

Anna B. Crocker and the First Decade of the School of the Portland Art Association

by Prudence Roberts



Anna Belle Crocker, Untitled (Self-Portrait), 1926, oil on panel, Gift of Miss Florence Crocker. Courtesy the Portland Art Museum.

Some years ago, I wrote a short essay on Anna B. Crocker (1867–1961), in which I examined her role as a curator/director of the Portland Art Museum, the position she held from 1909 until her retirement in 1936. With little in the way of financial resources and no permanent collection as a backbone on which to rely, she helped to bring many forward-looking exhibitions of contemporary art to a small museum in a conservative western city. Here, I want to provide a very brief introduction to her contributions as an educator, for Crocker was also the first director of the School of the Portland Art Association (later known as the Museum Art School and now the Pacific Northwest College of Art), which opened its doors in 1909.

Crocker was one of a group of women in early twentieth-century Portland whose influence and work deeply affected the city’s cultural climate. Among them was Crocker’s contemporary and frequent collaborator, Mary Frances Isom (1865–1920), a graduate of the esteemed Pratt Library School, who came to Portland in 1901 and became head of the Library Association of Portland. While the city lacked a patron with the financial means of Mrs. Potter Palmer of Chicago or Louisine Havemeyer of New York, there were several independent women with means and a number of artists—painters, photographers, ceramicists, and weavers—whose ideas shaped the art of the community.

Her interest in modernism and her deep curiosity about what constituted creativity are evident in both Crocker’s curatorial vision and her views on art education. She was a lifelong student, as comfortable discussing the work of contemporary artists like Constantin Brancusi and Marcel Duchamp as she was in her knowledge of ancient Greek sculpture and the painters of the Italian Renaissance. When she brought Duchamp’s then-infamous *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912) to Portland in 1913, the same year it scandalized audiences at the Armory Show, Crocker was bemused by the excitement it caused. She wrote years later:

So far from seeming to be a break with the past, the effect was of connecting what had gone before the more securely to an active future; of shifting and revaluating the objects that form the visible history of art, throwing elements previously in shadow into light; so that the far past, its opening into the momentary present, and into the approaching future, showed as from one root.

Crocker saw the Art School as a branch of the museum: the core mission of each was education and what would be called “community outreach” today. Early on, she forged a partnership with the city’s public schools and hired a

professional docent to lecture young students on the fundamentals of Greek and Roman art. She was a realist who understood that art students needed the training to become professionals in the fields of teaching and graphic design as well as in painting and drawing and sculpture. This approach reflects not only the era's emphasis on the Arts and Crafts movement, but also Crocker's own practicality, her curiosity about educational theory, and her exposure to modern teaching philosophies.

Crocker's ideas about how to structure an art school came in part from her own experiences as a student. She was a painter and printmaker and had been among the few female members of the Portland Sketch Club. This group met in the evenings to draw and paint, primarily from the Art Association's collection of plaster casts, and to work with the occasional visiting artist. She was able to take two leaves of absence from her work as a secretary to study at New York's Art Students League in 1904 and 1908. When she was appointed curator of the Portland Art Museum in 1909, she prepared herself for her new career by traveling for several months through the museums and galleries of Europe and the East Coast.

At the Art Students League, Crocker had become aware of the influential artist and educator Arthur Wesley Dow (1857–1922.) Dow's classes at the Teachers College, Columbia University, attracted such notable students as Max Weber and Georgia O'Keeffe. His influence spread further through *Composition*, a manual for students and teachers first published in 1899 (and in print until 1941). Here, Dow laid out his innovative approach to an art education that focused on the principles of Japanese art, the Arts and Crafts movement, and their relation to European modernism. After studying at the Académie Julian in Paris, Dow renounced his own academic education in favor of a more intuitive approach. He advocated beginning with what he referred to as "Structure" as opposed to "Imitation":

For a great while we have been teaching art through Imitation—of nature and the "historic styles"—leaving structure to take care of itself; gathering knowledge of facts but acquiring little power to use them. This is why so much modern painting is but picture-writing; only story-telling, not art; and so much architecture and decoration only dead copies of conventional motives.

Dow's method, with its emphasis on bridging the divide between art forms, eras, and traditions, and on encouraging students to find their own styles and voices, is evident in Crocker's own descriptions of the school, which, as she noted, "...arose from existing needs." These included an active Arts and Crafts Society, with participants who were interested in learning bookbinding, weaving, metalwork, and pottery; young art students who could not afford to travel to distant cities; older working people with a passion for art; and parents looking for children's art instruction. Thus, since its inception, the Art School's curriculum included what today would be called "continuing education," with evening classes as well as Saturday classes aimed at children.

The Art School proved successful from the moment it opened its doors in October of 1909, with the salary of one teacher guaranteed by a gift from the Arts and Crafts Society. There were ninety-eight students in the first year, including some who had traveled from as far away as Idaho, Iowa, and New Mexico. While the enrollment numbers wavered from year to year, the school continued to grow, adding more instructors and more classes.

During the next decade, Crocker and her staff crafted a comprehensive program offering two years of study incorporating foundation classes and advanced painting, drawing, and design work. Alongside painting, drawing, and sculpture, they offered art history, weaving, pottery, and wood carving. The success of their endeavors can be measured in part by the number of students who received their certificates and went on to other institutions, including the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Pratt Art Institute, and the Art Students League.

In 1917, Crocker welcomed Arthur Wesley Dow to Portland to conduct an intensive workshop sponsored by the Art School. In a brief report on the school, published in 1919, Crocker noted that the classes “brought ninety-seven students from all parts of the United States to a short but intensive and highly inspiring course in design, normal art, and handicraft.” What a triumph this must have been for the director of a small school in a remote corner of the country!

But for Crocker, the fruits of an art education were more nuanced. In her memoir, she cited the career paths of two students, who, as she noted, both possessed “an understanding of art in a broad practical way.” She spoke as highly of the gravestone carver whose butter sculpture had been commended at a county fair in Washington as of the architect whose portfolio of drawings from night classes helped him to gain a scholarship to a prestigious East Coast university.

1. Prudence F. Roberts, *Pioneering Modernism: Anna B. Crocker and Early Exhibitions at the Portland Art Museum* (Portland, OR: Portland Art Museum, 2002).

2. Anna Belle Crocker, *It Goes Deeper Than We Think* (Portland, OR: privately published, 1946), 20.

3. Crocker had been trained as a professional typist and was the assistant to William Mead Ladd, a founder of the Portland Art Association and president of Ladd & Tilton Bank. Ladd encouraged Crocker’s interest in art and granted her sabbaticals to attend the Art Students League.

4. Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913), 3–4.

5. Crocker, *It Goes Deeper Than We Think*, 30.

6. *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Portland Art Association for the Year Ending June 1, 1910* (Portland, OR: Portland Art Association), 9.

7. *Summary of Reports of the Portland Art Association, June 1, 1917, to January 1, 1919* (Portland, OR: Portland Art Association), 6.

8. Crocker, *It Goes Deeper Than We Think*, 42.

9. *Ibid.*, 43.

Prudence Roberts is a Professor of Art History and the Director of the Helzer Art Gallery at Portland Community College’s Rock Creek campus. Roberts was the Curator of American Art at the Portland Art Museum from 1987-2000, where she focused on the museum’s regional collections and also specialized in early American museology. She was the curator of Disjecta’s Portland2012 biennial and has been a guest curator at the Art Gym, Marylhurst University; and at COCA in Seattle. She is a member of the board of Disjecta Contemporary Art. She has served on panels for the Regional Arts & Culture Council, The Ford Family Foundation, and the Oregon Community Foundation and is co-chair of Portland Community College’s Women in Art Lecture series, which has brought such notable artists as Carolee Schneemann and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith to Portland audiences.

This essay was edited by Stephanie Snyder, and is among a series of essays commissioned for the Visual Arts Ecology Project by The Ford Family Foundation and Oregon Arts Commission with Editors Stephanie Snyder, John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director, The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery; and Sue Taylor, Associate Dean, College of the Arts and Professor of Art History, Portland State University. The commissioning institutions share a goal to strengthen the visual arts ecology in Oregon, and a key interest of increasing the volume of critical writing on art in our region.