

Illinois Women Artists, Part 44

“A “new woman”: Minerva J. Chapman

By Kristan H. McKinsey, Director,
Illinois Women Artists Project

Minerva Chapman is an excellent example of a “New Woman” of the late 19th century: educated, independent, confident and accomplished. Such women increasingly challenged the social codes that defined their place in society as wives and homemakers. The time was right for them to search out training, establish themselves professionally, and support themselves without a husband. Chapman had the advantages of financial support and encouragement from her family, personal ambition, and abundant energy. And she had the good fortune to live in Chicago.

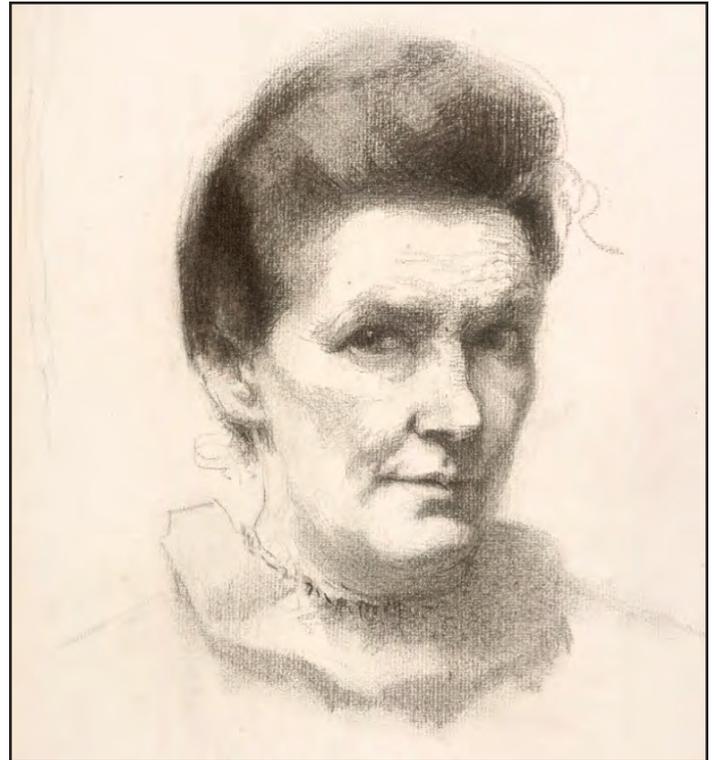


Minerva Josephine (1858-1947) was the eldest of five children born to James Lincoln and Agnes Josephine Barnes Chapman. He was a tanner in the small village of Sand Bank (now Altman), on the Salmon River north of Syracuse, New York, but saw opportunities to improve his circumstances in Chicago: in 1863, his uncle Edmund R. Aiken had founded the federally chartered First National Bank, which ranked as Chicago’s largest bank by 1876 and of which he became a Director; and, in 1865, the Union Stock Yard opened, increasing the need to turn the many hides into usable goods such as saddles, shoes, fire buckets, gloves, outerwear, bellows, furniture upholstery, trunks, whips, and, with increasing industrialization, machinery belts and straps.

In 1866, J.L. Chapman advertised as a dealer in hides, furs, pelts, wool and tallow located at 182-188 Washington St.; his residence was at 998 Indiana Ave. Four years later, Chapman dealt solely in hides at 193 Kinzie Street and the growing family lived several blocks west of the Chicago River at 608 W. Washington Street. The business was flourishing and the family employed two live-in female servants. But the Great Fire of October 1871 consumed the business property, and subsequent city directories list Chapman as a flour dealer or with no profession, living at 3217 Vernon Ave in the Douglas neighborhood.

Minerva apparently enjoyed her parents’ support of her interests, and never lacked the means to pursue them. She attended the University of Chicago in 1875, prior to attending Mount Holyoke College for two years. Returning to Chicago in 1878, she began serious study of art under Annie Cornelia Shaw (1852-1887), who two years earlier had exhibited her *Illinois Prairie* painting at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition and been the first woman elected an Academician by the Chicago Academy of Design. Shaw was the first of more than a dozen teachers Chapman would seek out over the next 30 years in the United States and Europe, exploring a variety of styles and media.

From 1880 to 1886, Chapman studied with John Vanderpoel (1857-1911) at the School of the Art Institute. Best known as a popular instructor of figure drawing, his influence is evident in her sketchbook pages (at Mount



Minerva J. Chapman (1858-1947). **Self-portrait**, 1906. charcoal on paper. *Collection of National Portrait Gallery*

Holyoke College). Perhaps Vanderpoel’s decision to study at the Académie Julian in Paris (1886-1888) motivated Chapman’s own travels to Switzerland, Holland and Belgium in 1886, finally settling in Paris the following year. Over the next decade, took classes at the Académie Julian, a private studio school established in 1868 which began admitting women in 1880, well before the École des Beaux Arts did. She also studied independently with Jules Joseph Lefebvre (1836-1911), another figure painter with whom Vanderpoel studied; historical painter Tony Robert-Fleury (1837-1911); academic genre painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905) and his student Louis-Joseph-Raphaël Collin (1850-1916), and Gustave-Claude-Etienne Courtois (1852-1923). But her most influential teacher was American-born Charles Lasar (1856-1936), who had studied under painter-sculptor Jean-Leon Gerome and opened his own atelier that catered to English-speaking female artists. Lasar encouraged Chapman’s bold, plein-air painting style and introduced her to still-life painting, two of which she exhibited in the 1897 Paris Salon. In 1903 she commenced studies with Emile Rene Menard (1862-1930), who advocated the small oil sketch (4x5”), and ultimately she painted more than 150 of these.

Chapman spent the majority of her professional life in Paris, returning to the United States in 1897 for 6 years, spending World War I safely in America, and moving permanently back here in 1925. Although best known as an artist



Minerva J. Chapman (1858-1947). **Birches by Water** oil on canvas

in Paris, she exhibited regularly at the Art Institute of Chicago, with the Society of Western Artists, and with miniature groups throughout the country. Her works were included in at least four world's fairs: the World's Columbian Exposition (1893, Chicago); the Pan-American Exposition (1901, Buffalo); the Panama-Pacific Exposition (1915, San Francisco); and, the Century of Progress Exposition (1933, Chicago).

Chapman was prolific as a landscape, still life, and genre painter, but earned most of her professional recognition as a portrait miniaturist, painting more than 181 of them in career and helping fuel renewed interest in them at the turn of the century. As a measure of her success, Chapman became one of the first American women to be elected a member of the prestigious Salon of the Société Nationale

des Beaux-Arts in 1905, along with her friends Elizabeth Nourse and Mary Cassatt. Chapman eventually became the first woman president of the International Art Union in Paris.

Minerva Chapman never married and clearly supported herself as a respected, professional artist. She moved easily among portraiture clients and other artists in both France and the United States. As a modern woman she exemplified the New Woman. She said it herself in one of her notebooks from about 1906: "Work. Ambition. Perseverance. Determination." 

Kristan H. McKinsey is the Director of Illinois Women Artists Project, with offices at Bradley University in Peoria.



Minerva J. Chapman (1858-1947) **Lilacs.** oil on canvas

Leave your legacy of.... Knowledge and Caring!

Your generosity, hard work, and commitment to others can live on ... and touch future generations. By planning now you can:

- Provide security for your loved ones
- Enhance your community
- Help your Society protect Illinois' vital history

***Call us today to help you plan.
Call us to help Leave your Legacy! 217-525-2781.***