Lucia Wiley (1906-1998)

Lucia Wiley was a nationally known fresco artist from Tillamook, Oregon, who first became famous in her hometown for winning the contract to paint a mural at the Tillamook Post Office (now the Tillamook City Hall). Wiley's *Captain Gray's First Visit to the Oregon Coast* (also known as *The Landing of Captain Robert Gray in 1788*) depicts the first meeting of Captain Gray and local Native people. She also painted murals in post offices, schools, and armories in Minnesota and Illinois.

Born in Tillamook on April 14, 1906, to Wayne and Frances Drew Wiley, Lucia was the oldest of six children. She was an exceptional artist even as a young child. In the 1923 high school yearbook, Wiley wrote: "He who has an art has every where a part."

From 1924 to 1926, Wiley attended the University of Minnesota for Art Education. In 1928, she transferred to the University of Oregon, where she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in fine arts (1930) and a Master of Fine Arts (1932). Her thesis, "True Fresco, Including the Designing and Execution of the Walls in Fresco," was on an art form that was created by adding color pigments directly to wet plaster. For her degree, she also created the fresco *Fishing on the Columbia River* (also known as *Salmon Fishing in Oregon*) in the foyer of the Exhibition Hall at the University of Oregon's School of Architecture and Allied Arts.

While she was taking graduate courses, Wiley worked as a graduate assistant at the university and as an art teacher at Eugene High School. In June 1933, after some post-graduate study, she accepted a fulltime teaching position at the Minneapolis School of Art, but the school canceled her contract because of financial difficulties. To make ends meet, Wiley gave fresco workshops at the Minneapolis School of Art and worked as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) fresco artist from 1938 to 1940, mostly in Minnesota and Illinois.

In the early 1940s, the U.S. Treasury Department held a competition for fresco artists to paint murals in post offices around the country. Wiley submitted a fresco design and won a commission. She proudly told her family, and the news soon spread around Tillamook. A group of citizens requested that Wiley's fresco be installed in the new post office being built in Tillamook, and the Treasury Department agreed. Wiley completed the mural in 1943.

Between 1943 and 1946, Wiley held art classes in her Tillamook studio. In 1946, she took a position at the Museum Art School at the Portland Art Museum (now the Pacific Northwest College of Art), where she worked until 1955. During that time, she created the fresco *Woman at the Well* for the St. John's Episcopal Church in Milwaukie.

It was the Tillamook Post Office mural that led to Wiley's commission to do a mural for the entrance to the Tillamook County Courthouse in the late 1940s. The county commissioners and judges solicited funds from private individuals and logging companies to sponsor the fresco. At the time, Wiley was still teaching at the Museum Art School in Portland, and so it wasn't until the summer of 1950 that she was ready to paint the mural.

The Building of the Morning Star depicts the story of the first commercial ship built in Tillamook, which supplied early settlers with a way to sell their cheese and bring supplies to the community. Because fresco murals are so large, they are painted in segments, with the artist completing a segment each day before the plaster dries. Wylie painted the courthouse fresco in thirty-three sections, each blending seamlessly with the one before. The mural was a finalist for the Architectural League of New York's Gold Medal Award in 1951. By the early 1950s, Wiley was considered to be one of the country's top eight fresco artists.

In 1955, Lucia Wiley resigned from the Portland Art Museum to become a postulate at the Episcopalian Community of the Holy Spirit at St. Hilda's House in New York City. In an interview in 1996, Sister Lucia explained, "I began to want more quiet and more meditation [but]...there was something more that I was hungry for, and it just grew about gradually."

She could not leave her art, though, and Sister Lucia soon became the supervising art teacher at St. Hilda's. She also taught math, English, social studies, and religious knowledge classes in the Community's two schools. In 1958, Sister Lucia illustrated "Our Prayers and Praises" in the Book of Common Prayer. She became Sister Warden of Associates, serving as an advisor to postulates, novitiates, and ordinates of the Community of the Holy Spirit. In that capacity, she presented training and spiritual direction in the United States, Canada, and Panama.

Sister Lucia died at St. Luke's Roosevelt Center in Harlem, New York, on August 20, 1998.

Written by Carla Albright

Further Reading:

Allen, Ginny,and Jody Klevit. *Oregon Painters the First Hundred Years 1859-1959*. Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1999.

Lucia Wiley Family Files Collection. Tillamook County Pioneer Museum, Tillamook, Oregon.

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