

Josephine Hale

In Country, Out of Country: The Life and Art of Josephine Hale

What were the signs in that landscape, in the air, in the motion, in our companionship, that so excited our imagination and made us so happy? If we only knew what were those signs, we could paint that country, could paint what it was to us. What delight we have had in the memory of it. What is that memory? We have strange ways of seeing. If we only knew. If we knew what we saw, we could paint it.

—From Robert Henri's 'The Art Spirit', quoted in Josephine Hale's Notebooks

Josephine Hale lived an extraordinary life predominately shaped by two factors, a strong commitment to volunteerism and travel as an educational, transformative act. Both of these factors had a profound influence on her art making and understanding of art history. For Hale, travel was an imperative that knit together the passions in her life—helping others and art. As a result of her travels, Hale had access to the finest early 20th century academic arts training available during a time when France was understood to be the epicenter of the art world.¹ In many ways, Hale served as a conduit for a chic, sophisticated European culture to take root in the sparsely populated region on the plains, east of the Continental Divide. Hale brought this fine arts education and an astute eye to bear upon uniquely Montana subjects when she returned to Great Falls—Glacier National Park, the Missouri River, and the small coulees and benches along the Rocky Mountain Front.

Early Biography

Hale was born Josephine Adeline Bruneau, May 27, 1878, near Sioux Point, South Dakota. The youngest of eleven children—most of whom were born in Canada at St. Paul du Chester, near Trois Rivieres, Quebec—Hale was born after the Bruneau family immigrated to America. The family relocated to 'New France' —a predominately French-Canadian settlement in the southeastern corner of the Dakotas. Hale completed grade school in Sioux Point and graduated from Commercial High School June 4, 1896, across the river in Sioux City, Iowa. In 1898, at age twenty, she moved to Great Falls, Montana, to be near three of her siblings. When she arrived, she learned of the need for teachers at rural schoolhouses and passed the teacher's certification test. She began teaching at what was most likely the Canyon Schoolhouse, in the Eden area ten miles south of Great Falls.

While in the Eden area, she met her future husband Walter George Hale and the two were married August 22, 1901. They purchased a ranch in Goodwyn Coulee. They were only married for three brief years before Walter died of tuberculosis on September 25, 1904, leaving the ranch and property in the distant cities of Butte and Helena in Hale's hands. After his death, Hale stayed in the area. She would retain ownership of the ranch for the rest of her life, but began renting it to tenants in 1907. This is an important detail because it would provide her with a steady income and independence, later funding her travels and studies. Also during this time she took care of her mother and traveled to Canada for a year to help raise her nieces. In 1910, she purchased a lot in Great Falls located at 925 4th Avenue South with three houses to shelter herself, two nieces, a brother, a close friend, and guests. She would maintain this property throughout her life, using the attic as a studio space and boarding family members who were elderly or those who needed to reside in town to attend public school.

Red Cross Years

The seven years that elapsed between her house purchases and her enlistment in the Red Cross remain largely undocumented. One can only imagine that Hale, widowed, advancing in age, financially secure, and with very few encumbrances, must have been questioning what was to come next in her life. In 1914, the Great War engulfed Europe and quickly spread from country to country. Hale felt compelled

¹ A view that wasn't to change for another thirty years when New York assumed a central role in international art and culture.

to service, partly from the natural sense of duty and nationalism that most citizens felt, but also because her fluent command of French made her a valuable asset. At this point, she was 40 years old. She enlisted and was accepted to the Red Cross in the fall of 1917, after subtracting five years from her age to meet the requirement and paying her own passage to Europe to ensure inclusion.

Hale sailed from New York harbor aboard the *Corinthia*, one of three transports that held 26 women serving as nurses, nurse's aids, cantineers, and clerks among 1,500 draft men, composed of artillery and YMCA volunteers. Hale recorded the impressions of her travels in journals and formed the habit of keeping a diary. Hale writes, "*Left Great Falls July 8, 1918. \$62.50 to Chicago. Left Chicago July 15. \$39.82 to New York. Uniform, etc. \$140.35. Ticket to Europe \$102.00. Left at 3:50 on Tuesday, July 23, 1918.*"

The *Corinthia* traveled among a cruiser, several U boat destroyers, airplanes and hydroplanes for safety, but they encountered no resistance, arriving in London a week later on July 31st, entering, as Hale poetically describes, "*with the tide, up the Thames,*" later continue by train to Paris.

From 1918 to 1921, Hale was assigned to work in the canteens at Gare de L'este in Paris and Bordeaux—large operations that provided food and a stable base for groups of soldiers. Hale did not work with the English or Americans, instead, she remarks:

"because of my knowledge of French I am assigned on the French and Belgian side. They are so different from our boys and so very polite but they are accustomed to being waited on so it is a bit harder on the waiter. They seem very much pleased to have an American to talk and joke with them and how they love to air every bit of English that they know. The Americans are all about the same age, but the others range from 55 to 18—grey haired men and fresh faced boys and everyone ready to smile back at you every chance they get. It seems they take this war as their work and it is here to do."

Her years of managing the operational and financial aspects of the ranch, as well as her level-headed business sense made her uniquely suited to this work. Nor was she afraid of long hours or hard labor, combating a shortness of necessary supplies to feed an excess of soldiers, insufficient fuel to cook and heat with, and bouts of personal illness brought on by trying conditions and the environment. Hale relates:

"Yesterday I opened the canteen at 6:15 a.m. but today I was not there until 6:30 a.m. and then a Lieutenant came in and asked me to feed his 70 men who had been working hard for 14 hours without rations. The R.T.C. Lieut. Jones sent word that 21 others were coming. We had ten dozen eggs and about 1 ½ loaves of bread so I gave them one egg sandwich and a cup of coffee as long as the bread lasted. After that they had hardtack with the eggs. After the eggs were gone we gave them hardtack, jam and coffee. We fed three hundred this morning and three o'clock flew around before I fairly realized it."

Hale spent a brief time at the Front but did not record her impressions, though it can be assumed that she saw terrible things. Included in her personal effects are photographs of bombing damage at Fort de la Pompelle outside of Rheims, a ruined cathedral, and "the remains of a forest near Rheims." She also spoke to soldiers, who pointedly shared the horrors of what they saw. Hale recounted, "There are about 1600 aviators at Tours and they figure on one death a day. When they fall from four or five hundred feet there is usually very little left of them, arms and limbs only. The engine of the machine is usually buried two feet in the ground."

Toward the end of the war Hale was tasked with opening a canteen of her own in Marseilles. After the November 11, 1918, armistice, Hale extended her visa and stayed for the next several years to help rebuild and work in devastated areas.

During this time two remarkable things happened that would alter the course of her life. First, she studied and graduated as a *Dame Infirmiere* through the *Société Française de Secours* in Paris in October

of 1920, expanding her list of skills and usefulness to the Red Cross. Nursing continued to be a lifelong practice, serving her at intervals when she cared for friends or relatives, as well as during WWII. The following letter from Dr. J. Oberthur at the *Centre Français de Médecine et de Chirurgie* (French Center of Medicine and Surgery) indicates how adept Hale was at nursing and how well loved she became to her patients:

Madam Hale was to the C.F.M.C. a nurse, then a surveyor of medicine and surgery, from July 1 1921 until today. Everyone, sick and those operated on, doctors and surgeons, that had the occasion of working with her appreciated her praiseworthy manner, her know how, her smiling kindness, her technical capacities and her tireless devotion. As director of C.F.M.C., I deeply regret her departure and entrust to her the memory of a perfect collaborator.

The second is that she fell in love. Hale met George Hepburn Robertson, who served in the Quartermaster Corps and later became major to the Air Service and commanding officer of the First Air Service Concentration Depot of the Army Signal Corps, and finally Chief of the Air Service Transportation at the end of the war. George, whom she affectionately referred to as Geo, was Hale's other great love, though circumstances or inclination left them unable to marry. From 1919-1921, Geo served in the American Red Cross as Director of Transportation in Europe, the probable time frame during which he and Hale became acquainted. They saw one another intermittently and made a point to visit each other when either had leave.

Though the details of their relationship are somewhat unclear and reconstructed through inference, as Hale's diaries from 1928-1938, with the exception of 1935, are lost or destroyed, it is clear that this relationship was extremely dear to her. It is highly likely that when Hale returned to France in 1926 to study art, the desire to continue this relationship was central to her decision.²

For her reconstruction efforts, Hale was awarded the *Medaille Reconnaissance Française* in 1924 and was acknowledged by the people of the village of Conchy-les-Pots in the north of France. She was presented with thank you letters from the villagers of Conchy-les-Pots:

Dear Madam,

In the day before leaving the post of Secours d'Urgence de Conchy-les-Pots, where your great kindness and your constant devotion earned you everyone's heart, allow us to offer you this modest souvenir as tribute from our sincere gratitude and sincere and deep affection. That it reminds you there in your generous native land, that here, in devastated Conchy-les-Pots, your name is blessed and will never be forgotten.

—B. Chrétien, Director of Secour d'Urgence de Conchy-les-Pots

As an individual, Hale was very generous and compassionate. Repeatedly, she suppressed her personal ambitions to be able to serve others. An early stern austerity was transformed into a relaxed and open personality through her exposure to European customs and habits. When she returned to America, she was considered cosmopolitan and unconventional. She came back from her travel to Europe and the war a changed woman. Her niece, Fran, writes in her diary dated May 29, 1924:

"Aunt Jo is back but such a difference! Henna'd hair and so Frenchy—she even says damn! Really quite an improvement but I can't find in the modern sophisticated Parisienne [sic] a single trace of my dear old strait-laced, dignified Aunt Jo who ruled me with an iron hand and planted

² In Hale's diary from 1926, Geo met her in New York as she prepared for the journey. On March 4, 1926, she writes "Arrived in N.Y.C. and was met at train by my man, who seemed perfectly crazy to have me." Geo, who traveled frequently as manager of the American Duesenberg team for the French Grand Prix at Le Mans in 1921 and later as director of Lincoln Automobile and Ford airplane operations for the Eastern District of Ford Motor Company from 1924-1928. Hale's diary from 1927 includes, in the section for 'notes,' the address of the Ford Motor Co. in Berlin.

the fear of the Lord in my trembling bosom.”

In this brief assessment by her niece, there are several aspects that reflect the degree of transformation Hale was subject to—a relaxed personal ethic, an openness to others, a self-assurance, a sense of culture and sophistication, a burgeoning feminism, a nurse who had seen the carnage of the war, the effective business woman who managed large-scale canteen operations feeding hundreds of soldiers a day, a woman who was rediscovering love—in a sense, at age forty six, Hale was coming into her own. This new awareness and confidence may have been in part responsible for her decision to chart a new course in her life through the arts. She returned to Great Falls and stayed for just under two years, trying to settle into the life that she had left. Hale’s exposure to the world left her informed and critical, enabling her to assimilate a host of ideas that were uncommon in Great Falls, Montana, at the time. Informed by Parisian fashion, she was seen as bohemian and risqué for her habit of wearing pants around town.³ She also smoked, swore, and was quick in her opinions, even brash at times. Her travels had exposed her to a larger world and important cultural movements on both sides of the Atlantic. Partly to escape the difficulties of returning home, but also to enjoy one of her new Parisian friendships and to pursue this new direction, Hale traveled to Boston. In March of 1926, she began a correspondence course in interior design while staying with her friend Ruth Harl, an expatriate she had met while in the Red Cross. Her instructors at the New York School of Interior Decoration saw her talent and recommended that she pursue painting as a course of study. Hale responded immediately. Her longing for Europe, coupled with her affection for George (who still resided in Europe), and Paris as the best place to receive an arts education must have made her decision easy. Hale continued her interior design courses even after she sailed to Paris three months later in June of that year. Once back in Europe, Hale was met by Geo and spent time with him between his travels. After Geo left for Spain, Hale toured the areas in France that she had left two years earlier, calling on old friends and acquaintances and seeing what recovery efforts had taken place in her absence. She also visited the Southern Coast of France and toured the Alps for two weeks in September. Hale was fond of mountains, having spent many summers in Glacier National Park at a vacation cabin in which she owned a share, and was curious about their European counterparts. On October 14, 1926 at the age of 48 she began lessons at the Académie Delacluse in Paris, studying under Auguste and Eugene Delacluse, as well as De Courmon and Jean-Paul Laurens. Since the average lifespan in the 1920s was 54 years, her accomplishments all the more noteworthy. She later described this time as *“the happiest years of my life.”* Indeed, her diary on May 16, 1927 has a single entry, *“sold my return passage.”* It is interesting to note that only four days later on May 20, 1927, Hale made a single entry in her diary, *“News this a.m. that Lindbergh landed in Paris,”* thus opening the way to transatlantic flight.

Paris Between the Wars

Hale stayed in Paris for nine years during this visit. It is remarkable that during this relatively brief span of time she would complete her studies, gain a technical mastery, emerge as a promising artist, and toward the end of her stay participate in the prestigious Paris Salon of 1934. When she left Paris August 21, 1935, she left as an accomplished professional who received invitations from galleries and arts organizations the world over.⁴

As an artist, the vestiges of Hale’s academic training can be seen in her choice and approach to subject matter. Her subjects include a host of still-lives, florals, landscapes, figurative portraits and nudes. Her

³ The Montana Museum of Art & Culture has one preparatory sketch and two watercolors in the Permanent Collection which executed on the reverse of broadsheets torn from Parisian Fashion catalogs.

⁴ Following the Paris Salon, Hale received invitations from the Galleri Vitelli in Genova, Italy; the Ligue des Artistes Professionnel American Exposition in Paris, France, the European Chapter of the American Artists Professional League, and the Charles M. Russell chapter of the American Artists Professional League in Great Falls, Montana.

paintings are a confluence of several influences and stylistic factors, including the strong fabric patterns and floral motifs reflecting her interior design interest, academic training, and traits also borrowed from painting traditions current in France at that time. She was aware of the legacy of the Impressionists and Post-impressionists and her oil sketches at times exhibit an influence or awareness of the Fauves, particularly in the use of strong, animated forms when depicting the landscape. They also reflect the rich tradition of plein air painting in the Brittany region—all part of the philosophy of directly recording the sensations and particular traits of a location—while remaining faithful to the careful preparation and considered proportion emphasized in French Académie training. Hale capitalized on her love of travel to produce a strong body of work which records the specificity of locales as far afield as French Brittany and the southern coast including Monaco, Italy, Spain, Holland, Belgium, Morocco, the Sonoran Desert, and Mexico.

In her sketch books, she notates whole passages from the 1923 edition of the recently published and influential *The Art Spirit* written by notable artist and professor Robert Henri. These notations reveal that Hale was deeply philosophical and self critical about the act of painting, giving close attention and thought to each component part and then gathering her inquiries and thoughts together to organize them into a cohesive whole. On occasion she had difficulty uniting the foreground and background, overemphasizing one at the expense of the other. This is a subject to which she gave a great deal of thought in her sketchbooks. When she resolves this division compositionally, the paintings are strong and assured. She also relies on Henri's writings to express thoughts on color harmony. When Henri writes, "*It is seldom that the appearance of night can be produced by a very black drawing. Night can be painted so that it will be beautiful and true with a palette that does not drop into black, but has instead a surprising richness of tone,*" it is immediately possible to see Hale's *Night Scene* in these terms, resonating with blues, brassy gold reflections, and shimmering streetlights reflected in the Seine.⁵

As a student of art history, Hale was knowledgeable about the collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, having visited on her return from France in 1924. Hale visited the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam September of 1927, mentioning specifically Hals, Rubens and Rembrandt (referring to the *Night Watch* as the Night Guard) and continuing on to visit Rembrandt's home. In addition, she often visited the Parisian galleries. Hale had insights into an array of artist and formulated opinions on their work, including Velasquez, Corot, Ingres, Manet, Renoir, Eakins, Daumier, and Rodin, whom she mentioned in her sketchbooks and was adept at seeing artists within a historical context.

Always, Hale is a colorist; her canvases pit electric green lawns against pink skies and the indistinct purple of distant trees. Her floral paintings are an occasion to work vibrant reds against deep greens, soft muddy violets against yellows. When she uses value-based grays, black or white, it is to great purpose and with great intention. Her painting moves between deeply structured and prepared finished works and much more spontaneous and free plein air canvases, sketches and drawings that are inventive in their paint handling, responsive to their subject, full of life, and quite striking. In the studies, there are a variety of brushstrokes and she occasionally uses the handle to scratch texture into the surfaces. The more finished and structured pieces, on the other hand, are a little too careful. By contrast, her drawings, which are heavily structured, have a wonderful space and resonate with a

⁵ Although Thomas Edison made experiments in electric lighting possible for application as streetlights as early as 1878, gas lighting remained dominant for many years afterward through a series of innovations and marketing. Advances such as the Auer or Welsbach lamp provided softer illumination and three times the amount of light while consuming only half as much gas. The introduction of the drawn-wire tungsten lamp in 1910, and the gas-filled tungsten lamp in 1914, allowed electric lighting to prevail, though it was not until the years following WWI that electric gradually replacing gaslights by the 1930s. Luckiesh, M. "A Half-Century of Artificial Lighting" in *Industrial & Engineering Chemistry* 1926 18 (9), pages 920-922. "Electric Street-Lights; Their Successful Use in Paris. The Comparative Cost And Brilliancy Of Gas And Electricity—Experiments For Perfecting The New Light." In the New York Times December 7, 1878.

volume that doesn't always translate to the paintings. Her unbalanced compositions and the odd relationships that she discovers between architecture and the landscape imply a belief in the indelible, permanent impact of human history on the landscape—a view reinforced by her war experience where she saw fields lain to waste and whole forests disintegrated.

In the 1920s and 1930s Paris was alive with artistic experimentation and fostered the genesis of several modernist movements, among them Art Deco, Dadaism, Surrealism and Cubism. A devoted gallery attendee who frequently brought out of town visitors to see current exhibitions, Hale was certainly familiar with this climate. Despite this awareness, it is notable that her work remains faithful to traditional subjects. Hale's paintings are a definite attempt to find her voice and show her strengths within tradition—of plein air painting, of academy training, and the history of European painting. She holds a particular romanticism about Europe and these traditions, but also uses them to challenge women's roles at the beginning of the 20th century. In many ways, she is uniquely positioned to present those challenges—widowed, cultured, educated, and of sufficient means to be self-reliant.

WWII, The Great Depression, and After

Hale's time in Europe culminated in the Paris Salon of 1934, when Hale's painting *Marche Douarnenez* (now in the Permanent Collection of the Montana Museum of Arts & Culture) was accepted by the 40 member jury of the *Societe des Artiste Français*. Of the 6,000 pieces selected, Hale was among only a handful of Americans and one of 150 artists to be included in the exhibition catalog.

The concern of war, the declaration of the Nuremberg Laws which stripped Jews of their civil rights as German citizens, and the growing belief that the Maginot Line—a vast fortification of concrete and steel that stretched between Luxembourg and Switzerland along the French/German border as security against invasion—would not hold as Hitler announced on March 16, 1935, that he abrogated the Treaty of Versailles' limit on German munitions and armament, caused Hale to leave August 21, 1935. After an extended return visiting museums and galleries in New York and relatives in Sioux Point, she arrived in Great Falls at the end of October. She found the nearby Malmstrom Air Force base expanding with airmen and their families as the country readied itself for inevitable war.

In March 1938, Hitler took over Austria without bloodshed as part of a plan to unite all German-speaking people. Then, Germany invaded Poland without warning on September 1, 1939, sparking WWII. Hale followed the events of the war with great interest, noting in her diaries from 1939-1946 news of bombings and destruction to places she had visited. From the period between her return in 1935 until she volunteered as a nurses aide at the Columbus Hospital in 1942 at the age of 64, there is very little information about Hale, but it can be surmised that the effects of the Great Depression and the advent of WWII were all-consuming.⁶ Although she took a few painting trips to Glacier National Park, California, Arizona, and Mexico during this time, the economic collapse of the country and the descent into war were overwhelming preoccupations.

In the late 1940s, Hale's painting slowed considerably for a number of reasons—her work as a nurse during the WWII and after, care for her older sisters, failing health and arthritis, and the onset of leukemia, which left her debilitated for long periods of time. She did, however, continue to make smaller sketches and gifts for family members over the next twenty years, but nothing approached the scale of her canvases or her level of production during those brief nine years in France between the

⁶ Letters from her attorney indicate that her ranch tenants had difficulty paying during this time.

wars.

In 1956, she wrote to a friend in France, *“twenty years since I left your charming land. I had thought to be back there long before this, but there always seemed to be some empeachment [sic] and now it looks as if I’ll stay put for some time.”* Hale died at the Deaconess Hospital in Great Falls on October 5, 1961 at the age of 83 of leukemia or related complications.

—Brandon Reintjes, Curator of Art
Montana Museum of Art & Culture
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