

Martha LeVan Mussina: A glimpse at the life of an artist

Williamsport Women

By ANDREA CAMPBELL
Special to the Sun-Gazette

The Way's Garden Art and Craft Show, held at the corner of West Fourth and Maynard Streets in Williamsport, has for many years given artists in the region an opportunity to showcase their talents. Martha LeVan Mussina was a prominent local painter who took advantage of this opportunity, participating in the annual art show for decades.

Born on June 22, 1910, in Williamsport, LeVan Mussina grew up in an environment of substantial wealth, though many friends say that she was never affected by it. Some friends were surprised, at the time of her death, to discover the size of her estate.

As the only child of Bertha LeVan and Clarence Clyde Mussina, she was raised with a worldly vision and strong mind. Her independent mindset probably came from her father, whose letters often included ongoing conversations about traveling, as well as controversial discussions on religion and war. He spoke and thought freely, thus setting an example for his daughter, whom he adored and conversed with easily.

Her diary

As LeVan Mussina grew into her teens, she started keeping a diary, providing readers with intimate insights into a fiery, headstrong and yet incredibly vulnerable woman. It is rare to have access to personal diaries, but this one has been preserved with the family papers at the Lycoming County Historical Society.

During her school years, she struggled with self-definition, never really conforming to the expected actions and behaviors of a "proper lady." After graduating from Williamsport High School in 1928, she appears to have changed almost completely.

She accepted and empowered herself, writing of dreams, plans and loves. She began to travel and write and continued to paint. Her writing reveals deep emotions, quirky humor and hopeless longing.

LeVan Mussina was a friendly person, who loved to make people smile. Incredibly generous, in her will she divided the family fortune among friends, charities and family. Despite her natural generosity and love, she never could bring herself to become a wife and mother, roles that were societally defined in a very restrictive manner. She debated this issue freely with her mother — and with anyone else who tried to lecture her on what she "should" be doing with her life.

"I try to imagine me married to him, living with him constantly, cooking and sewing and ironing and cleaning and worst of all — having and raising children and having to be constantly sociable ... No, I don't think I could stand it."

An artist

LeVan Mussina accomplished her dream of becoming a well-known local artist. She kept a detailed inventory of her paintings; buyers included the



PHOTOS PROVIDED

The above photo, provided by the Lycoming County Historical Society shows Martha LeVan Mussina in the 1930s. Top right is "Williamsport Train Station," a painting by Mussina, which is housed at the Madigan Library at Pennsylvania College of Technology. At right is the Mussina home, 1022 W. Fourth St.

James V. Brown Library and Lycoming College. She entered local art contests, winning occasionally. Her artwork was displayed at many art fairs and by local art distributors like the Octagon House in East Lewisburg.

For years, she was a member of the Bald Eagle Art League and an active participant in the Way's Garden Art Show.

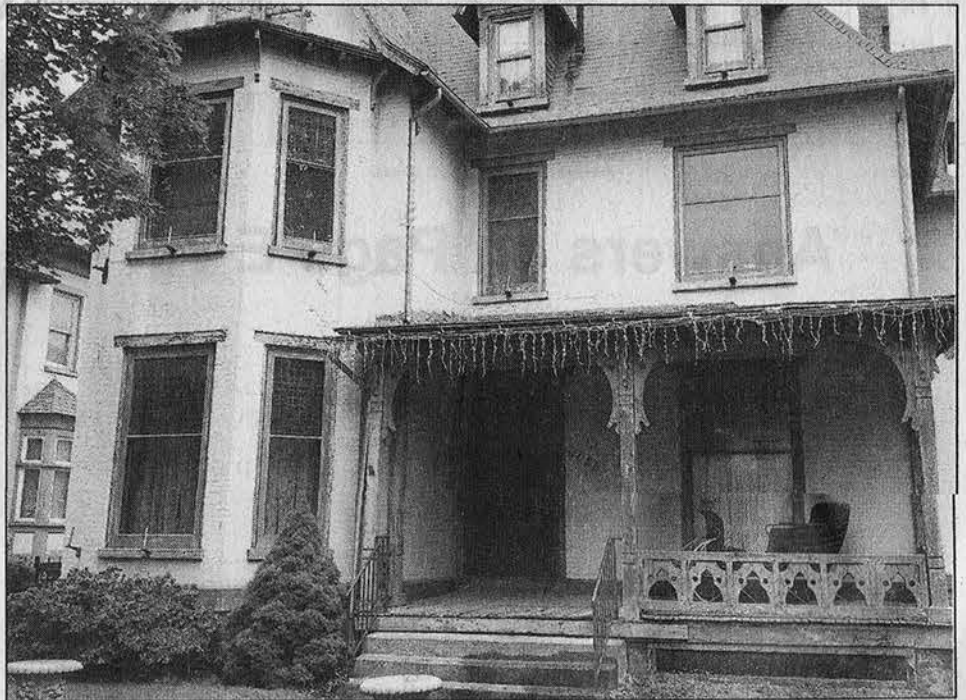
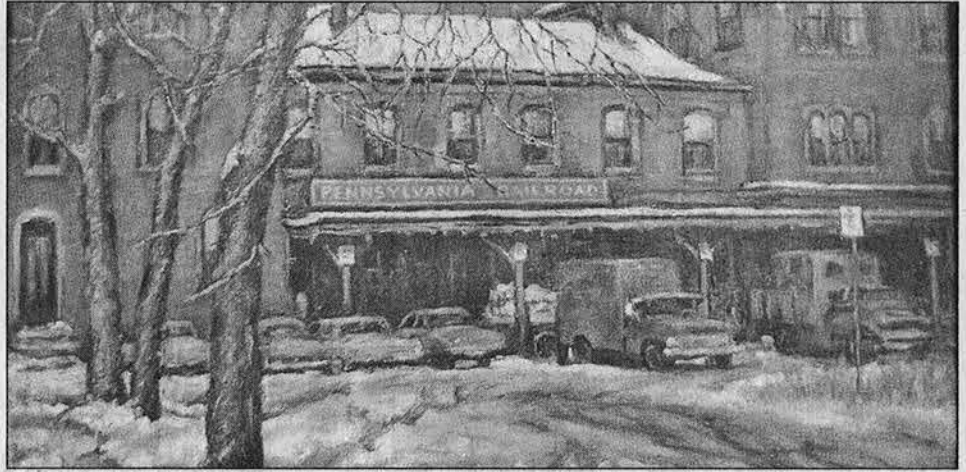
"I remember Martha Mussina. She was a dear tiny woman who was a great artist. For a number of years there was an award given at the Best of BEAL show called the Martha Mussina Award. I know because I won it one year," said Marilyn Seeling, member and participant in the art show.

LeVan Mussina never married. After her father died in 1960, and her mother in 1972, she lived alone in the family home at 1022 W. Fourth St. The impressive structure, designed by Isaac Hobbs, of Philadelphia, was built in 1881 for her grandparents Charles Coburn Mussina (a prominent local jeweler) and his wife, Susan. LeVan Mussina took great pride in the family home, doing her best to maintain the sense of originality. The house was auctioned by the beneficiary after her death in 1995.

LeVan Mussina's story is not a well-known part of local history, as very few of her works remain in the area. However, her writings reflect the passion of an independent female living successfully without the things culture measured feminine success by — marriage, children and home. Her friends recall a lively woman with a bright smile and a large heart.

"I remember when Martha informed her cardiologist that she was taking a dip in the Susquehanna after digging with the local archaeology group (NCC8). Her doctor wasn't happy but Martha firmly asserted that she intended to live the life she had left," said Beverly Murray.

Her diaries reveal that her sense of self was not easily created or maintained. However, as a courageous woman who insisted on being defined by



her own standards, and affected the lives of those who knew her, LeVan Mussina deserves a place in local history.

School District and is president of the North Central Chapter for the Society of Pennsylvania Archaeology.

Mary Sieminski, the regular columnist for the column, is a retired librarian and manager of the Lycoming County Women's History Collection. Her column is published the second Sunday of each month and she can be reached at lcwhcmanager@gmail.com.

Campbell is a guest writer for this week's Williamsport Women column. She received a master's degree in history from the University of Nebraska and is employed by the Jersey Shore Area