



HAWTHORNE

Fine Art

RHODA HOLMES NICHOLLS (1854-1930)

An artist and educator, Rhoda Holmes Nicholls was born in Coventry, England. She spent her early years in the West Sussex town of Littlehampton where her father served as a parish vicar.¹ An educated man, he received a Master of Arts from Wadham College, Oxford in 1845.² Her grandmother, a talented watercolorist, likely encouraged the young Nicholls's artistic aspirations.³ She attended the Bloomsbury School of Art in London⁴ and later studied at the Kensington Museum.⁵

While at the Bloomsbury School, Nicholls was awarded the Queen's Scholarship which allowed her to pursue her studies in Italy for three years.⁶ In Rome, she studied under Giuseppe Cammeranno and Achille Vertunni and attended the evening classes of the Circolo Artistico, a professional artist's club. She was elected a member of the Roman Watercolor Society, a rare distinction for a woman.⁷

Following her studies in Italy, Nicholls travelled to South Africa where she spent a year painting *en plein air* desert and farm scenes.⁸ In 1884, Nicholls married American artist Burr H. Nicholls and moved to New York where she quickly gained a reputation as one of the finest painters of Venetian subjects. In 1885, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* stated that the artist's, "strongest and most striking pictures are drawn from the picturesque life of Venice which she paints, both in water-colors and in oil, with a spirit, power and sparkle no painter in America can equal..."⁹ In 1892, several of the artist's Venetian works were published in *Venetian Days* by American author William Dean Howells.¹⁰

While highly skilled in oils and watercolor Nicholls began devoting herself to the latter. Soon after her arrival in New York City she began teaching from her home on West 50th Street and within a decade was heading the watercolor department of William Merritt Chase's Shinnecock Summer School on Long Island.¹¹ In 1895, Nicholls's painting entitled *A Sunny Afternoon in Venice* was lauded at the exhibition of the Society of American Artists.¹² The painting demonstrated Nicholls's skill in capturing the dramatic effects of sunlight and shadow.

¹ "English-American," *Buffalo Courier* (Buffalo, New York), Sun, Mar 15, 1896, 13.

² "University Intelligence," *The Morning Post* (London, Greater London, England) Sat, Mar 8, 1845, 5.

³ "Divorce Parts Famous Artists," *The Leavenworth Post* (Leavenworth, Kansas), Fri, Sep 14, 1906, 8.

⁴ "American Women in Art," *The Canton Independent-Sentinel* (Canton, Pennsylvania), Fri, Jun 14, 1895, 2.

⁵ "English-American," 13.

⁶ "Female Artists," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, Missouri), Sat, Mar 21, 1885, 9.

⁷ Frances M. Benson "Five Women Artists of New York," *The Quarterly Illustrator* 1, no. 1 (January–March 1893) 35.

⁸ "American Women in Art," 2.

⁹ "Female Artists," 9.

¹⁰ Frances M. Benson, 35.

¹¹ "American Women in Art," 2.

¹² "As Clever as Men," *The Soldier Clipper* (Soldier, Kansas), Thu, Jun 27, 1895, 7.



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During the early 20th century, Nicholls held art classes throughout the Northeast including at the Art Society of Hartford, Connecticut in 1903¹³ and in Gloucester, Massachusetts.¹⁴ A vice-president of the New York Watercolor Club, Nicholls held memberships with the Woman's Art Club of New York, and of Canada, and the Aquarelle Club of Rome.¹⁵ She was also an editor of the art publication *Palette and Bench*.¹⁶

¹³ "The Art School of the Art Society of Hartford (Advertisement)," *Hartford Courant* (Hartford, Connecticut), Thu, Oct 29, 1903, 16.

¹⁴ "Autumn at Magnolia," *The Washington Herald* (Washington, District of Columbia), Sun, Sep 29, 1907, 13.

¹⁵ "English-American," *Buffalo Courier* (Buffalo, New York), Sun, Mar 15, 1896, 13.

¹⁶ "What the Artists Are Doing," *The New York Times* (New York, New York), Sun, Nov 29, 1908, 54.