



# Fern Isabel Coppedge (1883–1951)

## Road to Lumberville, 1938

Oil on canvas  
H.18.125 x W. 20.125 inches  
James A. Michener Art Museum  
Gift of Ruth Purcell Conn and William R. Conn

*People used to think me queer when I was a little girl because I saw deep purples and reds and violets in a field of snow. I used to be hurt over it until I gave up trying to understand people and concentrated on my love and understanding of landscapes. Then it didn't make any difference.*

Fern I. Coppedge



Fern Coppedge in her studio, late 1940s. On the easel is *Road to Point Pleasant*. Courtesy of the James A. Michener Art Museum Archives.

### 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 *Road to Lumberville* 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

- What do you see in this painting?
- 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 bottom of the painting. 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 Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) and Fern I. Coppedge. Discuss their educational opportunities, challenges they faced as women artists, 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 life of Daniel Garber, a significant landscape painter of the New Hope School, and Coppedge's teacher.
- Analyze snow scenes by Bucks County artists: Walter Baum, George Sotter, and Edward Redfield. Compare their techniques to those used by Coppedge.
- Explore and discuss how the Great Depression affected artists. What kinds of opportunities were available to them during the 1930s?

### About this Painting

Fern Coppedge did not travel far to create this painting because her first home was in Lumberville, the town featured here. Lumberville is a small village on the eastern side of Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Situated along the Delaware River, it is known for rolling hills and lush green landscapes. Coppedge lived here between 1920 and 1929. Because she 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 *Road to Lumberville* were Coppedge's favorite 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 intrigued by the effects of glowing colors at particular times of day. The foreground in *Road to Lumberville* contains a snow covered road that curves to the right, then the left, and disappears into the background. Coppedge combined white paint with yellows, purples, reds, and blues to depict the deep snow covering the road. In the middle ground, the yellow house snuggling between snow and trees, serves as the focal point of the painting. This was Coppedge's home. Additional colorful houses line the road leading to the purple mountains in the background. This painting conveys Coppedge's skill using complementary colors and her delight in recording a familiar winter scene.

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 typically painted on small canvases, not larger than 30" x 30".

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.

### Related Art Projects

- Create a landscape using the colors inspired by Coppedge and the Fauves. Select a place that has meaning to you—either a photograph, or a place where you can sketch. Using acrylic paints, develop your photograph or sketch further using expressive colors.
- During the winter months, create a work of art with snow as its main inspiration and focus. This artwork can be two or three dimensional and in a medium of your choice.
- Experiment with drawing *en plein air* (outdoors). Choose a location and try to capture the light, colors, weather, and time of day using paints, pastels, or oil pastels. Return to the same location at a different time of day or season and make a second artwork. Compare the results. What has changed?

### Compare and Contrast

Compare *Road to Lumberville* 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.

Compare *Road to Lumberville* with *The Road West*, a photograph by Dorothea Lange created the same year (See the Metropolitan Museum of Art at: [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)). Why were these artworks created? How are their compositions similar or different? Compare the lives and careers of each of these two artists.

### 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

### 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. The studio's design was like a carriage house. She called it "Boxwood" after the shrubs she moved from her home in Lumberville.

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.

### Interdisciplinary Activities

- **Geography:** Write a letter encouraging a friend to visit Lumberville, PA. Describe its location, geographical features, and significant buildings in the area. Provide directions to your friend on how to travel to Lumberville from where they live.
- **Language Arts:** Write an essay imagining that you are Fern Coppedge. Describe your memories of painting this landscape, starting your sentences with "I remember..." Include memories of the five senses (see, hear, feel, taste, smell) in your recollections.
- **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:** Role play Daniel Garber and Fern Coppedge, acting out a scene that would take place between them as teacher and student.

### 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, Curator of Education. Copyright © 2007 James A. Michener Art Museum.



Studio of Fern I. Coppedge, undated photograph, Courtesy of James A. Michener Art Museum Archives.

### 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.