

# REDISCOVERING JANE PETERSON



Jane Peterson painting c. 1928; photo: Underwood & Underwood Studios; courtesy Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Readers of *Fine Art Connoisseur* may recall a lengthy, gorgeously illustrated article about the American painter Jane Peterson (1876–1965) in our February 2015 issue. This winter we were delighted to visit *Jane Peterson: At Home and Abroad*, the first major retrospective in 45 years devoted to this once-renowned artist. Much credit goes to the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury, Connecticut, where organizing curator Cynthia Roznoy gathered more than 85 works from lenders nationwide and published an impressive 124-page catalogue. That book opens with a touching preface by J. Jonathan Joseph, who produced the first biography of Peterson in 1981.

Although the Mattatuck's inaugural presentation closed in January, its Peterson show is continuing, relatively unchanged, to three more lucky venues: the Long Island Museum in Stony Brook, New York (February 11–April 22), South Carolina's Columbia Museum of Art (May 13–July 22), and finally the Hyde Collection in Glen Falls, New York (August 5–October 14).

The genesis of this long-overdue project is all too revealing. Essentially American museums have forgotten how terrific Peterson's paintings are, but commercial galleries never made that mistake because real-life, middle-market collectors have always adored them. Sure enough, in 2013 Mattatuck director Robert Burns was exploring the Liros Gallery in scenic Blue Hill, Maine, when he admired two superb pictures by "Jane Peterson": one was a Venetian scene in muted tones and the other an electrifyingly orange floral still life. How, Burns wondered, could these have been created by the same artist? Proprietor Serge Liros filled him in on Peterson's remarkable story, so when Burns returned to the Mattatuck, he shared his new enthusiasm with Roznoy. That's one way good exhibitions get going. In the process, the Mattatuck even acquired two Peterson paintings for its collection.

It's surprising Jane Peterson's life has not been made into a biopic movie. In the mid-1890s she left her middle-class family in Elgin, Illinois, to study with Arthur Wesley Dow at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. After graduation she taught art and cultivated a group of rich patrons who supported the travels that took her — unmarried, mind you — to England, France, Italy, Balkans, northern Africa, Turkey, and Egypt. Seemingly fearless, Peterson connected with people who could teach her something — from Gertrude Stein (whose Paris salon she visited) to the Spanish master Joaquín Sorolla and the British illustrator-muralist Frank Brangwyn.



(ABOVE) *Boats on the Nile, Dawn*, 1905–15, oil on canvas, 19 x 24 3/4 in., Eskenazi Museum of Art, Indiana University, Morton and Marie Bradley Memorial Collection, 98.49, photo: Kevin Montague ■ (RIGHT) *Market Day at Plougastel, Brittany*, n.d., watercolor, gouache and charcoal on paper, 18 x 23 7/8 in., Mattatuck Museum, Purchase, Acquisition Fund, 2017

Curtailing her travels only because World War I got in the way, Peterson painted American scenes ranging from New York streets (in neighborhoods poor and privileged) and quaint harbors in Massachusetts to beach parties in Palm Beach and the Long Island gardens of her friend Louis Comfort Tiffany. There were also many images of women, usually seen in reverie or at the dressing table. In 1925, aged 49, Peterson married a widower friend — an older man of means — and from then on, she could truly afford to paint what she liked, and travel where she wished. The exhibition offers glimpses into Peterson's private life through photographs and archival materials, and concludes with a heady dose of boldly, brilliantly colored floral still lifes.









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(OPPOSITE PAGE) *The Accused and Her Dog (Woman with Umbrella)*, n.d., oil on board, 16 7/10 x 12 1/5 in., Collection of Dominique Riviere, photo: Doyle New York ■ (RIGHT) *Marché aux Fleurs*, 1908, oil on canvas, 17 1/8 x 23 1/8 in., Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection, 1994.17 ■ (BOTTOM) *Fishing Boats*, Gloucester, c. 1915–20, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in., Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Martin Horwitz, 76.191, photo: Jonathan Dorado

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Tracing Peterson's journey, we watch her exploring different approaches, from impressionism to expressionism (including fauvism), from realism to a form of representational abstraction. This evolution reflects what was happening in early 20th-century modernism generally, offering a fresh vantage on an extraordinarily exciting period. The fact that Peterson was female is irrelevant to us now; she was a huge talent, and that's all that matters. ●

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**Information:** [longislandmuseum.org](http://longislandmuseum.org), [columbiamuseum.org](http://columbiamuseum.org), [hydecollection.org](http://hydecollection.org). The catalogue can be ordered at [mattmuseum.org/product/jane-peterson](http://mattmuseum.org/product/jane-peterson)

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