b. The author is the great-niece of Grace Ravlin, the subject of this article. Long letters that Ravlin wrote home to her family, especially to her older sister Alta, form the basis of the author's writings on the artist's life and work. Some of her letters are accessible at www.graceravlin.com.



Grace Ravlin

Relatives once described artist Grace Ravlin as “ambitious and purposeful;” they undoubtedly also considered her to be courageous, curious and generous. She pursued professional art training in this country and abroad, sought out interesting subject matter in places where the majority of artists did not venture, and contributed to war efforts here and in Europe as a Red Cross volunteer and worker. She exhibited widely in Paris and the United States, and won a medal for work displayed in the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco.

Ravlin (1873-1956), the last of five children, was born and raised in the township of Kaneville, about 53 miles west of Chicago. Her paternal grandfather, Thomas, was a Baptist minister and an early settler and major landowner there. Her father, Needham Nicaner (1823-1899), was the village's first postmaster, served as Town Supervisor for 27 years as well as several other elected positions, briefly serving in the Illinois General Assembly. Ravlin's mother, Frances Ann West (1831-1907), came to this country from England as an infant.

Ravlin attended the Industrial and Normal School in nearby Sugar Grove, then the South Division High School on Chicago's near south side, graduating in 1893. From 1891 to 1904, while still in high school and later after teaching in Kaneville, she studied at the Art Institute of Chicago with John Vanderpoel (1857-1911), a well-respected Dutch-American painter best known as an instructor of figure drawing. Then she studied for two years at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts with William Merritt Chase, a major proponent of American Impressionism and a popular teacher willing to provide serious training for women artists.

Wanting to extend her training even further, Ravlin alarmed her family in 1906 by setting out to study in Paris with Émile-René Menard (1862-1930) and Lucien Simon (1861-1945). She wrote at one point “I found my task in

Europe.” Her paintings were accepted into several exhibitions there, and the French Government purchased five works for museum collections.

A pattern for the next few years of her life quickly evolved, in which she studied maps and timetables during the winter months, then close to the time of her April birthday she set out for a new destination. She painted until autumn when days grew too short or too cold for her to work.

By 1914, Ravlin had spent time painting in Venice, the Italian Riviera, Holland, Moret and Nemours in north-central France, Brittany, Spain, Morocco and Provence. She delighted in painting people in their native locale. A letter to her father, dated 1897, reveals Ravlin's early interest in other cultures: “...Then we went over to the National Museum. I liked that better than the Smithsonian. It's a collection of all sorts of personal relics belonging to celebrated people, as well as an example of fine art work, pottery, carving and modes of living of all different nations...one part devoted to Eskimos, representing their mode of life, dress and another part devoted to Indians, another Japanese, with all the weapons, utensils etc. that these different people make. It was all very interesting” The many lists of Portuguese words in her archive suggest she also spent time in Portugal but no letters survive. Ravlin hoped to reach Tunis, Tunisia in northern Africa before year's end. In the fall, however, she was forced to leave Italy as the countries where she had been living and studying art were lining up for war.

Back home in Chicago, Ravlin gravitated to the extensive stockyards, located several blocks from her high school and where she had painted at intervals since her student days. Her interest may have stemmed from her childhood on a farm, and this may have been a way to honor her family. [Image: *The Yards in Snow*, 1915] Another subject took on interest in 1915: “I've been having a great time lately, thought I'd try some horses and let up on cows.” The superintendent of the horses found her a place to paint in an upper gallery within a stable with “whitewashed walls hung with flags. I was crazy to get in there.” Her you-are-there descriptive letter tells of an English inspector buying horses for



The Yards in Snow, 1915



Alta, her 15-year-old niece, 1914-1915.

the British Army. The details of her painting are so well expressed that we would know this work in an instant were it to come up for auction.

Life was becoming expensive for Ravlin. When she heard that one of her friends was earning \$1,000 for completing a child's portrait within one month, Grace began to speculate and tried portraiture to increase her income, starting with her 15-year old niece, Alta, namesake of Ravlin's sister. This work was made in a studio borrowed from Walter Ufer (1876-1936) while he was painting in the Southwest, commissioned by his two major patrons, Chicago's mayor Carter Harrison and meat-packing tycoon Oscar Mayer. The border of a Navajo rug curves around the lower right corner and floral background of the canvas depicting Alta Elizabeth Ravlin.

Ravlin herself traveled to the Southwest in the summers of 1916 and 1917, the first female artist with recognized ability and widespread reputation to paint in New Mexico. It was there that she painted her most admired paintings, largely of Pueblo Indians, their landscape, dwellings, and ceremonies from an outsider's point of view. She encountered a site where Navajo were moving their camp and where she made the study for a larger work (now lost), *In the Navaho Country* (1916), which received a Chicago

civic prize and was purchased to hang in a Chicago Public School. The highly influential New York City artist Robert Henri (1865-1929) told Ravlin it was her best work.

In the spring of 1918, Ravlin journeyed east to New York where she painted at least three remarkable flag paintings. *Armistice Day, Fifth Avenue, New York, 1918*, was published in the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* on November



11, 1934. In May, she painted a Red Cross parade as it made its slow march down Fifth Avenue past 42nd Street as viewed from a friend's office on Fifth Avenue.

For both practical and altruistic reasons, Ravlin decided to volunteer with the Red Cross. Her training as a nurse's aide in a children's hospital during the 1917 flu pandemic was rigorous; she was their best volunteer. It did not make her a nurse. In early 1919 Ravlin sailed back to Europe with a Red Cross contingent to continue her volunteer work helping troops returning home following the armistice for as long as necessary. Her close involvement with the Red Cross remained a part of her life; whenever the U.S. was at war Ravlin took shifts folding bandages for the Red Cross Production Service Volunteers in Chicago. In 1921, Ravlin made her final trans-Atlantic crossing home to America, where she lived, traveled and continued to paint for about 20 more years.

Postscript:

The Navajo weaving in the portrait of Ravlin's niece could be said to have had a profound effect. Ravlin, instead of traveling to Cuba, which she said would be preferable, chose to paint New Mexico many important Pueblo Indian celebrations and harvest dances in the summers of 1916 and 1917. These paintings were well received and admired both in Chicago and Paris, and became the pictures by which Ravlin is best known and admired.

The niece, Alta Ravlin, began a serious study of weaving in 1950. In 1956, she and her husband, Leonard C. Turner, took their first car trip to the west. Returning home, she reread the few but vivid letters Ravlin had written during her "Indian Summers," which inspired her to study the designs, colors and techniques that were the distinctive hallmark of the weavings of different Navajo tribes. Then she planned another trip West to visit places where her aunt had traveled and painted forty years earlier.

Photographs that her husband took of weavings and other crafts during the 1950s, '60s and early '70s formed the basis of slides lectures that Ravlin's niece gave at weavers' conventions around the country. Some illustrated her book, *Finger Weaving: Indian Braiding* (Sterling Press, later republished by The Cherokee Press).



Navajo moving their camp, 1916.