



HAWTHORNE Fine Art

SARAH E. DAVIS (Fl. 1870's)

Like many lady painters in the nineteenth century, Sarah E. Davis was very active in her local art community, yet her life and work remain little studied. Though the details of her personal life and artistic education remain obscure, exhibition records shed light on her career and extensive body of work.

During her lifetime, Davis was best known for her exquisitely-painted floral still lifes, which she exhibited to much acclaim in New York from the mid-1870s to the mid-1880s. While some of her works, such as *Still Life with Yellow Roses*, are painted with exacting detail, others, such as *Floral Still Life*, reflect an interest in Impressionism with their freer, more flowing and visible brush strokes. Davis was particularly active in the Brooklyn art community alongside prominent male artists such as George Clough (1824-1901) and Clinton Loveridge (1838-1915), whom she exhibited with frequently at the Brooklyn Art Association. Susie M. Barstow (1836-1923), a well-respected woman who painted landscapes in the Hudson River School style, also regularly exhibited alongside Davis.



Still Life with Yellow Roses, Oil on canvas, 17 ¼ x 10 inches, signed lower left. Image courtesy of askArt.com.



Floral Still Life, oil on board, 29 ½ x 20 ½ inches, signed lower left. Image courtesy of askArt.com.

Davis exhibited her painting *Mother of Pearl and Pansies* at the Association exhibition in New York in 1874. Critics labeled her as an amateur in comparison to the “leading men of the day” who were considered professional artists.¹ However, her still life was deemed “very cleverly painted” and one writer commented, “Miss S. E. Davis, although we class her as an amateur, belongs partly to the professional

¹ “Brooklyn Painters in the Exhibition: Notes on Their Pictures and Their Methods,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, NY), Dec. 12, 1874, p. 4.



HAWTHORNE Fine Art

school, and is a constant and worthy exhibitor in the Association Exhibitions.”² Davis continued to exhibit with the Association through at least 1880, showing studies of Morning Glories and Roses in 1877,³ and “a pleasing flower piece” in 1880, which was considered “a strong example of the artist’s talent as a flower painter.”⁴

Davis began exhibiting with the Brooklyn Art Association in 1881, showing two works. In 1883, she exhibited a large still life of roses alongside a painting of Japanese lilies in a jar. Critics described the floral still lifes Davis exhibited with the Brooklyn Art Association in 1884 as “pleasing” to look at.⁵ Contemporary critics often used this type of soft language to describe paintings by women artists. While paintings by men were frequently described as “strong,” “vigorous,” or “expertly painted,” women’s artworks were deemed “pleasing” or “pleasant,” reflecting the strong gender bias at the time. This is certainly why Davis, like many other lady painters, attempted to conceal her gender by signing her works as “S. E. Davis.”

² Ibid.

³ “The Association Exhibition: A Glance at the Works of the Brooklyn Artists,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, NY), Dec. 7, 1877, p. 3.

⁴ “Unusual Interest in the Association Exhibition: A Further Look at Some of the Paintings, Good Work for Brooklyn Artists,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, NY), May 21, 1880, p. 1.

⁵ “The Fifth Fall Exhibition of the Brooklyn Art Club: An Excellent Collection of Paintings by Leading Local Men,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, NY), Nov. 15, 1884, p. 1.