

CORA BLISS TAYLOR

1889–1986

In a 1984 interview, the Holland Sentinel proclaimed Cora Bliss Taylor as “Saugatuck’s Living Treasure.” Having opened the Taylor Art Studio in 1931 she taught art to hundreds of adults and children for over 50 years.

Born on April 14, 1889, Cora Bliss Taylor’s life started tragically. She lived with her mother and father until the age of 1 when her father passed away. After his death, Mrs. Bliss took Cora to live with the child’s aunt and uncle. This lead to an active childhood as the family took many trips around the country. At the beginning of the 20th century, when she was 11 years old, the family moved to Paris for nine months. It was “La Belle Époque,” the “beautiful age,” when France was a center for cultural and artistic achievement. Cora learned to speak French and took art lessons crediting a visit to the Louvre as a formative event influencing her to become an artist.

From 1914 to 1916, Cora pursued her passion for painting by taking classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. She continued her studies with Charles W. Hawthorne of Provincetown, Mass, with Leon Kroll and Leopold Seyffert at the Art Institute, and in France and Italy with Andre L’Hote. During this period, from 1916–1927, she had 12 of her works accepted into the Annual Exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago as well as exhibiting her watercolors of Italy for the University Guild and Evanston Art Commission.

In addition to the paintings that were featured in the Art Institute exhibits, she won numerous awards such as the Chicago Women’s Aid Prize, the Edward B. Butler Purchase prize, and the Fine Arts Building Prize.

Cora became an important leader in the art community, joining different organizations to help her fellow artists. She was in demand as a lecturer, and among her many honors, she was listed in the Michigan State Library Biography Collection, the Smithsonian’s History of Famous Women Artists in the United States, and in “Who’s Who of American Women.”

As recently as January 2014, Cora’s works were included in an exhibition at Olivet College, “Beautiful Things: Still Life Paintings by American Women 1880–1940.” Curator George Bentley writes, “Though highly accomplished, these women lived in a time when female artists were scarcely recognized. In researching the lives of these artists, much of the known information only lists organizations with which these women were affiliated—almost nothing is said about their work or abilities.”

She first came to Saugatuck when she married James Taylor, a Chicago attorney in 1914. They honeymooned in Saugatuck which later became her home. Three children followed, Joy, Florence, and Jane.

In 1931 Cora became the Art Director of the Saugatuck Chamber of Commerce and was influential in attracting many Chicago people to the area. She opened the Taylor Art School and Gallery on Holland Street which was a summer art school for adults and children. Successful from the start, she had over 2,000 visitors her first year. In 1946, she downsized the school to concentrate on teaching children moving it to the studio behind the home her mother left her at 350 Mason Street.

Her legacy in our community did not stop at art and teaching. In her late 70’s she began to advocate for a community bus service, for the elderly and those unable to drive, by writing letters to the newspaper. Her arguments were so compelling that grant money was secured by Saugatuck, Douglas, and the Township to fund the Interurban, an on-demand bus service that is still thriving today. In 1980, when the service was introduced, Cora was there to cut the ribbon and be the first rider.

She continued to teach until the age of 91. Despite her failing eyesight, she lived on her own until moving to a care facility in 1984. When interviewed at that time and questioned about her legacy, she humbly replied, “I taught everybody in Saugatuck, and I loved all of them. I would like to be remembered as one of them.” Cora Bliss Taylor died at the age of 97.

Cora Bliss Taylor researched by fellow
Team HerStorian, Christa Wise

Christa M. Wise



Former student Christa Wise recalls, “Mrs. Taylor was older than my mom and definitely more, I think we would say now, Bohemian. She routinely came to class wearing a broad-rimmed straw hat embellished with sequin-covered felt fish, artsy flowing dresses covered with a smock, and always a big smile. She was fearless. We loaded up our cupcake tins with tempera paint, grabbed brushes, and a drawing board with three pieces of paper secured with clothespins, and headed off to paint ‘on-location’.”



When Cora Bliss Taylor announced her school and gallery located on Holland Street in Saugatuck in 1931, Fredrick Fursman of Oxbow arranged to open another gallery at the village hall over the fire department prompting this article in the Chicago Daily News. “Two Galleries Stir Art Colony at Saugatuck; Rivalry Makes Michigan Town a Lively Center. Now Saugatuck, with a population of 700, has two art galleries and probably more pictures per capita than any town in the U.S.A. Each bears the name ‘Saugatuck Art Gallery,’ and each refuses to change its name.”



Cora was an out-spoken advocate for the Interurban. Her letters in the local newspaper urging the community to provide a transportation system, for the elderly and those unable to drive, were influential in bringing the Interurban into being. This photograph, taken on opening day in 1980, shows Cora, always stylishly dressed, as she boards the bus to take the first ride.