



Laura Coombs Hills (1859–1952)
Pansies, ca. 1935
 Pastel on paper, 10 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches
 Signed upper right

Portraits from My Garden

BY SANDRA LEPORE

Laura Coombs Hills was born on September 7, 1859, in the prosperous and thriving seacoast city of Newburyport, Massachusetts. Her father, Philip Hills, was a vice president of a local bank, the Institution for Savings. Her mother's side of the family, the Gerrishes, were from Joppa, one of the city's more colorful neighborhoods. Filled with working clam shacks along the water, it was a bustling hive of maritime activity. Enoch Gerrish, Hills' maternal grandfather, purportedly

played the fiddle and sported a hoop earring; and it was from this influence that she most

likely derived her love of music and the theater. "I love music. I can never get enough of good music. . . I listen to it in terms of color," she remarked in an interview in 1942.¹

With a modicum of art instruction, Hills' determination and talent first expressed itself in the art of miniature painting. "When I was a child," Hills said, "I used to make tiny figures of paper dolls and infinitesimal things. . . so when I took up miniatures I showed perhaps only another form of this obsession for small things."²



Fig. 1: Fenno Estate, 1950. Presently SeaView Retreat.
 Courtesy of SeaView Retreat and the Comley family.



Fig. 2: Laura Coombs Hills (1859-1952), *Larkspur and Lilies*, ca. 1935.
Pastel on paper, 28¾ x 23½ inches. Signed lower right.



Fig. 3: Laura Coombs Hills (1859-1952)
Peonies, ca. 1936
 Pastel on paper, 23 x 28¾ inches
 Signed lower left

While on a trip to England in 1890 with her sister, Lizzie, Hills encountered a woman painting a portrait on ivory, and was fascinated with the process. She returned home in 1891 with a cache of ivories and a determination to master the technique. Just two years later Boston art dealer J. Eastman Chase exhibited a grouping of her miniatures in *Seven Pretty Girls of Newburyport*; thus began the “fairytale part” of her career. By 1898 she had helped found the American Society of Miniature Painters, and served as its vice president.

During her thirty years as a painter of miniatures, Hills won medals at the Paris



Exposition (1900), the Pan-American Exposition, Buffalo (1901), the Charleston Exposition (1902), the St. Louis Exposition (1904), the Pan-Pacific Exposition (1915), and the Pennsylvania Society of Miniature Painters at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art (1916). She also belonged to a number of professional organizations, including the Society of American Artists, the National Academy of Design, as an associate, the Boston Art Students Association, precursor to the Copley Society, the Boston Water Color Club, and the Guild of Boston Artists.

Having spearheaded the miniature revival in the decade preceding and the one following

A Young Laura Hills. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Old Newbury.



Fig. 4. Laura Coombs Hills (1859–1952), *Night Blooming Cereus*, 1936. Pastel on paper, 21¾ x 17¾ inches. Signed upper left.

1900, Laura Hills embarked on a second successful career in the 1920s. Failing eyesight and a diminishing interest in miniature portrait commissions prompted the sixty-year-old artist to shift her focus to floral pastels. The subject of flowers was not new to Hills. During her career as a miniature painter she had rendered flowers in watercolor and pastel, and exhibited them alongside her miniatures at exhibition arenas such as the Art Institute

of Chicago (intermittently from 1902 to 1930) and Boston Water Color Club (from 1890 to 1916).

Beginning in 1921 with Frank Bayley's Copley Gallery in Boston and ending at the Guild of Boston Artists in 1947, Hills' year-end solo exhibitions were extremely popular. There were stories of admirers lining up outside the gallery prior to opening. In a letter written after one show to fellow artist Lucy

Stanton on January 8, 1928, she wrote: "All of the pictures were sold, forty the first morning and the remaining five in a few days. Great good fortune, wasn't it?"³ These exhibitions, in fact, provided a platform for friendly, but fierce, competition among Boston's notable names: Hale, Crowninshield, Spaulding, Cabot, Moseley, Coolidge, Frothingham, Richardson, and Gardiner, to name a few.

One name that shows up consistently in the

"If a peony, for example, were to have the most conspicuous position in the flower arrangement, I would paint it first."

Doll & Richards gallery records, now in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, was that of Mrs. L. Carteret Fenno, née Pauline Shaw, daughter of Quincy Adams Shaw, perhaps the most important early benefactor to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. She had grown up in a home filled with Renaissance treasures as well as an important collection of work by Francois Millet (1814–1875).⁴ The Doll & Richards records show that Mrs. Fenno purchased seventeen of Hills' pastels between 1932 and 1939, ten of which appear in the exhibit *Portraits from My Garden* (see last paragraph). It is possible that Fenno purchased others, but the records of buyers of Hills' work from Copley Gallery and the Guild of Boston Artists have yet to be uncovered.

Pauline Fenno had constructed a very large summer home in 1910 in Rowley, adjacent to Newburyport (Fig. 1), and was likely acquainted with Hills through Karoline Burnhome, whose son, Clement, was married to Pauline's daughter, Florence. Karoline Burnhome owned a large Federal-style home on High Street in Newburyport, and was a lifelong friend of Hills.

There is a record of a dozen *Larkspur* and *Lilies* pastels sold during the 1930s, most of them priced at five hundred dollars, which indicates that they were full sheet compositions. These works were extremely popular because of their large format, commanding presence, and sheer vitality. Hills had a particular dexterity with lilies. Having carefully arranged the just picked flowers, she would place them outside in full sunshine, and augment the sunlight with an electric light bulb. "It was the electric light that made the difference. It woke those lilies up, and made them speak," she commented in a 1951 interview for the *Boston Sunday Post*.⁵ Pauline Fenno purchased her example (Fig. 2) at the 1935 Doll & Richards exhibition; in the following year she purchased three more works


by Hills: *Peonies* (Fig. 3), *Summer Roses*, and *Night Blooming Cereus* (Fig. 4).

Peonies were another very popular subject for Hills, and there is a record of twenty-five examples exhibited during this period, with the most famous being *Larkspur*, *Peonies* and *Canterbury Bells*, which was purchased by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1926. The poster of this painting has consistently been the largest selling image in the museum's gift shop. Capturing her subject at its peak of vitality was key to Hills' success and popularity. Her sister Lizzie picked the flowers early in the morning, and Hills, with nothing more than a visual in her mind, manipulated the arrangement to get the right composition and color balance against a decorative background provided by a colorful scarf, shawl, or wallpaper. It might take her as little as three days to complete a pastel, but sometimes the effort took as much as six. It was imperative to work quickly. "If a peony, for example, were to have the most conspicuous position in the flower arrangement, I would paint it first," she said in 1921.⁶

Will Howe Downes, a noted Boston art critic, speculated in 1921: "There is something about a pastel as a medium for this particular kind of work that is especially adapted to the purpose; one of its peculiar advantages being the blooming quality of the surfaces, the fineness of the textures, and the combined brilliancy and delicacy of the colors".⁷ Hills was very particular about the quality of her pastel sticks and personally purchased, or had her traveling friends purchase, most of them from a Parisian named Roche, who made his own. It would appear that Hills found his range of color to be far more dazzling than anything she could purchase at home.

Laura Hills brought a fresh aesthetic to an age-old subject. She was successful in posing her subjects against decorative motifs

without compromising the color balance and focus of her pastel. Mostly, however, she brought a palette informed by modernism and art movements of the time. Hills died on February 21, 1952. Always modest, she would be exceedingly pleased to see the attention her work garners today from collectors and curators.

Portraits from My Garden is a joint exhibition cosponsored by Vincent Vallarino Fine Art, New York, NY.; Lepore Fine Arts, Newburyport, Mass.; and the Cooley Gallery, Old Lyme, Conn. The paintings will be exhibited November 12, 2009, at the Boston International Fine Art Show (visit www.fineartboston.com). It will then travel to the Cooley Gallery, 25 Lyme Street, Old Lyme, Connecticut, where it will be on view from November 21 through January 2, 2010. An opening reception will be held at the Cooley Gallery on Saturday, November 21. For information call 860.434.8807 or visit www.cooleygallery.com. 

Sandy Lepore is the owner of Lepore Fine Arts, Newburyport, Massachusetts.

1. Loring Holmes Dodd, "Three Good Art Shows Now Running in Boston," *Worcester Evening Gazette* (November 30, 1942).

2. M. J. Curl, "Boston Artists and Sculptors Talk of their Work and Ideals: IV—Laura Coombs Hills," *Boston Transcript* (January 22, 1921).

3. Hills correspondence to Lucy Stanton, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The University of Georgia, Athens, Ga.

4. Quincy Adams Shaw bequeathed "twenty-six oil paintings, twenty-seven pastels, two etchings and one etching washed in watercolour, by Jean-Francois Millet, together with nineteen pieces of Renaissance sculpture." Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Exhibition catalogue, April 18, 1918.

5. "N.E. Flower Artist at 91 Finds Work Still in Demand—Has Won Many Medals," *Boston Sunday Post* (April 8, 1951).

6. Ibid.

7. Will Howe Downes, "Old Fashioned Flowers," *Boston Transcript* (November 25, 1921).



Laura Coombs Hills (1859–1952), *Roses and Glass*, ca. 1933.
Pastel on paper, 18 x 12½ inches. Signed upper left.