



# HAWTHORNE

## Fine Art

### **Alice Archer Sewall James (1870-1955)**

Alice Archer Sewall James was born in 1870 in Glendale, Ohio to Thedia Redelia Gilchrist and Rev. Frank Sewall. Her father was an 1858 graduate of Bowdoin College and further studied at universities in Germany and France before entering the pastorate in Glendale.<sup>1</sup> Following Alice's birth, the family moved to Urbana, Ohio and Rev. Sewall became the first president of Urbana University, a role he held for 16 years. Sewall was ordained in the New Church (Swedenborgian) ministry in 1863. The family later moved to Washington D.C. where he was the pastor of the Church of the New Jerusalem for 25 years.<sup>2</sup> In addition to his pastoral duties, Sewall was a member of the National Society of Fine Arts and a well-known author, educator and painter.<sup>3</sup>

Alice began her artistic training at the age of sixteen at the Glasgow School of Art in Scotland.<sup>4</sup> Upon her return to the U.S., Alice further studied in Washington D.C. under American artist Howard Helmick (1845-1907).<sup>5</sup> In 1893, Alice exhibited a number of designs at the Ninth Annual Exhibition of the Architectural League of New York that received favorable attention. Her works included a panel from a design for an altar-piece, a colored plaster panel, and sketches for three lunettes on rough plaster in the house of a gentleman in New York City.<sup>6</sup> In 1895, Louis Comfort Tiffany commissioned a series of Alice's decorative panels. The panels which depicted cupid-like figures with musical instruments were placed in the choir screen of a church being erected in New York City.<sup>7</sup>

Alice's "positive genius for decoration and color"<sup>8</sup> lead Tiffany to invite the artist to take on the interior decoration of a new mansion being built in New York City. Alice received a \$1,000 commission for her mural decoration in the private residence on 57<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City. The commission consisted of three panels as well as a design for a window executed by the American artist John La Farge. While in New York, Alice was invited to numerous social gatherings by New York women artists including Mrs. Kenyon Cox and Mrs. Ella Condit Lamb.

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<sup>1</sup> "Rev. Frank Sewall Dies at Age of 78," Evening Star (Washington, District of Columbia), Tue, Dec 7, 1915, P 2

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Logan, John A., *The Part Taken by Women in American History*, (United States: Perry-Nalle publishing Company, 1912), p811

<sup>5</sup> *The Artists Year Book*. (United States: Art League Publishing Association), 1905. p99

<sup>6</sup> *Catalogue of the Ninth Annual Exhibition of the Architectural League of New York*, (New York: Architectural League of New York, 1893)

<sup>7</sup> "In Local Studios," Evening Star (Washington, District of Columbia), Sat, May 18, 1895, P9

<sup>8</sup> "James-Sewall," Chillicothe Gazette (Chillicothe, Ohio), Sat, Jul 11, 1896, P1



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The *Evening Star* [Washington, D.C.] noted that Alice's work, "...excited considerable interest in the decorative art circles of [New York City]." <sup>9</sup> In 1897, the New York Architectural League sent Alice's recently exhibited mural works to the Centennial Exposition in Nashville, Tennessee. <sup>10</sup>

In 1898, Alice was one of two Washington artists represented in the exhibition of the Society of American Artists. The critic for the *Evening Star* stated, "Miss Alice Archer Sewall's portrait of her sisters is painted in a low key and with very fine harmony of color. The grace of the figures and the expressive faces make the portrait one that will not be easily forgotten." <sup>11</sup> In 1900, Alice's *Portrait of a Young Girl* was "favorably hung" at the Paris Salon. <sup>12</sup> Alice's semi-decorative panel titled *Cupid in Repose* won a prize at the 7<sup>th</sup> annual exhibition of the Washington D.C. Water Color Club in 1902. A critic noted that the pastel work on gray paper "will be found to be beautifully rhythmical in line and richly harmonious in color. Not a reality, but an artist's dream." <sup>13</sup>

Alice's painting entitled *The Holy Family* caused a sensation in 1904 at the 14<sup>th</sup> annual exhibition of the Society of Washington Artist's held at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. A critic for the *Evening Star* described the painting as, "broadly laid in with much virility and force; it is fresh and beautiful in color; and it is more than admirably composed..." The critic thought Alice's painting was equally as admirable and interesting as Mary's Cassatt's *The Caress* exhibited in nearby. <sup>14</sup> During the summer of 1904 Alice contributed *The Temptation of Cupid* and a small self-portrait to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Mo. *The Holy Family* received further attention in a show at the Cincinnati Art Museum along with another work entitled *Portrait of a French Gentleman*. <sup>15</sup>

Alice was as well-known as a writer as she was an artist. She contributed poems and verses, many of which she had illustrated, to the *Century Magazine*, *Harper's Monthly* and other popular magazines. A volume of her poetry titled *An Ode to Girlhood and Other Poems* was published in 1899.

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<sup>9</sup> "Art and Artists," *Evening Star* (Washington, District of Columbia), Sat, Dec 19, 1896, P18

<sup>10</sup> "Art and Artists," *Evening Star* (Washington, District of Columbia), Sat, Mar 27, 1897, P13

<sup>11</sup> "Art and Artists," *Evening Star* (Washington, District of Columbia), Sat, Mar 26, 1898, P16

<sup>12</sup> "Literature," *Deseret Evening News* (Salt Lake City, Utah) · Sat, Sep 22, 1900, P19

<sup>13</sup> "A Water-Color Artist," *The Oregon Daily Journal* (Portland, Oregon), Fri, Dec 5, 1902, P4

<sup>14</sup> "Many Fine Pictures," *Evening Star* (Washington, District of Columbia), Sat, Mar 19, 1904, P27

<sup>15</sup> "Art Notes," *Evening Star* (Washington, District of Columbia), Sat, Jun 18, 1904, P22



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During her lifetime, Alice's work was shown alongside many prominent American artists including Cecilia Beaux, William Merritt Chase, and Childe Hassam. In addition to exhibiting regularly with the Society of Washington Artists, Alice contributed her work to exhibitions at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Chicago World's Fair, the Atlanta Exposition, and the Tennessee Centennial Exposition.

Alice Archer Sewall James died in Columbus, Ohio in 1955. She was 85 years old.