

“Colorado Woman Arts Pioneers 1870-1970,” film showed at History Colorado 6/26/2017

Artists featured: Helen Henderson Chain, Jean Wirt Sherwood, Muriel Sibell Wolle, Eve Drewelowe

Helen Henderson was born in Indianapolis in 1849, and grew up surrounded by fortune seekers which likely contributed to her fearlessness on cultural matters. She obtained a Mistress of Liberal Arts degree from the Illinois Female College in 1869, a time when less than one percent of women in America received a college education. After graduating, she taught at the Female College for a few years.

She met James Albert Chain in 1870, who, like her, was a devout Christian and a lover of adventure. They married the next year and immediately moved to Denver, where James had recently travelled for his health. It was here that they opened the Chain & Hardy Bookstore, where they sold art supplies as well as books, and they exhibited works of art including Helen’s own paintings.

Prior to their move to Denver, Helen dabbled in “polite” flower painting, which society viewed as the only proper subject for female artists who were meant to remain in the private sphere, at home. As a woman, it was very difficult to be a successful artist because most believed painting was best left to the professionals, who were men. When Helen and James moved to Denver, she began painting gutsy landscapes *en plein air* (outdoors). She hiked and climbed in a corset, heels, and a full-length skirt to find her next painting subject, and earned the nickname “Trot” because she constantly travelled around to paint. She even hiked to the top of Mount Vesuvius in Italy with Susan B. Anthony, where they “ascended the red hot lava” of the volcano.

Helen exhibited her works not only at her own Chain & Hardy Bookstore, but also in New York at the National Academy of Design, and at the Le Brun Art Club in Denver. She became more and more well-known, but she always signed her paintings “Chain,” or “Mrs. J. A. Chain” because she found she sold more when she left her feminine name, Helen, off the painting. Still, many disapproved of her work, exclaiming that women were better off “sticking to flower painting and ceramics.”

At one point, Helen visited Denver’s China Town and became very unsettled by what she saw here. Most white Americans viewed the Chinese as inferior and excluded them from society. The government even passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 to suspend Chinese immigration, the first law preventing a specific ethnic group from moving into America. In response to the mistreatment of this group, Helen created a school to teach English to Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian Americans, and at that point she became fascinated with Asian culture and expressed this through her own paintings.

In 1882, she and James travelled to Japan together and Helen sent home a scroll she had created with a few Japanese-inspired paintings. They boarded the ship Bokhara to continue on to Hong Kong, but the ship was destroyed by a typhoon. The Chains, along with the rest of the crew and passengers, drowned. Her Japanese-style paintings were covered in Japanese silk and the scroll was read aloud to her loved ones back home.