

More than Books

Stella Perkins Watercolors on Display

Although Freeport Library owns 17 watercolors of early Freeport by noted area artist Stella Perkins (1891 - 1980), 15 of the watercolors spend most of their time in storage because they aren't color fast, and the library is too well-lit an environment for us to have them on permanent display. Thanks to Board Member Judy Barney, who curates the Gallery Café exhibits, for suggesting it is high time to give the public another look at the Perkins collection.

I learned a lot about Perkins from Judy's research when the collection was on display in 2008, during the observation of the Sesquicentennial of the Lincoln Douglas Debates.

The library's series of 15 watercolors date from the Freeport Centennial in 1955, when Perkins painted a total of 24 Scenes of Old Freeport. The Freeport Women's Club then presented them to the library.

To give you a flavor of the library collection, here are some of the titles: "A Stranger Comes to Tutty Baker's Cabin," "Freeport's First Courthouse 1838," "The First Train Arrives in Freeport Sat. Sept.3, 1853," "Goddard's Mill owned and operated by A.D. Goddard," and "Stine Bros. Leading Clothing and Merchant Tailoring House."

The remaining nine watercolors in the Scenes of Old Freeport Series are in the Stephenson County Historical Society collection.

Stella Perkins was born in Winslow but the family soon moved to Freeport. Stella attended Freeport High School and later studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1936, she exhibited her watercolor paintings alongside prominent WPA artists in the 45th annual exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago.

The Stephenson County History book published in 1970 reports that Perkins continued to work as an artist and teacher, experimenting with different styles and techniques in watercolor, oil, casein, and prints. She painted subjects of interest to her, including a number of watercolors of Jane Addams sites in Cedarville, which are hanging in various Chicago locations.

Perkins's paintings are also to be found in many Freeport homes. During the library's 2010 showing of Scenes of Old Freeport, we received two generous donations of additional works by the artist, one from Neva Barthel, and another from Attorney Randall Manus. Both Neva and Randy wished to make their Perkins paintings available to the public.

As a consequence, these two pieces are on display year round in the library's Administration Office. Consider this an invitation to drop in upstairs and see them at the same time you visit the Perkins exhibit in the Gallery Café.

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