

The Guide | HOME

ANTIQUES & COLLECTIBLES

## The Woman Who Painted Spring

Laura Coombs Hills brought flowers to life on canvas. | BY CATHERINE RIEDEL



THE PAYOFF FOR WORKING at a world-class auction house is to be able to see and feel and learn about rare and beautiful things. Such is the case with paintings by Laura Coombs Hills (1859-1952), a Boston School artist from Newburyport, Massa-

chusetts, best known for her pastels of floral compositions and tabletop still lifes. Never heard of her? Let's put it this way: Laura Coombs Hills could paint flowers from her garden as easily as others could pick them.

Seeing her work, one comes away with the sense that color—bright, softly sensuous, even bold—was a world unto itself for Hills. Add in light and soft shadows to illuminate, define, and diffuse that color, and the end result is a composition whose breadth and depth and weight defy the subject matter. Larkspur, hollyhocks, and poppies overflow from vases, reaching out toward the edges of the paper, which can barely contain the abundance. A light-infused breakfast table set with flowers and porcelain captures the essence of the day that lies just outside the frame. Hills's simple scenes are complete in their scope, but they leave the viewer wanting more—wishing one could peel back the edge of the frame in hopes of revealing just a bit more of that light, that color, that moment in time.

Perhaps for a woman artist at the turn of the last century, that's just how good you had to be. Because while their male contemporaries were abroad painting Venice's Grand Canal, women artists of Hills's generation were often tethered close to home, constrained by the duties of convention and family. What choice did they have but to look past the day-to-day and create idealized views of the world around them?

Sadly, most of us will never get the chance to own a Laura Coombs Hills painting. In the past 30 years, prices for her work have skyrocketed and easily reach five figures at auction. In May 2004, Skinner set a world-record price for a Laura Coombs Hills pastel when *Peonies and Velvet* sold for more than \$52,000. If only you could have seen it in person—it was beautiful. It came over the auction block, there was a frenzy of bid activity, and then slowly, one by one, bidders dropped their paddles. There was just one quiet bidder left standing. I think Laura Coombs Hills would have been proud. 🍷

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Laura Coombs Hills's lush pastel blossoms burst with luminous color. Above: "Peonies and Velvet" sold on May 14, 2004, for \$52,875, more than 13 times its estimate.