The Art of Maude J. Mitchell (1875-1957)

Carol Cook

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Maude Josephine Mitchell was the daughter of early Wabaunsee County pioneers Captain William and Mary Mitchell. Captain Mitchell was a leader of the Beecher Bible and Rifle Colony who came to the area in 1856. He operated an Underground Railroad station at his home three miles east of the town of Wabaunsee.

Maude Mitchell received her early education at District School #2 in Wabaunsee County. She attended the New York State Normal College at Buffalo, New York. After graduation, Mitchell taught district school near Manhattan, Kansas. She then went to New York City to study art, graduating from Columbia University’s School of Art in 1900. She also studied at the Art Students League in Manhattan and Woodstock, New York.

In 1915, her mother passed away, and she returned to Kansas to take charge of the Mitchell Ranch. Continuing to paint, Mitchell became a well-known Kansas artist. She exhibited her work in regional exhibitions, including those in Kansas City and Topeka.
Many of Mitchell’s paintings present views of Pottawatomie and Wabaunsee counties. The artist sought to preserve the architecture and landscape around her in impressionistic watercolors and oils. Her favorite subjects were wheat fields and the Flint Hills prairie. A few of the artist’s works touch on the story of black settlement in post-Civil War Wabaunsee County.

Many area residents took art lessons from Mitchell. Some of her former students are still painting in the Wamego area.

Occasionally Mitchell traveled to Florida to spend the winter with her brother. These journeys inspired several Florida landscapes.

Mitchell was also a musician and composer. Among her published works were such tunes as “Prairie Roads a Windin” (recorded by Roy Rogers), “The Dance of Romance,” and others.
and “Ridin’ in the Rain.” The artist’s other accomplishments include a series of murals for Columbia University and the design for the stone gateway at the Wabaunsee Township Cemetery. Mitchell’s poetry, editorials, and cartoons were published widely. She had an interest in public affairs and a wide circle of friends. Mitchell was a leader among those who have sought to preserve and make vital the history and culture of Wabaunsee County.

After many years of living in the Flint Hills near Wamego, Carol Cook now lives in Topeka with her husband, Doug. She has been a classroom teacher in the Paxico area for twenty years. Cook discovered Maude Mitchell while helping her young daughter research Captain Mitchell and his involvement with the Wabaunsee Underground Railroad. Cook has organized exhibitions of Mitchell’s work for the Wamego Senior Center (1989) and Columbian Theatre in Wamego (1999). She is currently co-organizing a Mitchell exhibition for the Wabaunsee County Historical Society and Museum, in Alma, Kansas.