F. T. Hunter advertising illustration for Pro-phy-lac-tic toothbrushes, 1930

Women

by MARY LEMMING

Until the latter half of the 20th century, male artists dominated the world of illustration. There were a few women bold enough to enter into the very-competitive profession, however, and one of those “bold women” was Williamsport’s own Frances Tipton Hunter.

A career that spanned four decades, the 1920s through the 1950s, Hunter is acclaimed for the watercolor illustrations that graced and brightened the covers of the Saturday Evening Post, Ladies’ Home Journal, Colliers, Redbook, Good Housekeeping, Cosmopolitan and other national magazines.

Unlike the lives of many of the other Williamsport women featured in this column, Frances Tipton Hunter’s life has been relatively well documented. She has been featured in various newspaper stories and has entries in Who’s Who and art reference books. Her literacy appeared not only in our local papers, but also in the New York Times.

A Google search of her name reveals her work for sale on online and poster sites, eBay and Etsy.

The two children’s books she illustrated, “The Frances Tipton Hunter Picture Book” and “Who Used to Be Scared of the Dark,” have been translated into several different languages.

Drew from childhood

Frances drew from the time she could hold a pencil. In a 1930 interview with Williamsport journalist Dorothy Deane, Hunter recalled that at the age of three while visiting her grandmother — apparently bored and not impressed with the wallpaper in the stairway — she drew on top of it.

She worked up as high as she could reach, drawing figures up and down the staircase. She later had a large piece of paper on which she had drawn a face, which she took to an art school and said, “I want to be an artist.” She was accepted and began her career as an artist.

In the 1920s, Hunter attended Williamsport schools, specifically saying that it might have been the time that her father asked her to draw three puppies in a basket, captivated. We Bark for Sweeney.

A reader would be one of her favorite subjects.

Hunter was born on September 1, 1896 in the town of Howard in Centre County. Her parents were Michael Hunter, an insurance salesman, and Laura Tipton. When she was only 6, her mother died. Although her father was still living, Frances and her older brother, Harold Tipton Hunter, were raised by their mother’s sister, Fannie, and her husband, Edward McEntire. Their home was on Locust Street in Williamsport.

Hunter attended Williamsport High School, graduating with the class of 1914. Modestly, she said that she distinguished herself there only by contributing some pretty bad drawings to the Cherry and Whiteand playing unexceptional basketball. In actuality, those “pretty bad drawings” are now collector’s items.

Art education

After high school, Hunter attended the art school of the prestigious Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Arts (now the Philadelphia Museum of Art), where she graduated with honors.

Later, she studied at the Philadelphia Academy of the Fine Arts, the oldest museum and art school in the country, known for encouraging female artists.

Her first paid work was for the famous Philadelphia department store John Wanamaker’s. While still an art school student, she was hired to illustrate their line of children’s fashions for catalogs and advertisements.

She was paid $500.

In her own words, she recounts her early career: “Armed with the Wanamaker proofs and a few other little gems of art, I went to New York, hoping to crash into the magazine field. But for a time, the magazines were unimpressed, and I drew countless children’s fashions for Lord & Taylor and Best and Company, often laboring 12 hours a day, before I was able to convince anyone that I might be useful in some other forms of illustration.”

Breakthrough

But eventually she did break into the male-dominated field.

Like those of the few other female artists of the time, her illustrations were often featured children and animals, drawn in an up-to-date, homely style resembling that of Norman Rockwell.

One of Hunter’s finest illustrations appeared on the cover of the Feb. 27, 1937 issue of the Saturday Evening Post. The magazine editors had suggested the topic. Hunter wanted “real life,” so, according to an article accompanying the illustration, she went to a department store and asked, “Well, she waited and waited,” according to the article.

“Little girls came in with large mothers, and sold, big boys with small mothers but not a small boy in the lot. Hours passed, with Miss Hunter waiting patiently in her corner.”

Finally, when all seemed lost, in came the pair you see on the cover. The small fry glowed and muttered while the mother held the disposable woof.

Her illustrations became so famous that they were made into calendars and jigsaw puzzles and paper dolls.

A series of paper dolls that she created for the Ladies’ Home Journal were so sought after that a compendium of her doll artwork was later published. She continued to draw advertisements for numerous firms, including Eveready Batteries, Firestone, Listerine and Westinghouse.

Local holdings

Hunter also painted in oil. Several of her oil paintings are in the collections of the Brown Library and the Taber Museum. One of those paintings is a portrait of a handsome young man, perhaps her brother, who died while Hunter was still in high school.

References allude to urban scenes that she painted in Philadelphia with African American subjects, but these paintings, apparently unsigned, have not been located.

If any reader is aware of any of Hunter’s works in oil, the Historical Society would be pleased to evaluate them.

Although she lived in New York and Philadelphia, Frances Tipton Hunter always considered Williamsport her home. She died in Williamsport in 1967, at the age of 61 and is buried in Howard, where she was born.

A community-wide effort is in place to restore and preserve Hunter’s artworks owned locally. Spearheaded by Williamsport artist Marguerite Bierman, the project has re-housed the works belonging to the Brown Library, using archival quality materials.

The library and the Historical Society want to assure that our Williamsport artist is appropriately remembered and celebr-