



*Note: The following information is found on the back of the teaching poster of Back Road to Pipersville by Fern Coppedge.*

## Fern I. Coppedge: Pennsylvania Impressionist

Fern Coppedge was one of several women painters from Bucks County, Pennsylvania who achieved a national reputation. While finding friendship and exhibition opportunities with **The Philadelphia Ten**, a group of women artists formed in 1917, Coppedge also established her reputation within the landscape painters of the New Hope School, which embraced American Impressionism. This teaching poster is designed to guide teachers and students in understanding and appreciating *Back Road to Pipersville* through information on the artist, the artwork, and Pennsylvania Impressionism. Suggested activities provide opportunities for students to construct meanings related to the work, to explore interdisciplinary connections, and to create their own artwork.

### Looking Questions

- Is this a portrait, a still life, or a landscape?
- Describe what you see in the foreground, middle ground and background.
- Where is the horizon line?
- Imagine that you are walking on the road. In the air, trace where it takes you, starting at the bridge. What kind of a line did you make?
- What season is it? What colors do you see in the snow?
- Where is the focal point of the painting? What makes your eye go to this spot?
- Find examples of complementary colors.
- If you were a weather reporter, how would you describe the weather depicted here?
- Where do you think Fern Coppedge stood when she made this painting? Was the scene below, at eye level, or above her? How can you tell?
- What is the mood of this painting? Think of three adjectives. What do you see that makes you use these words?

## Extension Activities

- Research and compare the lives of Violet Oakley (1874-1961) and Fern Coppedge. Discuss their educational opportunities, career choices and accomplishments.
- Create a time line with key dates indicating the changing status of women during Fern Coppedge's lifetime, including the road to women's suffrage (right to vote) in 1921, the fate of the Equal Rights Amendment, and changing attitudes towards women's reproductive rights (Roe vs. Wade).
- Research the lives of male Pennsylvania Impressionist artists (Daniel Garber, Edward Redfield, William Lathrop). What choices and challenges did they face as artists?
- Research the lives of the other painters and sculptors of the Philadelphia Ten. How was this group unique? What was the group's purpose?

## About this Artwork

To create this painting, Fern Coppedge traveled to Pipersville, a small town on the eastern side of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, known for its rolling hills and lush green landscapes. Because she especially loved snowy landscapes, local residents often saw her striding through the snow, wrapped in a bearskin coat with her sketching materials slung over her shoulder, seeking the perfect scene to paint. One critic quipped that if she had been "born a man, she undoubtedly would have manned a trawler and sailed the Arctic Ocean." Snow scenes such as *Back Road to Pipersville* were Coppedge's most common subject.

Like most Pennsylvania Impressionists, Coppedge focused on the changing effects of light in nature, painting *en plein air* (outdoors) during her early years as an artist. She was especially attracted by the effects of glowing colors at particular times of day. In *Back Road to Pipersville*, the bridge and buildings in the foreground as well as the bare tree trunks and branches in the background reflect golden sunlight emanating from a source beyond the painting's left side. In the center, the snow is streaked with cool lavender and purple shadows and warm yellow and ochre highlights. What time of day do you think is depicted? This painting conveys Coppedge's skill in heightening subtle contrasts and combinations of complementary colors as well as her delight in recording a winter scene.

Unlike other impressionist painters, Coppedge composed her paintings carefully, stating, "I may erase most of my sketch, but after I have it the way I want it in charcoal, then I work over the entire canvas with a large brush. I use thin paint in trying to get the right value- [I] test different spots to see whether the scene should be painted rich or pale. Then I proceed with the actual painting using paint right from the tube. I hold the brush as arm's length and

paint from the spine. That gives relaxation.” Coppedge mostly used small canvases; she seldom exceeded 30 inches on a side.

During her middle and later years, Coppedge’s use of color became bolder and more imaginative and her shapes simpler and flatter, perhaps revealing the influence of **post-impressionist** artists.

## About This Artist

Fern Isabel Coppedge was born on a farm near Decatur, Illinois, in 1883. As a young child, she was passionate about the intense colors of nature and sunlight reflected on snow and water. When she was thirteen, she visited her older sister’s watercolor class in California, and dreamed of becoming an artist. She met her husband, Robert W. Coppedge, a chemistry instructor and amateur painter, while attending the University of Kansas. He encouraged her to pursue her dream. Subsequently, she studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Art Students League in New York City, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, and privately with artists John Carlson (noted for his winter scenes) and Daniel Garber. In Philadelphia, she joined a group of women artists known as the Philadelphia Ten.

In 1920, Coppedge moved to a converted Quaker meetinghouse in Lumberville, Pennsylvania, near Daniel Garber’s home and studio, Cuttalossa, while keeping her studio in Philadelphia. During the early 1920s, she worked outdoors, painting the villages and farms of Bucks County, often blanketed with snow, and famously, tying her canvases to trees during storms. During the summers, she painted seascapes and harbor scenes in Gloucester, Massachusetts and Boothbay Harbor, Maine. In 1926, she traveled to Italy and was inspired by views of the Arno River in Florence. When Coppedge returned to Bucks County she continued to paint landscapes, but emphasized simple, flat shapes and bright colors rather than using the broken brush strokes and pastel colors typical of American Impressionism. She built a home and studio in the center of New Hope, a thriving artists’ colony, in 1929.

Coppedge always worked directly from nature, but moved from recording its shimmering colors and shapes towards a more expressionist style. Coppedge resided in New Hope until her death in 1951.

## Compare and Contrast

Compare *Back Road to Pipersville* with paintings by *Fauve* (French for Wild Beast) artists Maurice de Vlaminck, Andre Derain and Henri Matisse and *Die Brücke* (German for *The*

*Bridge*) artists Karl Schmidt-Rotluff and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Discuss color, shape, space, composition, and subject matter.

## Key Vocabulary

Background

Complementary colors

Composition

*Die Brücke*

*En plein air*

Foreground

Horizon line

Impressionism

Landscape

Middle ground

Perspective

Post-impressionism

*The Fauves*

The Philadelphia Ten

## The Philadelphia Ten (1917~1945)

The author James A. Michener once remarked, "I can't see [artists] Garber and Lathrop and Redfield bothering much with women on a serious note." Dismissing such opinions, Fern Coppedge found support and a forum for her art in the company of women artists. Between 1922 and 1935, she exhibited with Ten Philadelphia Painters, a group of women artists founded in 1917. The group exhibited annually in Philadelphia and sent exhibitions to women's clubs across Pennsylvania, as well as to museums and galleries on the East coast and the Midwest. Their first exhibition included 247 works by eleven artists, nine of whom had studied at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women (now Moore College of Art). This little-heralded event marked the beginning of the group's almost thirty year existence. Known as "Ten Philadelphia Painters," "The Philadelphia Ten," and, later, simply "The Ten," the group exhibited until 1945. Each member of the Philadelphia Ten was a financially independent artist and contrary to the prevailing custom, retained her maiden name. Although the group consisted mainly of painters, beginning in 1926, the exhibitions included sculptors Harriet Whitney Frishmuth, Beatrice Fenton, and Gladys Bates.

## Related Art Projects

- Experiment with drawing *en plein air* (outdoors). Choose a location and try to capture the light, color, weather, and time of day using crayons, markers, or oil

pastels. Return to the same location at a different time of day or season and make a second artwork. Compare the results. How is the light different? What else has changed?

- Create three landscapes from different **perspectives**: aerial, eye level, and a worm's eye view. Experiment with combinations of complementary colors as you create a foreground, middle ground and background. Use pastel colors to convey a sense of distance and atmospheric perspective.

## Interdisciplinary Activities

- **Geography:** Find Pipersville, Pennsylvania on a map. Research Bucks County geography and learn the meanings of Atlantic coastal plain, agrarian bosque, and diabase terrain. Explain which term best fits Pipersville using evidence found in *Back Road to Pipersville*.
- **Language Arts:** Imagine that you are in this painting, walking on the road to Pipersville. Where have you come from? Who will you see? What is the weather? Write a descriptive essay.
- **History:** Research the status of female students at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. When were women allowed to enroll? When were they permitted to draw from live models? What women artists have attended and taught at the Academy?
- **Performing Arts:** Create and perform a dialogue between Fern Coppedge and a wealthy patron who is unhappy that Coppedge is no longer painting in an American Impressionist style.

## Credits:

This teaching poster was supported by a grant from Target Corporation. Produced by the Education Department at the Michener Art Museum. Written by Adrienne Neszmelyi-Romano, Associate Curator of Education. Copyright © 2006 James A. Michener Art Museum.

**Image Credit:** Fern I. Coppedge, Backroad to Pipersville, n.d., oil on canvas, H. 38 x W. 40 inches, James A. Michener Art Museum. Gift of Robert J. Lillie