# Lilla Cabot Perry

## Impressionist painter in Meiji era Japan

Junko Ono Rothwell

Lilla Cabot Perry (1848 - 1933) came to Japan more than 100 years ago, in 1898 (Meiji 31), and lived in Tokyo for three years, painting in oils and pastels. She was probably the only American woman painter living in Japan at the time, and the first to paint Japan with impressionist eyes.

Lilla was born into a prominent Boston family, the Cabots, on January 13, 1848. Her family was of such an elite class that it was said, "A Lodge speaks only to a Cabot, and a Cabot only to God." As the eldest of eight children of a surgeon father, she was taught "simple living, noble thinking, and service to others" from an early age. Writers gathered at the house, and the children played hide-and-seek with the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson and Louisa May Alcott, author of *Little Women*, among other works. Alcott and other children played hide-and-seek and other games.

Lilla was an excellent student. She excelled not only in painting but also in literature, especially poetry and music. Although she did not receive a formal art education, she grew up surrounded by art, with painters and art collectors always coming and going from her home. In particular, Quincy Shaw, known for his collection of Millet, was a close friend. She visited his home and he showed Lilla many paintings.

The year Lilla turned 13, the Civil War began. The Cabot family helped the sick and wounded and accepted escaped black slaves. The war ended when Lilla was 17.

In 1868, at age 20, Lilla was introduced to Thomas Sargent Perry by a friend. Thomas was a direct descendant of Benjamin Franklin, and his great-uncle was Commander Perry, known for the Black Ships that prompted Japan's opening to the world. Thomas had just graduated from Harvard two years earlier, traveled around Europe, and returned in the fall to teach literature at Harvard. Six years later, Lilla and Thomas were married.

The marriage was between two of Boston's most prominent families, but financially it was not so easy. Thomas's teaching job suddenly disappeared, and he later became a critic, publishing articles and works and editing literary treatises, which were accepted by the critics but ignored by the general public. Eleven years after their marriage, Lilla's father died, and she

inherited his estate and finally had an easier time of it. Three daughters were born to them, the eldest, Margaret, in 1876, Edith in 1880 and Alice in 1884. As the years passed, however, her inheritance dwindled and they began to rely on the income from Lilla's portraits.

Lilla was a self-taught painter, but in 1884, at the age of 36, she learned to paint from Alfred Collins, a portrait painter. Collins who studied in France, was famous at that time but is largely forgotten today. His students included Thomas Eakins and John Singer Sargent. The following year, Lilla studied under Robert Bonneau at the Museum of Fine Arts.

With two young girls and a one-year-old baby, Lilla finally began to learn to paint, and she was hooked. She was so absorbed in painting that she left behind a letter from that time. She said: "I am hard at work painting. . . . I feel I am improving fast — and that is a delightful feeling! I told Tom (her husband) the other day he must not feel offended if I said that I had not been so happy since I was a girl at school!"

His teacher Bonneau, originally a French-trained painter, traveled back to France the following year and became interested in plein air painting. Lilla remained in contact with Bonneau throughout his life, and both encouraged the American Impressionists to create landscapes and portraits.

At that time, 19th century American artists were looking to and gathering in Paris. Not only painters but also writers were active there. Thomas decided to lead his family to Paris for two years in 1886. Lilla said in a letter, "I like the idea of being in Paris and beginning to study painting there, the headquarters of modern painting."

In preparation for her trip, Lilla immediately enrolled at the Cowles School of Art. There she met her professor, Dennis Bunker, and was attracted to his paintings. She wrote in a letter: "[Bunker] is a very young artist whose power of drawing is amazing." Commenting on the process of learning, she said, "I enjoy it very much, partly because it is so difficult. A whole figure is so much more complicated than a head alone, and I have so little experience in charcoal, that I find it much more difficult to use than paint."

Collins, Bonneau, and Bunker were the painters Lilla studied with in Boston, and in Académie Julian in Paris. They were portrait painters with a powerful style.

## Stay in France

In 1887, the Perry family left Boston, traveling to London and Spain before settling in Paris for the winter. Lilla enrolled at the Académie Colarossi School of Fine Arts but did not attend much and studied classical masterpieces at the Louvre. The following year, she traveled to Munich, and upon her return to Paris, she joined the Académie Julian. The next year, she exhibited a portrait of Thomas and a painting of their daughter Edith reading at the Salon, both of which were accepted. She was 41 years old.

That summer the Perry family decided to spend some time in Giverny. The Impressionist Monet lived there, and a group of American painters surrounded him. They included Theodore Robinson, John Breck, and Theodore Butler. The Perry family was so enchanted with Giverny

that they spent nine summers there between 1889 and 1909. Lilla was attracted to Monet's style of painting, and his advocacy of open-air, light-filled sketching. She created many excellent works, including the use of pointillism, purple and green colors, and more liberal brush strokes to depict village scenes and figures.

She returned to Boston in 1889, but went back to France in 1891. She returned to Boston that year, and then back to France in 1994. That summer, the Perry family rented a house in Giverny next to Monet's. Monet often dropped by and sometimes critiqued Lilla's paintings. After lunch, he would stop by, smoke in the garden, and return to work in the afternoon.

At this time, Lilla became friends with Pissarro. She even held a tea party in Paris, where she showed Pissarro's paintings to American collectors.

In 1897, the Perry family returned to Boston, and Lilla had a solo exhibition at the St. Botolph Club. This was a milestone for Lilla. Critics did not mention Lilla's Giverny landscapes, but praised her portraits.

During the years between France and Boston, Lilla also made a commitment to her fellow painters. She introduced Monet's paintings to Boston and organized exhibitions. She also helped American painters in Giverny to have exhibitions in Boston and found one of them a teaching position at an art school.

## Residence in Japan 1898 - 1901 (Meiji 31 - 34)

In 1898, the Perry family left Boston for Japan. This was because Thomas accepted a position as professor of English literature at Keio University. Lilla was 50 years old and her daughters were Margaret, 22, Edith, 18, and Alice, 14. After gaining experience in Europe, her three-year stay in Japan opened Lilla's eyes to new artistic possibilities. Although prints and Japanese paintings, especially ukiyoe by Utamaro, Hokusai, and Hiroshige, had already influenced Japonisme, French Impressionists and American artists such as Whistler and La Farge, Lilla was again impressed by the beauty of line and artistry of prints and Japanese painting.

However, since the opening of Japan to the outside world by Commander Perry's black ships, traditional Japanese art had not been respected, and Western art had become the sole focus of the Japanese art world. In 1890, Fenollosa from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Tenshin Okakura, took a stand against this crisis of the destruction of Japanese culture. Fenollosa, who came to Japan in 1878, preached the wonders of Japanese old-style painting, and Okakura Tenshin, Hashimoto Gaho, Kano Hogai, and others gathered around him to create a new style of Japanese painting that made the most of traditional Japanese painting. In 1890, Tenshin became the principal of the Art School, but left in 1891 due to a dispute between teachers. In the same year, Okakura Tenshin founded the Nihon Bijutsu-in (Japan Art Institute) with 39 painters including Taikan, Kanzan, and Shunso.

On the other hand, Western-style painting in the Meiji period was initiated by artists such as Takahashi Yuichi and Asai Chu, and was known as the sepia school because of its dark brown wash. In 1893, Kuroda Seiki, who had studied from Collin in France, returned to Japan and

brought a new style of natural light painting. This was called the Purple School (after the purple colored shadows). In 1894, the Department of Western Painting was established for the first time at the Tokyo Fine Arts School, and Kuroda became its chief professor. Two years later, Lilla came to Japan, but Impressionism was still unknown in Japan. It was not until the 1900s that young artists and painters returned to Japan one after another with French Impressionism to promote it.

Lilla had already met Okakura Tenshin and Fenollosa in London 11 years earlier (in the summer of 1887), when they were traveling to Europe and the United States as members of the Ministry of Education's Art Interrogation Committee. Lilla's brother-in-law, La Farge, and Okakura Tenshin were friends. La Farge was a well-known painter in the United States. He was married to Lilla's husband Thomas' sister Margaret. In 1886, La Farge came to Japan and was taken care of by Tenshin Okakura, who was still young. His trip to Japan is described in "An Artist's Letters from Japan" (Gaka Touyuroku). Lilla took Okakura Tenshin and Fenollosa on a tour of the National Gallery in London. Lilla and Okakura agreed on the excellence of classical masterpieces, especially Rembrandt. Fenollosa was, in Thomas's opinion, a "fanatic" who regarded anything Western as inferior, and his personal life was full of scandal, which Lilla did not like.

That same year in Japan, Lilla, with the help of Okakura, had a solo exhibition in Tokyo. She also became an honorary member of the Japan Art Institute.

Lilla, accompanied by her maid, Tsune, often went out to sketch. Sometimes she would take one or two of her daughters with her, and sometimes she would be gone for weeks at a time. Monet advocated plein air painting, which means looking at things in the light outside and painting them. She painted many pictures of Mt. Fuji as seen from various locations, the coast of Kamakura, lotus ponds, and so on. As soon as Lilla set up her easel, people began to gather around her. In addition to being a rare foreigner, and a woman was painting a picture, the paints and drawing styles were new and unfamiliar to the Japanese. Impressionist pointillism must have come as a surprise to those accustomed to the line-oriented painting styles of Japanese-style paintings.

In a newspaper interview after returning to Boston, Lilla said: "You would be amazed to see the people collected to watch me work when I was painting out of doors [in Japan]. Once my daughter happened to turn around, and in her astonishment at the numbers counted them — and there were 62 gathered to watch! They seem much impressed with our different approach to the subject of the picture. Their painting is, of course, entirely conventional. But when they saw my painting, they exclaimed, 'very like, very like!'"

Fuji's clear shape and brilliance attracted Lilla to paint it many times. There are at least 35 paintings that were later exhibited. She painted the purple surface of the mountain, the beach, and the clouds hanging over the peak in different locations and at different times. On the coast of Kamakura, the sea seen through the pine trees is depicted.

The following year, around September of 1897, she often visited Oya near Kamakura, where her boldly shaped and colored paintings of lotus leaves filling the screen appeared, somewhat different from her previous style.

A letter written by Thomas at that time remains. “Lilla is hard at work as ever with her painting. Twice she has been to Oya, a station on the railway 1½ hours west of here. Leaving at 3:30 & back at 10, to paint lotus flowers there & she has finished two fine canvases. First she sent our ‘boy’ there to get some which we set up in our pad, but then she went to the place, tho’ the way is dull, the town hot, the crowd thick, and eagerly interested, her dinner what she could carry, her return late.”

Another painting titled “Japan” shows a row of graves surrounded by trees (figure below.) I first saw Lilla’s painting of these graves in an art book several years ago. In a book I casually picked up titled “Impressionism in America,” I was surprised to see a painting of what appeared to be a Japanese grave, painted in dotted strokes reminiscent of Monet’s brushstrokes. Then I started looking into Lilla’s paintings.

Lills also painted many portraits. Her portraits are not as impressionistic as her landscapes, but rather adopt a more classical style. Many of her paintings feature Japanese models, and Tsune was also placed in front of an easel for Lilla.

The “Girl with Mandarin Oranges” (below) depicts a Japanese girl, “In the Japanese Garden” shows a woman with a parasol squatting and looking at a pond from a bridge. “Visiting” depicts a Japanese lady entertaining a guest with tea.

Lilla constantly painted her daughters. Especially in the room when they were still small. She often painted his daughters playing and reading inside, and after going to France, she often painted his daughters outside in the light. One of the paintings she made after coming to Japan is

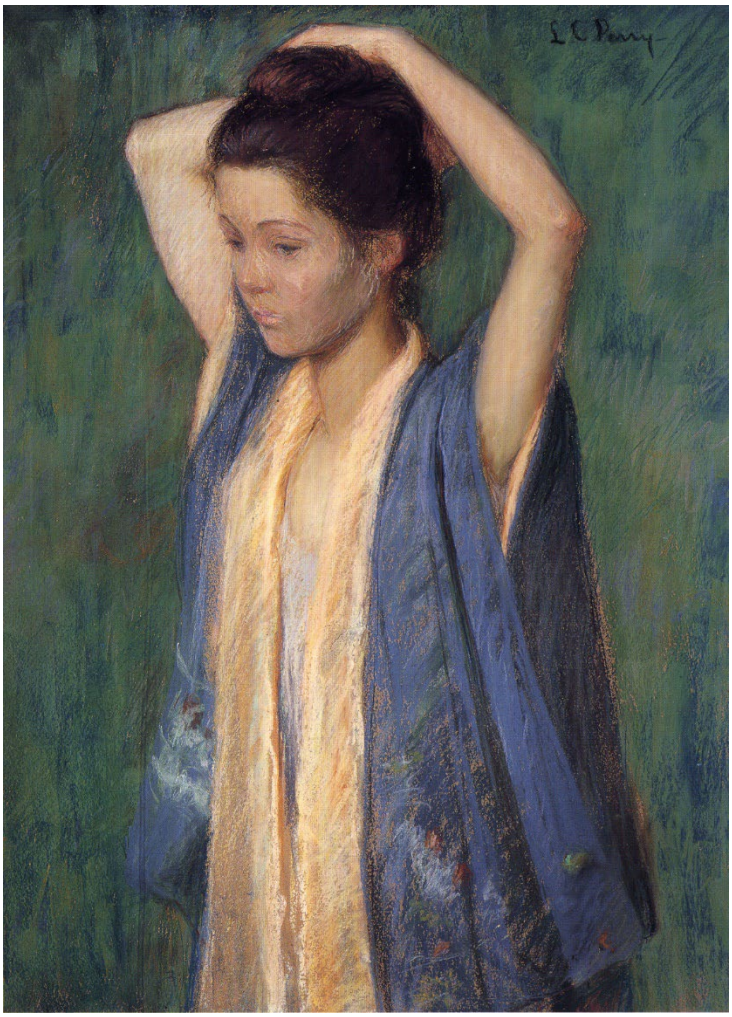
a “trio” of three daughters playing music indoors. Margaret plays the violin, Edith the cello, and Alice the piano.

The house she lived in Azabu at that time was Western-style on the outside but purely Japanese on the inside. The tatami mats were partially covered with a rug, and the guests wore shoes. Flowers were arranged in the tokonoma (alcove), and the three girls’ spring-colored clothes caught the light coming in. This is one of the few paintings that show all three girls together. The combination of the Japanese atmosphere and the three girls is interesting. The “home concerts” that the Perry family casually held in those days eventually became popular among foreigners living in Tokyo.

## Lilla and Pastel Painting

There remains a pastel painting titled “Girl in Kimono” painted in 1898 when Lilla arrived in Japan. (90 cm × 65 cm, shown below right) This is probably one of the earliest pastels painted in Japan. The painting was modeled after Alice, the third daughter, and is now owned by Alice’s daughter, Lilla Cabot Levitt. 14-year-old Alice is putting on a Japanese kimono and raising her hands above her head to style her hair (page 7). It is one of Lilla’s earliest pastel paintings.

In France, many pastel paintings by Degas were produced at that time, and his series of dancers are particularly famous. Mary Cassatt, an American who was a close friend of Degas, also left many pastel paintings of mothers and children. In Paris, Lilla and Mary Cassatt were friends and visited each other’s homes. One day, Lilla was introduced to a gray-haired woman at Mary Cassatt’s house. She was Berthe Morisot, Manet’s sister-in-law. She, too, was an Impressionist painter and an excellent oil painter, and also did pastel painting. Monet also highly appreciated her



and displayed her works in his home. Perhaps it was this association that sparked Lilla's interest in pastel painting.

Lilla did not paint as much in pastel as she did in oil, but she did paint "Alice with the White Hat" and "White Bed Jacket" when she returned to Boston, and a series of pastel paintings including "Spring Landscape" when she went back to France.

In June of 1901, Lilla spent the last month before leaving Japan by the sea in Kamakura. Every day she set up her easel and worked on her canvas. Although she stayed in Japan for only three years, her impression of Japan was strong and remained fresh in her mind for the rest of her life.

In a later letter to his granddaughter Elizabeth Grew, she wrote: "Remember when you go to a country, try to plunge into the inner life of the country and to really know the people and their point of life, their ambitions, ideals, etc. I know the French as if I had made them, and the Japanese far better than [Mrs. L] who lived there 38 years."

The mother of this Elizabeth and the aforementioned Lilla Cabot Levitt was Lilla's third daughter, Alice. As an aside, after leaving Japan and returning to Boston, Alice married a young diplomat, Joseph Clark Grew. In 1931, Mr. Grew became Ambassador to Japan, and Alice

stepped on Japanese soil again for the first time in 30 years. The first thing she did when she returned as the ambassador's wife was to find her old maid, Tsune, who was so happy to see her again that she had tears in her eyes.

At age 83, two years before her death, Lilla was very happy to see her daughters and their families living in her beloved Japan.

## Lilla in her later years

The Perry family returned to Boston in 1901, but four years later left again for France. Thomas had a library job in Boston, but it was largely unpaid, and they found it hard to make ends meet on the interest from his assets, so he increasingly relied on his income from Lilla's portraits. The cost of living in France was not as high as in Boston, which made it convenient for them to live there, and they lived there for four years from 1905 to 1909, spending the summers again in Giverny. Monet welcomed the family warmly, and Lilla devoted herself to her work in nature.

In 1909, she left Paris with the intention of returning to France someday, but she never went back.

In 1920, at the age of 72, Lilla was honored by the Boston Art Guild for her many years of achievement. The family was still dependent on Lilla's income, and at this time Lilla was working on many portraits. In one day as many as four clients came in, pausing for two hours at a time to paint without a break, sometimes completing as many as 13 portraits in 13 weeks.

She had solo exhibitions in New York in 1922 (age 74) and in Washington, D.C. in 1927 (age 79), where she was well received.

In her later years, she spent much of her time on a farm she purchased in Hancock, New Hampshire. Immersed in the beauty of nature, she loved to paint the mountains in the fall and snowy landscapes in the winter. She loved the changing colors at dawn and around 4 p.m., especially the time when the snow and trees turn pink and blend into the deep blue after sunset.

In the year of her 78th birthday (1926), news of Monet's death came from France. Two years later, her husband of 54 years, Thomas, also died, and Lilla was devastated.

Lilla died on February 28, 1933. She was 85 years old. She painted to last day of her life. She was working on a large canvas portraying a snowy mountain landscape.

Lilla's work is included in the Claude Monet Foundation in France, the Terra Museum of American Art in Chicago, and The National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C.

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