

# REDISCOVERING NINA BELLE WARD



KALAMAZOO INSTITUTE OF ARTS

MAY 16 – AUGUST 23, 2015



*Self-Portrait*, n.d., oil on burlap, 36½ x 29¼. Collection of David Nicholson and Ward Nicholson

It is a joy to reconnect with an artist and educator so essential to the development of the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts. For many, this will be the first time to learn what Nina Belle Ward meant to Kalamazoo and this institution. We have many to thank for the opportunity.

When Professors Dana Ward and Julia Karet first contacted us in 2013, Ward was researching his family history and paintings by his great aunt Nina. The idea emerged to mount an exhibition at the KIA. Ward and Karet have generously provided primary financial support for the exhibition and catalog. A selection of their paintings, along with works from the KIA's and other public and private collections, have come together as *Rediscovering Nina Belle Ward*.

We thank Rick Ryan, a lender who also supported the conservation and framing of a number of works. We extend our gratitude to Ward family members lending from their collections: David Nicholson, Ward Nicholson, Carolann Ward Cohen, and Elizabeth and Albert Kidd.

We also wish to thank conservators Anna Drewes and Ken Katz; the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (Nina Belle Ward's alma mater) for the loan of one painting; and local corporate sponsor Honigman.

Belinda Tate  
Executive Director



*Elizabeth*, 1913, oil on canvas, 35 x 29<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub>. Collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; gift of John Frederick Lewis, 1923.8.18

NINA BELLE WARD (1885-1944) trained as a professional artist and received significant recognition for her achievements before choosing a different path, pursuing social reform as an arts educator. Ward taught art at Kalamazoo High School for over 20 years and played a key role in founding the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts (KIA). This exhibition represents the first solo show of Ward's work since 1945 and includes examples of portraiture, landscape, and floral still life, drawn from two public institutions and five private collections.

Each year from 1911 to 1918, Ward's work was included in important Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., museum exhibitions intended to demonstrate that American paintings could compete in quality with works by European artists. Ward's paintings, including *Portrait of a Lady in Black* and *Elizabeth*, hung along-



*The Tugboat, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, c. 1930, oil on board, 20 x 23½. Collection of Rick Ryan*

side work by Mary Cassatt, William Merritt Chase, William Glackens, and other American luminaries. She won several awards and garnered praise from critics. The *New York Times* deemed the award of the 1914 Mary Smith Prize to Ward's *Elizabeth* "richly deserved," praising Ward's "understanding of the figure beneath the garments" and the refreshing "ease and simplicity of the execution."<sup>1</sup> The following year another *Times* article encouraged, "... if Miss Ward should go a very little further she would be a painter of great distinction."<sup>2</sup> However, Ward chose not to actively sell her work or seek commissions.

Instead, this modest and independent woman chose to nurture the talents of others. Embracing the reformist principles of her era, she saw art education as a path to social change. Ward expressed her views about the power of art education in a 1930 article about the KIA's classes for children:

There are all sorts of children in this group, some come in expensive fur coats, others in rags and tags, while color varies from white to very black....Our chief aim is not to make artists of them but to bring something into their lives that will enrich them. We can already see an effect on the lives of these children—many of them had been starved lives.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Pennsylvania Academy Exhibition at Philadelphia Rich in Excellent Works," *New York Times*, February 15, 1914.

<sup>2</sup> "Pennsylvania Academy's Annual Exhibition," *New York Times*, February 14, 1915.

<sup>3</sup> Nina B. Ward, "The Saturday Class of Creative Art for Talented Children," *The School Arts Magazine* 29, No. 5 (January 1930): 289-291.

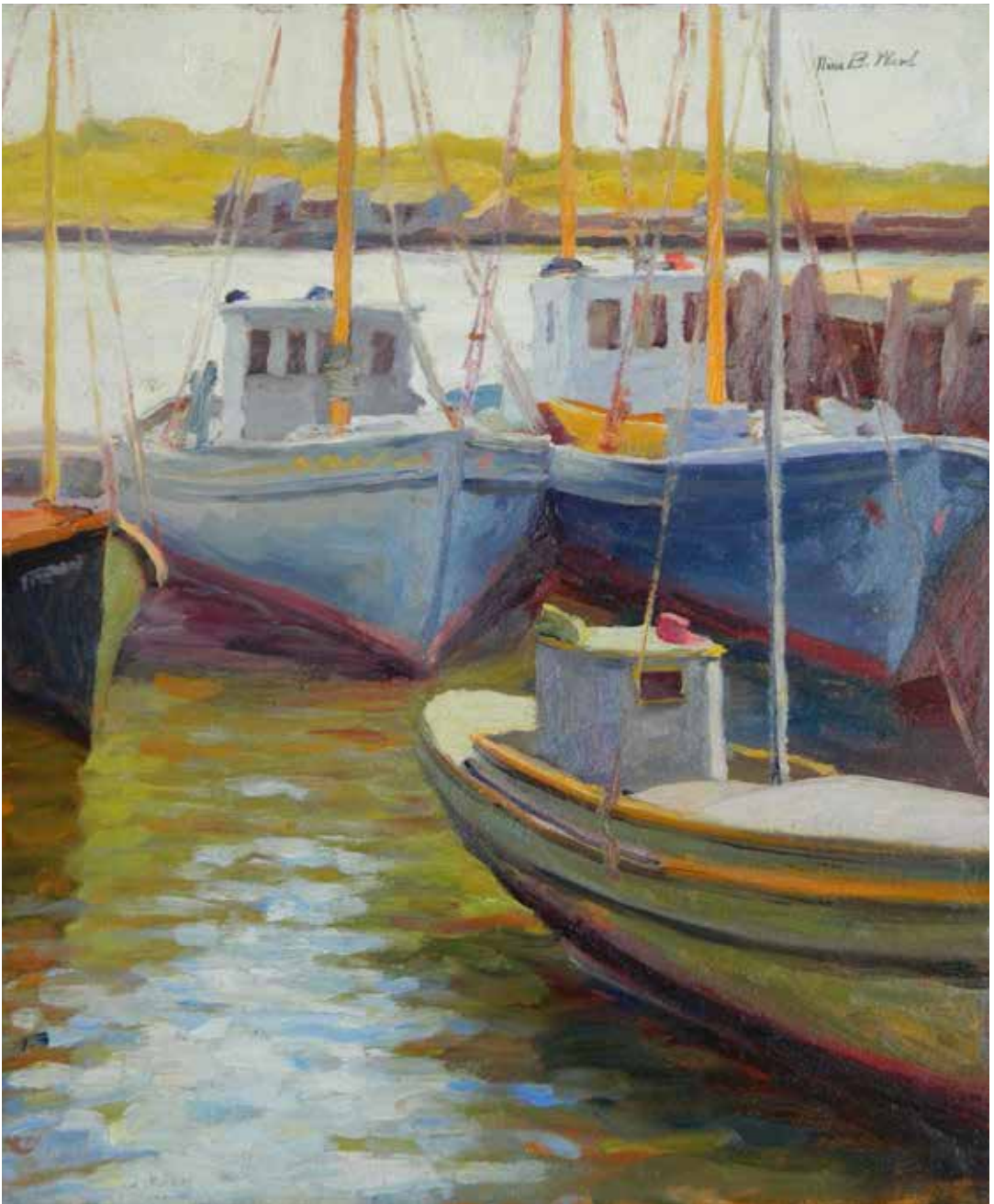


*Bouquet with Gaillardia*, n.d., oil on board, 23¼ x 20. Collection of Carolann Ward Cohen

Ward's remarkable skills as an artist and teacher were invaluable to Kalamazoo's fledgling Institute of Arts. She contributed not only professional-level instruction to children and adults, but also first-hand knowledge of the art museum/art school model and experience exhibiting art.

Nina Belle Ward was a woman of her time. Her lifelong pursuit of art, art education, and social reform was emblematic of major social trends in America during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The number of women pursuing careers as professional artists and art teachers skyrocketed between 1870 and 1890, increasing from approximately 400 to 11,000.<sup>4</sup> Drawing and art appreciation were added

<sup>4</sup> Kirsten Swinth, *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001), 3.



*Provincetown Harbor*, n.d., oil on board, 24 x 20. Collection of David Nicholson and Ward Nicholson

to the public school curriculum across the nation in the late 19th century, fueling rapid growth in art education. The adoption of art in public schools reflected a growing belief that appreciation of art was critical to the moral well-being of all citizens, rich and poor.<sup>5,6</sup> The early 1900s marked the Progressive Era, a time when many middle-class women took on volunteer and professional roles as social reformers, and when art and education were seen as engines of social and economic change. Communities supported local access to cultural education because the arts were understood to have a stabilizing effect on the moral and economic health of a community.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Smith, *Industrial Art and Education* (Boston: L. Prang and Company, 1875).

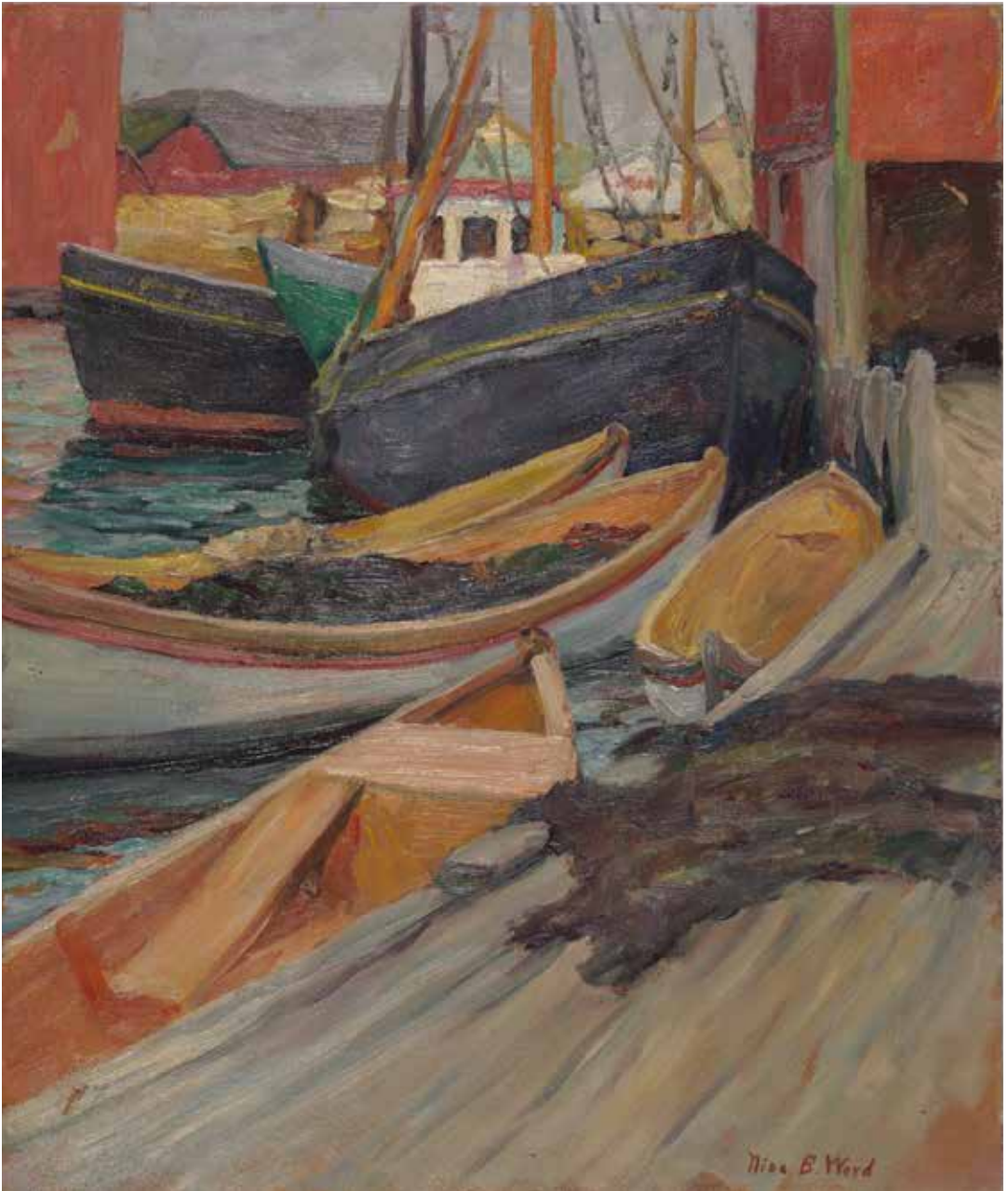
<sup>6</sup> Theodore F. Wolff and George Geahigan, *Art Criticism and Education* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 134-5.



*Round House*, n.d., oil on board, 24 x 18. Collection of Professors Dana Ward and Julia Karet

To prepare for a career, Ward enrolled at the prestigious Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) from 1907 to 1912. PAFA was the country's oldest art museum and school, founded in 1805 to establish America's cultural independence from England. There, Ward's artistic style would be shaped by her rigorous training in traditional figure and landscape painting. She studied figure drawing and portraiture with distinguished artists, including William Merritt Chase.<sup>7</sup> Chase brought to

<sup>7</sup> Pam Lajeunesse, PAFA school registrar, letter to Michael Goodison, KIA curatorial assistant, Kalamazoo, MI, February 13, 1976.



*Wharf and Nets*, n.d., oil on board, 24 x 19<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>. Collection of Elizabeth and Albert Kidd

his American students a respect for the portraits of Franz Hals and Velázquez, in addition to an appreciation for artists of the day, such as Manet and Whistler.<sup>8</sup> Ward developed a style of portraiture steeped in these traditions. Like Chase, she attempted to capture her subject's character in the face, gesture, and garments, placed against simple, muted backgrounds. As a student, Ward twice won the Cresson scholarship for summer travel in Europe. The scholarships enabled her to participate in a tradition long considered essential to the education of a professional artist: visiting European museums to see the "old masters," becoming immersed in artistic communities, and painting European scenery.

East Coast artist colonies brought the spirit of the European experience to American shores at the turn of the century. They became particularly popular when World War I forced many American artists back home. Numerous professional artists settled in picturesque New England fishing villages, some establishing summer art schools. Ward regularly spent summers painting in these vibrant arts communities and frequently invited one or two of her Kalamazoo students to join her. On Cape Cod, they practiced painting *en plein air* with Charles Hawthorne, a protégé of William Merritt Chase.<sup>9</sup> Ward embraced this European practice of painting outdoors to capture the natural light and color. Later in life, she was known to Kalamazoo residents primarily as a painter of New England landscape and harbor scenes.

Ward brought the experience of these active arts communities back to Kalamazoo. In the early 20th century, many Midwestern towns established associations in order to keep artists from migrating east to more established art communities. These art associations provided opportunities for study, created venues for artists to meet and exchange ideas, and encouraged citizens to commission and purchase original art. Some of these early associations evolved into institutions that survive today; among these are the Grand Rapids Art Museum, the Milwaukee Art Museum, and the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts.<sup>10</sup> Projects initiated by Ward at the KIA, such as teaching children's classes (1925) and mounting an annual exhibition of work by local artists (1930), continue today.

Ward devoted her talents to her students and community until cancer prevented her from teaching in 1943. Her older brother tended to her in Kalamazoo until she passed away in 1944, and then loaned work to the KIA for one last solo exhibition of 32 paintings in 1945. After giving a few works to the KIA and to her closest friends, he returned home with over 200 paintings. Several of these works are now treasured by his descendants, along with a few fragmented stories about their "Aunt Nina."

This 90th anniversary year of the KIA presents an opportune moment to reflect on the values that inspired Nina Belle Ward and many other women to embrace the arts and to take action on behalf of their communities almost a century ago. We honor Ward's legacy by teaching art, by welcoming and celebrating local artists, and by harnessing the power of art to transform our community.

Karla J. Niehus  
Associate Curator of Exhibitions

<sup>9</sup> Mary Warner Boyce, student of Ward, letter to Helen Sheridan, KIA curator, February 26, 1984.

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Greenhouse, "To Unify and Elevate: Midwest Art Organizations," in *Mathias J. Alten: Journey of an American Painter*, ed. Celeste M. Adams et al. (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Art Museum, 1998), 91-101.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions (unframed) are given in inches, height preceding width.

Ward did not title or date most of her paintings. Descriptive titles have been acquired over time.

Photographed by Brian Mosher (KIA, Kidd, and Ward/Karet Collections) and Anna Drewes (Cohen, Nicholson, and Ryan Collections).



COLLECTION OF CAROLANN WARD COHEN

*Bouquet with Gaillardia*, n.d., oil on board, 23¼ x 20 (p. 5)

*The Shop*, n.d., oil on board, 18 x 24



COLLECTION OF ELIZABETH AND ALBERT KIDD

*Wharf and Nets*, n.d., oil on board, 24 x 19⅞ (p. 8)



COLLECTION OF DAVID NICHOLSON AND WARD NICHOLSON

*Flowers in Blue-Green Pitcher*, n.d., oil on board, 24 x 20

*Bouquet with Sunflower in Glass Vase*, n.d., oil on board, 24 x 20

*Provincetown Harbor*, n.d., oil on board, 24 x 20 (p. 6)

*Cape Cod Harbor*, n.d., oil on board, 24 x 20

*Blue House*, n.d., oil on board, 24 x 20

*Rockport, Massachusetts*, n.d., oil on board, 20 x 24

*The Bookstall*, n.d., oil on board, 24 x 30

*Self-Portrait*, n.d., oil on burlap, 36½ x 29¼ (p. 2)

*Portrait of Sanna (Black) Ward in her Wedding Dress*, n.d., oil on canvas, 42½ x 32½





COLLECTION OF RICK RYAN

*The Tugboat, Portsmouth, New Hampshire*, c. 1930, oil on board, 20 x 23½ (p. 4)

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COLLECTION OF PROFESSORS DANA WARD AND JULIA KARET

*Harbor*, n.d., oil on board, 18 x 23¾

*Zinneas and Four Vases*, n.d., oil on board, 18 x 24

*Round House*, n.d., oil on board, 24 x 18 (p. 7)



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COLLECTION OF THE KALAMAZOO INSTITUTE OF ARTS

*Portrait of a Lady in Black*, c. 1912, oil on canvas, 35 x 27, gift of A. Pitzer Ward, 1960/1.11 (cover)

*Portrait of a Girl in Pink Dress*, n.d., oil on canvas, 29¼ x 24¼, gift of A. Pitzer Ward, 1960/1.12

*Gloucester Harbor*, n.d., oil on board, 16 x 20, gift of Mrs. W. O. Jennings, 1983/4.22



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COLLECTION OF THE PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS, PHILADELPHIA

*Elizabeth*, 1913, oil on canvas, 35 x 29<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub>, gift of John Frederick Lewis, 1923.8.18 (p. 3)



## NINA BELLE WARD

- 1885 Born in Rome, Georgia, to Martha Vesta Payne Ward (c.1842-1924) and James Pegram Ward (1837-c.1894)
- by 1894 Family lives in Chattanooga, TN, after father's death
- 1905-06 Enrolled at St. Louis School of Fine Arts
- 1907-1912 Enrolled at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA)
- 1909 & 1912 Travels in Europe, June-October (PAFA Cresson scholarships)
- 1912-1922 Teaches at various primary and secondary schools in Bryn Mawr, PA; Wilmington, DE; Cleveland, OH
- 1922 Joins Kalamazoo High School faculty  
Moves her mother into her Kalamazoo house (through 1924)
- 1924 Kalamazoo Institute of Arts is founded
- 1925 Teaches the KIA's first Saturday children's art classes (into the 1930s)
- 1930 Organizes *Kalamazoo Artists* exhibition
- 1943 Retires from Kalamazoo High School due to illness
- 1944 Dies in Kalamazoo, September 20. Buried in Chattanooga, Tennessee

### Exhibitions & Awards

- 1905-06 Silver, bronze, and honorable mention for portraits, St. Louis School of Fine Arts, St. Louis, MO
- 1911 *106th PAFA Annual Exhibition*, Philadelphia, PA
- 1912 *107th PAFA Annual Exhibition*  
Awarded PAFA's First (place) Toppan Prize, for landscape with water and figures  
*4th Exhibition: Oil Paintings by Contemporary American Artists*,  
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1913 *108th PAFA Annual Exhibition*
- 1914 *109th PAFA Annual Exhibition* (Awarded Mary Smith Prize for *Elizabeth*)
- 1915 *110th PAFA Annual Exhibition*
- 1916 *6th Exhibition: Oil Paintings by Contemporary American Artists*,  
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1917 *112th PAFA Annual Exhibition*
- 1918 *113th PAFA Annual Exhibition*
- 1920s-40s Participates in numerous group exhibitions at the KIA, Kalamazoo, MI
- 1932 *Fifteen Oils by Miss Nina Ward*, Civic Auditorium, Kalamazoo, MI
- 1933 Joint Annual Exhibition for Michigan Artists and Society of Independent Artists,  
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI
- 1945 Solo exhibition of 32 paintings, KIA
- 1976 *Early Michigan Paintings*, Michigan State University, Lansing, MI
- 1984 *Kalamazoo Painters of the 30s, 40s, and 50s*, KIA
- 2014 *Beautiful Things: Still Life Paintings by American Women 1880-1940*,  
Olivet College, Olivet, Michigan
- 2014 *Lasting Legacy: A Collection for Kalamazoo*, KIA
- 2015 *Rediscovering Nina Belle Ward*, KIA