George Matthews Harding

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For the architect George M. Harding (1827–1910) of Portland, Maine, see George M. Harding (architect).

Harding at an easel.

George Matthews Harding (1882–1959) was a war artist for the United States Army during World War I.

Life and career

George Matthews Harding was born in Philadelphia, where his choice of careers was influenced by his older sister Charlotte. (She had studied art at the Pennsylvania School of Design for Women at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and with Howard Pyle.) After Harding spent a brief period studying architecture at Boston Tech, his sister encouraged him to attend the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. He attended the academy at night and worked as an architect during the day. Following an introduction by his sister, Harding, like other future AEF artists, studied for a time with Howard Pyle.

Harding's first illustrations appeared in the Saturday Evening Post in 1903, and in 1906 he became an illustrator and author for Harper's Monthly Magazine. While with Harper's he traveled extensively throughout the United States and the world. In 1915 he joined the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania as an associate professor in the department of fine arts, a post he held until 1935.

From 1912 to 1917, he traveled around the world, writing and illustrating articles for the Saturday Evening Post and Harpers Magazine. When the United States entered World War I, he was chosen as one of eight combat artists attached to the American Expeditionary Forces in France. He began his World War I service as a member of the poster committee of the U.S. Navy Recruiting Service, and from there he was selected for the Army's program. Much of the work he produced during the war reflects his attempts to satisfy critics in Washington who wanted to see more action scenes.
After the WWI Harding returned to his painting and teaching in Philadelphia, publishing a limited-edition portfolio of some of his war art entitled *The American Expeditionary Forces in Action*, married Anita Nisbeth of Ardmore, and established his own studio and home in Wynnewood.

In 1942, at age 60, he accepted a commission with the U.S. Marine Corps as a combat artist in its campaigns in the Pacific during World War II. This time, he served as a captain in the U.S. Marine Corps.

**War And Remembrances Commingle In The Artwork Of George M. Harding He Was A Combat Artist In Both World Wars And A Global Traveler.**

By Joseph S. Kennedy, INQUIRER CORRESPONDENT

Posted: May 21, 1995

WYNNEWOOD — A life of reflection may produce art. But George Matthews Harding was a man of action as well as an illustrator, painter, teacher and muralist.

Harding's life included world travel and stints as a combat artist in World Wars I and II.

He was born in 1882 in Philadelphia. By 1917, at age 35, as an illustrator for the Saturday Evening Post and later Harper's Magazine, he had journeyed to Newfoundland in a seal-hunting vessel, been shipwrecked in Labrador and covered events in Egypt, Australia, New Guinea and China. In 1915, Harding had returned to his home in Philadelphia and joined the fine arts department of the University of Pennsylvania. In 1916, he married Anita C. Nisbeth of Ardmore and set up his own studio and home in Wynnewood.

But the war in Europe again captured his sense of adventure.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, the War Department decided that it would select eight men to be official combat artists and paint their impressions of the American Expeditionary Force. The men chosen would be commissioned captains of engineers and were to be given passes to move from unit to unit within the U.S. line of operation.

"I am not really sure of how the Army went about the selection process, but Harding's reputation as an illustrator and his record of travel in difficult conditions must also have been a factor in his selection," said Alfred E. Cornebise, a professor of history at the University of Northern Colorado who wrote Art from the Trenches, a book about the combat artists of the First World War.
Also chosen were William Aylward, Walter Duncan, Harvey Dunn, Wallace Morgan, Ernest C. Peixotto, Andre Smith and Harry Townsend. Four of the eight, Harding among them, were students of Howard Pyle, considered the father of American illustration.

In France in 1918, Harding moved among the front-line troops making sketches. In his wartime diary, which Harding quoted in a Sept. 2, 1939, article in the Magazine of Art, he wrote of one of many experiences under fire: "the screech of 75s (75mm artillery guns), the camouflage over a 155 (155mm artillery gun) catches fire, still the whine of its shells continue as they go over."

Later, he turned those sketches into charcoal, watercolors and oil paintings that depicted for the people back home the face of war on the western front of France.

In 1942, at age 60, Harding accepted a commission as a combat artist with the U.S. Marine Corps in its campaigns in the Pacific during World War II.

From places such as Bougainville, New Georgia and Guam, Harding produced 600 on-the-spot sketches in 20 months, sketches done in foxholes, at gun emplacements, on the decks of destroyers and in jungles and swamps.

"The heat was intense, and sweat from my wrists often wrinkled up the paper on which I was doing my sketch. Then when it rained, as it did each day, I had to cover my work and myself with a poncho," Harding said in a 1950s interview in The Inquirer.

Using watercolor and crayon, he later turned those sketches into canvases for the official record of the Marine Corps.

After World War II, Harding resumed his career as a teacher and muralist.

His murals appear in post offices in Philadelphia, New York, Washington and Wilkes-Barre. He also completed a mural at Mill Grove, the home of John James Audubon, in Lower Providence Township.

Harding's work also decorates five courtrooms in the Montgomery County Courthouse in Norristown, depicting people, events and places that highlight the county's history. The murals were begun in 1951 and completed in 1953.

Harding's achievement in art was noted in the latter part of his career, when he was elected to the National Academy of Design and the Society of Mural Painters.

A stroke in 1958 ended his work as an artist. He died in 1959.
Murals trace Montco history Artist George M. Harding's notes offer insight on his approach.

By Joseph S. Kennedy INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

Posted: October 21, 2001

In 1953, after completing a series of murals that illustrated the highlights of the history of Montgomery County, artist George M. Harding wrote down his thoughts about the details in these historical paintings.

These remarks provide additional insight into the paintings.

Harding, 68 at the time he accepted the commission from the Montgomery County commissioners to do the murals, was an established painter and muralist whose work appears in post offices in such places as Philadelphia, New York and Wilkes-Barre, as well as Mill Grove, the home of John James Audubon in Lower Providence Township.

Born in Philadelphia in 1882, he studied architecture in Boston, art at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and illustration with Howard Pyle, the father of American illustration.

From 1912 to 1917, he traveled around the world, writing and illustrating articles for the Saturday Evening Post and Harpers Magazine. When the United States entered World War I, he was chosen as one of eight combat artists attached to the American Expeditionary Forces in France.

Between the two wars, Harding returned to this region, married Anita Nisbeth of Ardmore, and established his own studio and home in Wynnewood.

In 1942, at age 60, he accepted a commission with the U.S. Marine Corps as a combat artist in its campaigns in the Pacific during World War II.

Harding knew from the start that the murals he would paint would hang in the courtrooms of the Montgomery County Court House, where they would be viewed by thousands of people. As a result, he immersed himself in local historical research, according to an article he wrote in Pennsylvania History, Volume 20 (July 1953).

The first mural, "Frederick Muhlenberg Holds His First Court in the Barley Sheaf Barn, Dec. 28, 1784," "depicts the diversity of the new county's population," Harding wrote in Pennsylvania History.
The mural shows the people one would expect to see, such as Welsh, English and German, but there is the presence of an American Indian as well as an African American - an indication that there were free blacks in the county at the time.

Current historical opinion disputes the view that the first court was held in the Barley Sheaf barn. But no one disputes the importance in county history of that first court meeting.

The next mural, "Prominent Figures in Education, Science and Natural History in Early Montgomery County," shows in three panels the contribution of Christopher Dock, David Rittenhouse, and John James Audubon.

"Swedes Ford, Dec. 12, 1777," depicts the American Revolution coming to Montgomery County. After defeats at Brandywine and Germantown, the American army moved to winter encampment at Valley Forge.

"In the months that followed, the inhabitants of the area we now know as Montgomery County saw much of the suffering of Washington's army," Harding wrote.

The fourth mural, "Schuylkill River Ferry, 1806," features the river that played an important role in the agricultural and later industrial development of the region.

Said Harding about the river: "It was a water highway to Philadelphia down which the settlers could float timber and products of the farm."

The last mural, "Montgomery County Court House, 1854," appears to Harding the final establishment of the county as a significant political and economic unit that stands by itself. The courthouse is centered on a public square in the center of town.

"The shop windows show work of craftsmen and small industry of the Norristown area of that period (as it entered a new age)," Harding wrote.

Harding's career as an artist was ended by a stroke in 1958. He died in 1959 at age 77.

His history of the county as painted in murals is still being viewed by new generations at the county courthouse.

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**Montco seeks art to relieve courthouse stress**

By Margaret Gibbons Staff writer Margaret Gibbons; 610-279-6153; mgibbons@phillyburbs.com; Twitter, @peggibbons | Updated 1 month ago

The hallowed halls of Montgomery County justice will take on some fresh color this year.
The Montgomery Bar Association’s community outreach committee Thursday kicked off its “Courting Art” contest and exhibition program, which is aimed at making the county courthouse in Norristown more comfortable and visitor-friendly by displaying works of art created by county residents.

“There are few things in our lives more stressful than being in the courthouse,” said Judge Carolyn Tornetta Carluccio, the chairman of the outreach community. “That stress is shared not only by litigants, defendants, victims who have to face their aggressors, jurors, but by all those, including judges, lawyers and workers who are here on a daily basis.”

Hospitals are in the forefront in discovering that bringing art into the workplace relieves some of the stress, she added.

Other than the hanging of portraits of new county judges, the last time art was commissioned for the county courthouse was in the 1950s when Lower Merion artist George M. Harding painted murals depicting the history of the county in five of its courtrooms.

The contest, which has the stamp of approval from county judges and commissioners, this year will be limited to residents age 55 or older.

The theme of this year’s contest is “What I Love About Montgomery County.”

Senior artists are urged to submit their interpretation of that theme through their original paintings, drawings or use of mixed media (such as paint and collage) — no photographs.

These submissions, which must be framed or matted and cannot be larger than 18 inches by 24 inches, must be dropped off at the Montgomery County Community College Fine Arts Center between noon and 7 p.m. on May 7. A panel of judges, including judges who wear a black robe, will select the winning art.

There will be two free public exhibitions of the submissions, on May 10 and again on May 13, each from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. A reception and awards ceremony will be held immediately after the second exhibition for participants, sponsors and the media.

All artists whose works are selected for display at the courthouse will receive monetary prizes, with a grand prize of $1,000.

Those wanting more details about the contest can go to the contest’s website at www.CourtingArt.com

Carluccio said the winning artwork generated by this year’s contest will be displayed in the jury marshalling area.

All artwork will be returned to participants, with the bar association picking up the tab for duplicating the winning artwork and preparing it for display.
And for those who anticipate some amateurish water colors with stick people, guess again.

“’I am truly proud and glad that our seniors will be offered an opportunity to showcase their talent,’” said Joanne O. Kline, executive director of the county’s Office of Aging and Adult Services. “’I think you will be pleasantly surprised. There is a lot of real talent out there in our seniors.”

Carluccio said that, if this year’s program is a success, another contest will be held next year. Another group, such as school-age children, will be asked to compete in that contest.

All of the expenses for this year’s contest will be raised by the bar association from its members, law firms and other sponsors. To date, the association has already raised about $5,000.

Seniors' art to brighten somber Montco courthouse hallways

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Posted: Tuesday, May 14, 2013 12:00 am | Updated: 4:54 pm, Mon Oct 28, 2013.

By Margaret Gibbons Staff writer

Posted on May 14, 2013

by Margaret Gibbons

From a sunset at Green Lane Park to the Bryn Athyn Cathedral, from construction workers to firefighters, from Norristown rooftops to pastures, wooded areas and creeks, 113 older artists from Montgomery County celebrated life in the county.

And Monday evening, these artists were celebrated at a wine and hors d’oeuvres reception held at Montgomery County Community College’s Art Barn where their art work was on display.

More than 200 artists, family members, members of the county legal community and county government officials were present when the winners were announced in the first Courting Art contest jointly sponsored by the Montgomery Bar Association and the community college.
Walking away with the Best in Show award was a watercolor painting titled “Norristown Rooftops” by 85-year-old Margaret Dawson, a resident of the Dock Woods retirement community in Towamencin.

“I am absolutely stunned,” said Dawson, a professional artist and art teacher who, while she may have retired last year, still teaches art to fellow residents at the retirement community.

“I will always love and admire the architecture of Norristown,” said Dawson.

That was in keeping with the theme of the contest — What I Love about Montgomery County.

The first-place award went to Frank Batson, 77, of Upper Providence, for his “Airy and Swede, Norristown — County Seat” watercolor.

“Norristown has been the heart of Montgomery County since its beginning,” said Batson of his 1960s winter streetscape. “I love the Norristown we aspire to but can never return to.”

George Snyder, a 91-year-old history buff from Upper Providence, took second place with an oil painting titled “Washington’s Headquarters.” Suzanne B. Shank, 71, of Lower Salford, earned a third-place ribbon with her “Sweet Face of Rolling Meadows” watercolor depiction of her farm, complete with a cow in the foreground.

“I am just blown away by the quality of art that is on display here tonight,” said Commissioner Leslie Richards.

The artwork was judged not only on artistic ability but also for warmth and color, said Judge Carolyn Tornetta Carluccio, chairman of the bar association’s outreach committee and the driving force behind the contest.

The bar association and its partners in the private sector will reproduce some 30 of the top pieces that will then be hung in the hallways at the county courthouse in Norristown.

The artwork is designed to make the courthouse more comfortable and visitor friendly.

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