

*Annie Gooding Sykes*  
*Watercolors*

AG Sykes





# *Annie Gooding Sykes*

## *Watercolors*

July 12 - August 4, 2012

Lisa N. Peters

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## *Through a Watercolor Lens*

Beginning her career in the 1870s, Annie Gooding Sykes (1855-1931) (Fig. 1) belonged to an era when art was one of the few means by which American women could enter the workforce.<sup>1</sup> To some extent this was due to the recognition that the crafts women had traditionally created within the home could be produced for the marketplace, spawning the design reform efforts often spearheaded by women.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, art schools hastened women's prospects by offering them instruction on par with that given to men. Indeed, scores of women entered the art academies of the day, where they took advantage of the chance to study with noted teachers and even to render the figure from life. In 1880, *Art Amateur* reported that in the principal art schools of New York, "ladies are in the majority, and their work is equal in every respect to that of the male students."<sup>3</sup>

The *Art Union* pronounced in 1885: "The steadily increasing importance of woman as worker in the higher fields of art is one of the most encouraging signs of the time."<sup>4</sup> In 1890, eighty-two



Fig. 1. Annie Sykes, ca. 1882, Sykes Family Papers



Fig. 2. Annie Sykes, ca. 1890s, Sykes Family Papers

percent of the art students at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, were women, and by 1894, Elizabeth Champney stated in an article entitled “Women in Art” that women had “won the right to be considered seriously.”<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, many women left their ambitions behind when they married; others did not rise above amateur status. Although women artists did not receive the notoriety achieved by the prominent male artists of the day, some, like Sykes and the circle of women artists in Cincinnati to which she belonged, represent a select group of women who not only worked with rigor and dedication, but also had talent and vision.

Sykes occasionally created oils, but watercolor was her favorite means of expression. In this choice, she demonstrated her commitment

to an impressionist art, as she took advantage of the medium’s spontaneity and transportable nature to record her direct responses to her surroundings and to capture effects of light and air. She used watercolor with considerable versatility, exploiting its inherent transparency, while often allowing the underlying ground to emerge in her compositions, to bring to them a sense of light. In a sketchbook of 1893, she provided a key to her process, writing: “work with full brush in water color, water plenty warm colors sunshiny . . . go for tones and values—not regarding much detail.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Sykes’s association with impressionism during the period when it was just beginning to become prevalent in America was acknowledged in 1895. A critic reviewing her first solo exhibition, held that year at Traxel & Maas Gallery in Cincinnati, remarked that her work had attracted “considerable attention, as it represents the new school of impressionism.”<sup>7</sup>

With their exuberant and dense surfaces, Sykes’s watercolors suggests the joy she felt in the world around her. As a memorial article on her art in a Cincinnati newspaper observed in 1931: “her landscapes, brushed in in exquisite liquid color



with her delightful impressionistic wash stroke, were always . . . seemingly bathed in fresh sunshine.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, her images are a window into her era. She was an astute observer of the people and places within her frame of reference. Often depicting them from the standpoint of a spectator watching from the sidelines, she recorded the life that passed by her with a certain detachment. This was perhaps due to her status as a female artist, which set her apart from most of the women of her day who did not rise to her professional stature.

The third of six children, Annie Sullings Gooding was born on January 24, 1855, in Brookline, Massachusetts, to Josiah and Anna Gooding. She grew up in a well-to-do household in Boston, and her family provided an environment conducive to her future career. Her father (a direct descendant of two passengers on the Mayflower) was a silversmith and engraver. Her mother was a seamstress. Her brother Theo built a notable collection of Asian art. Annie began sketching in her teens, and in about 1875, she entered Boston’s Lowell Institute. The school offered free drawing classes in which students sketched from live models and actual objects rather than copying “from the flat”—as was the practice in many art schools of the time. Although Annie’s classes presumably consisted just of women, it is interesting to note that her years at the institute overlapped with those of Thomas Dewing, Willard Metcalf, and Childe Hassam. In 1878, she transferred to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, which had begun holding classes only the year



Fig. 3. *Three Rowboats*, 1890s, watercolor on paper, 11-1/2 x 18-1/2 inches



before. The same instruction was given at the school to male and female students alike, consisting primarily of drawing from casts and from life.

In June of 1882, Annie married Gerrit Smith Sykes, who had been a classmate of her brother Alfred's at Harvard University. Gerrit Sykes, along with another Harvard classmate, had started The Franklin School, a boys' prep school in Cincinnati, the year before. At the school, which remained in operation until 1926, Gerrit taught math and Greek in addition to acting as principal. It was in Cincinnati that Annie began her married life and established her career. Leaving Boston's rich cultural context behind might have been difficult for her, but Cincinnati had much to offer as it was a bustling city with its own illustrious art tradition.<sup>9</sup> At the time of Sykes's arrival, the main art school was the McMicken School of Design, which became the Cincinnati Art Academy in 1887. Sykes attended the school from

1884 through 1894.

Among her teachers were Thomas Satterwhite Noble, a conservative painter of historical scenes and portraits who headed the school, and Frank Duveneck (Fig. 4) who, having trained in Munich and painted in Europe before returning to Cincinnati in 1890, represented the progressive wing of the city's art scene. Sykes's painterly method and animated, textural surfaces reflect Duveneck's influence on her.



Fig. 4. Frank Duveneck with students, Frank and Elizabeth Boott, Duveneck Papers, 1851-1972, box 1, folder 34, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

In a letter of 1891, her sister Milly wrote home that Duveneck was commencing to be "very encouraging" to Annie and that his opinion mattered a great deal, by contrast with Noble, who was "rather inclined to praise too much."<sup>10</sup>

Sykes gave birth to two daughters, Milly in 1885, and Anne Christine, in 1888. In the years ahead, she continued to advance her career while raising her family.



Among the advantages for Sykes of life in Cincinnati was the supportive community of women artists with whom she found camaraderie. Including many serious-minded artists, this group played an important and active role in the art life of the city. In 1887, Sykes became a member of Rookwood Pottery (Fig. 5), started by Maria Longworth Nichols Storer in 1880.<sup>11</sup> However, after three years, Sykes chose to focus her energies on her own art rather than on painting china. Shortly after moving to Cincinnati, she established a close friendship with Elizabeth Nourse; they remained in contact after Nourse moved to Paris in 1887. In 1892, Sykes became a charter member of the Woman's Art Club of Cincinnati, established "to stimulate its members to greater effort in their work and to increase a general interest in art."<sup>12</sup> Among Sykes's friends in this organization were Dixie Selden, Christine Bredin, Henrietta Wilson, Emma Mendenhall, Caroline Lord (a teacher at the art academy), and Mary Spencer (founder of the club), all of whom, like Sykes, were unwavering in their dedication to their careers. Sykes served as the club's vice president in 1903.

Sykes actively exhibited her art throughout her life. She showed locally at the Cincinnati Art Museum (including a two-person exhibition with Mendenhall in 1908 and a three-person exhibition with Selden and Mendenhall in 1910), Closson's Gallery, the Woman's Art Club, Traxel & Maas Gallery (including solo exhibitions in 1895, probably in 1898, and in 1917), and the Ohio Water Color Society. She also sent her work to exhibitions at Fifth Avenue Galleries, New York; the New York Water Color Club; the American Watercolor Society, New York; the Boston Art Club; the Art Institute of Chicago; and the Philadelphia Water Color Club.



Fig. 5. Photograph from "Where Rookwood Pottery is made," *National Magazine* 21 (October 1905).





Fig. 6. *Afternoon Tea Party*, ca. 1900, watercolor and gouache on paper, 21-1/2 x 17 inches

Sykes's use of watercolor as a means of observing the world around her can be seen in *Afternoon Tea Party* (Fig. 6). The young woman depicted is probably a visitor, as she wears a hat and balances a teacup politely in her hand. Her frontal gaze suggests that she has been asked to hold still so that the artist could capture her image. Indeed, Sykes depicted the figure as an artistic form among the other objects in the room. We may guess that the scene represents Sykes's home; the Japanese print on the wall, the painted screen, and the blue-and-white porcelain on the table suggest that she shared an interest in Asian art with her brother Theo. In Boston, she would also have had exposure to the Japanese art collected by Ernest Fenollosa, who became curator of the department of Oriental art at the Museum of Fine Arts in 1890. Sykes treated the figure's dress as a pattern of dabs of color, demonstrating her greater interest in the aesthetic qualities of her subjects than in their details.

In the late 1890s, Annie and Gerrit Sykes moved from their home on Woodburn Avenue in East Walnut Hills to a house they built in the Italian



Fig. 7. Home of Annie and Gerrit Sykes, Vernon Place, Cincinnati, Sykes Family Papers



Renaissance style on Vernon Place in the Clifton Heights neighborhood (Fig.7). In their new home, Annie's studio occupied most of the third floor, while she transformed the backyard of the house into a lush and abundant garden. She had drawn and painted flowers since her youth—among her first exhibited works was an image of wild roses she showed at the Cincinnati Industrial Exposition in 1883—but her own garden also spurred her efforts in the rendering of floral scenes. An article stated in 1931 that Sykes “saw beauty in the world of flowers and gardens.”<sup>13</sup> Her approach may be seen in *Foxgloves and Dablias* (Fig. 8), in which she used a still life subject of flowers on her Vernon porch patio as a means of studying coloristic and atmospheric relationships, while creating an overall design. Throughout she used watercolor's translucency and delicate tonalities to create a glowing ambience expressive of her pleasure in flowers within the context of her home.

Sykes's depictions of flowers growing freely in the outdoors have often been compared with the watercolors created by Childe Hassam of Celia Thaxter's garden on Appledore Island, from 1890 to 1894. Like Hassam, Sykes frequently positioned the viewer in the midst of a garden's blossoms, focusing on the movements and patterns of their shapes and colors. In *Foxgloves* (Fig. 9), she applied her paint sparingly so that



Fig. 8. *Foxgloves and Dablias*, 1900s, watercolor on paper, 22-1/4 x 17 inches



Fig. 9. *Foxgloves*, ca. 1900s, watercolor on paper, 20 x 13-3/8 inches

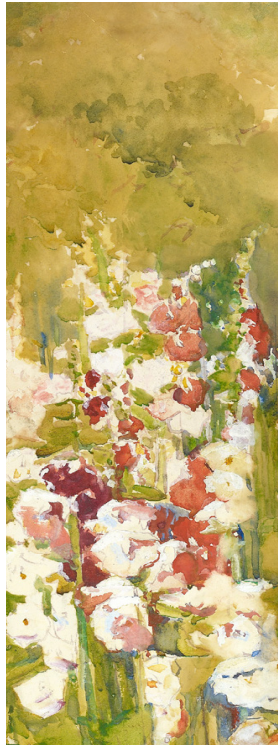


Fig. 10. *Hollyhocks*, ca. 1900, watercolor on paper, 21 x 6-3/4 inches



Fig. 11. *Backyard Flower Garden*, ca. 1910, watercolor on paper, 19-3/4 x 14 inches

the white ground tone, emergent throughout, serves as a luminous atmospheric setting rather than as a background. She conveyed the essence of her subject by omitting detail so as to emphasize the melodic rhythms of the lavender and mauve flowers—the shape of foxgloves has been associated with fingers and bells. In *Hollyhocks* (Fig. 10) she used a vertical Japanese “pillar” print format to express the nature of flowers that can rise as high as ten feet. Setting the white and red stalks against a background rendered with loose washes of pale green, she brought out the commanding and elegant qualities of these standbys of the old-fashioned garden, perhaps unconsciously representing her own character in her depiction. In many works, she combined images of flowers with domestic settings, expressing the idea prevalent in a time of dramatic industrial growth that the home was a place in which to reestablish a lost connection with nature (Fig. 11).

This was especially felt in Cincinnati which, in the late nineteenth century was notorious for being overbuilt and overcrowded, an aspect of the city that Sykes





Fig. 12. *Mount Adams*, 1890s, watercolor on paper, 21-1/8 x 13 inches

conveyed in *Mount Adams* (Fig. 12), where she showed the narrow buildings typical of the city stacked tightly against a steep hillside. Using a high horizon line, Sykes effectively flattened the composition, so that our gaze is drawn upward over the picture plane. Her choice of a vertical format and her placement of tall trees in foreground enhance this effect, as does her unified palette of lavenders and pale greens. At the center of the work is the track of the Mt. Adams Incline, one of the funiculars built in Cincinnati in the 1870s to ease the city's congestion by providing new access to suburban neighborhoods in the hills. Depicting structures beyond the hillcrest, Sykes revealed this extension of the city into its outlying areas.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, in *Ohio River* (Fig. 13), she



Fig. 13. *Ohio River*, 1900s, watercolor on paper, 14-3/4 x 20-3/4 inches

captured an unspoiled spot along the Ohio River. By broadly positioning a house—consisting of two conjoined buildings, a backyard garden, and a view of the river—within the composition, she conveyed the sense of peaceful contentment and security that this scene evoked.

Cincinnati was also infamous for its poor air quality, a result of the bituminous coal used to heat homes as well as the dramatic spread of industrial manufactures along the river and in the hills. Among the means the city sought to provide relief was its park system, including the establishment of Burnet Woods. On the model of Central and Prospect Parks in New York City, this urban park was begun in 1872 and completed in the years that followed. It was situated about a mile from Sykes's home on Vernon Place, and she depicted this leafy refuge often. While the land within Burnet Woods was cultivated to accommodate visitors—with pathways, an artificial lake, and areas for picnicking—its lush natural landscape was left largely intact. In her depictions, Sykes captured the artistic possibilities of the park, portraying groupings of women and children under forested canopies. Using dabs of loose color, she created decorative two-dimensional designs in the manner of Maurice Prendergast's images of Central Park. Like Prendergast, through generalizing her subjects, she was able to focus on matters of pose and gesture, observing the social attitudes and manners of her time. In *Mothers and Children, Burnet Woods* (Fig. 14), she depicted well-dressed children who stand still before their mothers as if waiting to be given direction, while the women sit or stroll in groups, yet do not seem to communicate with each other. In her image,



Fig. 14. *Mothers and Children, Burnet Woods, Cincinnati*, 1910s, watercolor on paper, 16 x 21 inches





Fig. 15. *Woman Reading under a Tree*, 1890s, watercolor on paper, 15-1/2 x 11-1/4 inches

Sykes subtly conveys a certain inactivity and lassitude on the part of the parkgoers. Her viewpoint, in which she observes the scene from a short distance away, suggests her familiarity with the lives of these women and as well as her feeling of being separate from them, perhaps due to her role as a working artist. In *Woman Reading under a Tree* (Fig. 15), she reflects on another side of the lives of women, for whom reading was a means of gaining enlightenment and a broadening experience. Sykes captures the contentment of this activity through her composition, in which the tree protects the figure and echoes her form. Using a flowing brushwork to describe both the figure and the tree, Sykes furthers this sense of the combined pleasure of engaging in a book and delighting in the outdoors.

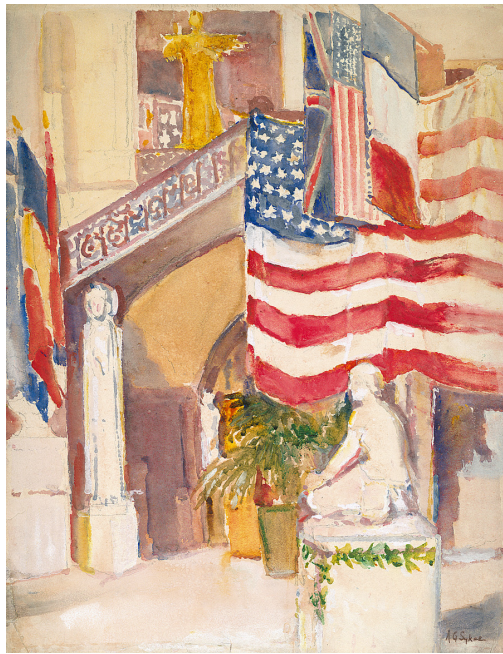


Fig. 16. *Art Museum, Cincinnati*, ca. 1918, watercolor on paper, 22-1/4 x 17-1/8 inches

Sykes's move to Cincinnati coincided with the period in which the Cincinnati Art Museum was being completed. Founded in 1881, it was opened to the public in Eden Park five years later. Sykes's practice of chronicling the world she experienced naturally included the museum, where she exhibited frequently.<sup>15</sup> In *Art Museum, Cincinnati* (Fig. 16), her subject is the Great Hall, looking north through the ground floor of the Schindlapp Wing. The flags in the image—those of America, Great Britain, and France, and others—indicate that the painting dates from the time of Armistice during World War I. This image and others by Sykes of flags at the museum can be associated with the nationalistic paintings created at the time by Childe Hassam, depicting flags draping buildings on New York's Fifth Avenue,

as well as by other artists including Theodore Butler and Hayley Lever. Uniting the flag with the skyscraper, Hassam expressed a patriotic message about the nation's technological and military superiority. Sykes's awareness of how the patriotic mood of the time entered into all aspects of American life is reflected in her image. She captured the way that the flags—rendered in broad washes of color—create a lively, festive air within the austere space of the museum.

While Sykes delighted in recording her life and experiences in Cincinnati, she also portrayed the many places she vacationed and traveled. She often visited her mother (her father passed away in 1879) in the coastal town of Nonquitt, Massachusetts.<sup>16</sup> Other Massachusetts coastal locales where she worked were Gloucester, New Bedford, Plymouth, and Quincy. On these trips, as well as while staying in Cape Porpoise, Maine, after 1902, she frequently depicted boats and harbors. As was the case for other watercolorists, she was spurred by this subject to explore the range and possibilities of her medium. In *Harbor Scene* (Fig. 17), she used a blend of transparent and opaque methods, conveying atmospheric and sunlit effects on water, boats, and buildings along the shore. She incorporated the work's tan-colored paper as a unifying tone throughout the composition. In *Sailboat with Semaphore Flags* (Fig. 18), she rendered the signal flags adorning a boat in the foreground



Fig. 17. *Harbor Scene*, ca. 1905–10, watercolor on paper, 17-1/4 x 22-1/4 inches



Fig. 18. *Sailboat with Semaphore Flags*, ca. 1905, watercolor on paper, 21 x 15 inches



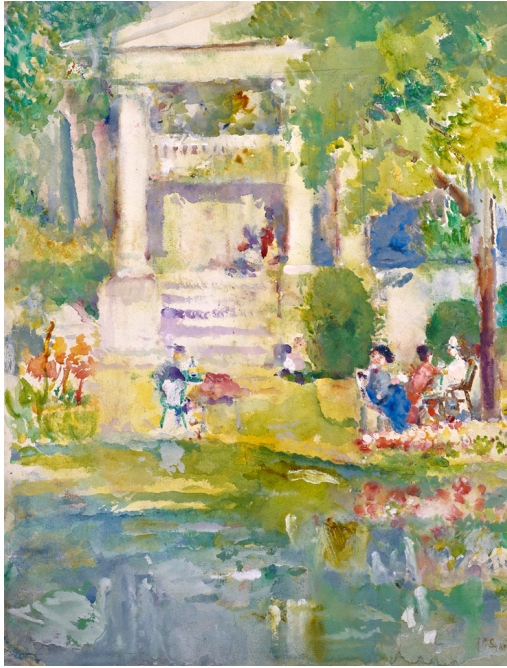


Fig. 19. *By a Reflecting Pond*, 1910s, watercolor on paper, 22 x 17-1/2 inches



Fig. 20. *Bermuda Town*, 1913, watercolor on paper, 22 x 15-3/8 inches

with crisp pure dots of color, their vibrancy made apparent by a contrast with the shoreline, which she painted with a tonal palette, blending together the shapes of buildings and hills. In *By a Reflecting Pond* (Fig. 19), Sykes captured the feeling of a summer afternoon at a resort or vacation home. Lounging on the grounds of a stately white house, figures relax beside a pond and enjoy the sun-dappled effects of light across the surface of the water. Sykes's vantage point from across the pond suggests her presence as an onlooker, enjoying the totality of the experience.

On a trip to Bermuda in 1913, Sykes's mastery of watercolor is apparent as she contrasted the solidity of the white houses of a town with the transparency of the water and sky. She let the white reserve of the paper remain present in the buildings to create a high degree of luminosity expressive of sunlight reflecting in the sun-bleached walls. Her awareness of the movement of the viewer's eye in the composition is demonstrated in her use of the diagonals of the rooftops to direct our gaze upward through the scene to the solitary tower that creates a culmination point.

Other places that Sykes worked include Texas, which she visited in 1902; Europe, where she traveled in 1906 and 1909; Williamsburg, Virginia, where she made a trip in about 1918; Ithaca, New York, where she visited the family of her daughter Anne Christine from 1920 through 1925, while her son in law was teaching at Cornell University; and

Barnston, Québec, where she spent the summer in 1928.

Despite ill health in her later years, Sykes worked until her death in Cincinnati in 1931; as noted in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*: “Mrs. Sykes worked up to the end, even when she was physically unable to do so. Her devotion to the art was one of the beautiful things in her eventful life.”<sup>17</sup>

Lisa N. Peters

1. Sykes’s art and career were brought to light in the exhibition *Annie Gooding Sykes (1855-1931): An American Watercolorist Rediscovered*, held at Spanierman Gallery in 1998. The show was accompanied by a catalogue, including a foreword by the artist’s granddaughter Christine Ayoub, an introduction by William H. Gerds, and an essay by Peter Hastings Falk and Audrey Lewis. A further source on Sykes is a biographical pamphlet written in the 1990s by Ayoub entitled “A Tribute to My Grandmother, Annie Gooding Sykes.”

2. A discussion of this topic in the context of Cincinnati is: Kenneth R. Trapp, “Toward a Correct Taste: Women and the Rise of the Design Reform Movement in Cincinnati, 1874–1880,” in Kenneth R. Trapp, ed., *Celebrate Cincinnati Art* (Cincinnati Art Museum, 1982), 49–70.

3. “Some Lady Artists of New York,” *Art Amateur* 3 (July 1880), 27.

4. “Women Who Paint,” *Art Union* (October 1885), 67.

5. *Boston Traveller*, September 3, 1889, Scrapbook Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, cited in Erica E. Hirshler, *A Studio of Her Own: Women Artists in Boston, 1870–1940* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2001), 91; Elizabeth W. Champney, *Quarterly Illustrator* 2 (April–June 1894), 111.

6. Cited in Ayoub, “A Tribute to My Grandmother,” [add page].

7. “For Woman’s Eyes,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 5 December 1895, p. 4.

8. Spring 1931 review of Ohio Water Color Society exhibition, held at the Cincinnati Art Museum, 1931. Cincinnati Art Museum Library Archives. [please check how to cite this]

9. Sources on art in Cincinnati include Denny Carter, *The Golden Age: Cincinnati Painters of the Nineteenth Century Represented in the Cincinnati Art Museum*, exh. cat. (Cincinnati Art Museum, 1979); Francis C. Sessions, “Art and Artists in Ohio,” *National Magazine of Western History* (June 1886), 152–66; and William H. Gerds, *Art Across America* [add rest of citation]

10. Cited in Ayoub, “A Tribute to My Grandmother,” [add page]

11. For an article from the era, see “Where Rookwood Pottery is Made,” *National Magazine* 21 (October 1905). See also Kirsten H. Keen, “Rookwood Pottery at the Turn of the Century: Continuity and Change,” in Trapp, ed., *Celebrate Cincinnati Art*, 71–87.

12. Cited in <http://www.womansartclub.com/woman-s-art-club-of-cincinnati/about-the-club.html>, retrieved June 24, 2012.

13. Spring 1931 review of Ohio Water Color Society exhibition.

14. The outward expansion of the city may have been among the reasons that the Sykes family moved away from East Walnut Hills where, after cable cars replaced horse-drawn transport in the mid-1880s, developers built inexpensive homes to accommodate the middle-income families that settled in the neighborhood. Woodburn Avenue, NBD Historic District, Designation Report, 2005. [http://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/cdap/downloads/cdap\\_pdf12168.pdf](http://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/cdap/downloads/cdap_pdf12168.pdf), retrieved June 21, 2012.

15. Sykes exhibited forty-two times at the Cincinnati Art Museum. Noted by Cathy G. Shaffer, Librarian, Cincinnati Art Museum, to Christine Ayoub, letter, 1992.

16. Sykes’s mother passed away in 1919.

17. Spring 1931 review of Ohio Water Color Society exhibition.



Fig. 21. *Bird by a Pond*, 1900s, watercolor on paper, 19-3/4 x 15-1/2 inches



## Checklist of the Exhibition

*Afternoon Tea Party*, ca. 1900  
Watercolor and gouache on paper  
21-1/2 x 17 inches  
Signed lower left: *AG Sykes*

*Art Museum, Cincinnati*, ca. 1918  
Watercolor on paper  
22-1/4 x 17-1/8 inches  
Signed lower right: *AG Sykes*  
Inscribed upper center: *ART MUSEUM CIN-  
CINNATI*

*Bermuda Town*, 1913  
Watercolor on paper  
22 x 15-3/8 inches  
Dated and inscribed on verso: *Bermuda / 1913 /  
Bermuda*

*Bird by a Pond*, 1900s  
Watercolor on paper  
19-3/4 x 15-1/2 inches  
Signed lower left: *AG Sykes*

*By a Reflecting Pond*, 1910s  
Watercolor on paper  
22 x 17-1/2 inches  
Signed lower right: *AG Sykes*

*Foxgloves*, ca. 1900s  
Watercolor on paper  
20 x 13-3/8 inches  
Signed lower right: *AG Sykes*

*Harbor Scene*, ca. 1905–10  
Watercolor on paper  
17-1/4 x 22-1/4 inches

*Hollyhocks*, ca. 1900  
Watercolor on paper  
21 x 6-3/4 inches  
Signed lower right: *AG Sykes*

*Mothers and Children, Burnet Woods, Cincinnati*,  
1910s  
Watercolor on paper  
16 x 21 inches  
Signed lower left: *AG Sykes*  
Inscribed on verso: *Burnet Woods*

*Mount Adams*, 1890s  
Watercolor on paper  
21-1/8 x 13 inches  
Signed lower right: *AG Sykes*  
Signed and inscribed on verso: *Mt. Adams / Mrs.  
Sykes*

*Ohio River*, 1900s  
Watercolor on paper  
14-3/4 x 20-3/4 inches  
Inscribed on verso: *OHIO RIVER*

*Sailboat with Semaphore Flags*, ca. 1905  
Watercolor on paper  
21 x 15 inches  
Signed lower left: *AG Sykes*

*Three Rowboats*, 1890s  
Watercolor on paper  
11-1/2 x 18-1/2 inches  
Signed lower right: *AG Sykes*

*Foxgloves and Dahlias*, 1900s  
Watercolor on paper  
22-1/4 x 17 inches  
Signed lower right: *AG Sykes*  
Inscribed on verso: *Return Mrs Sykes / Cincinnati  
/ On the porch / Y[illeg.] Place*

*Woman Reading under a Tree*, 1890s  
Watercolor on paper  
15-1/2 x 11-1/4 inches



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