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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ WOMEN'S STUDIES

Selected Letters of Anna Heyward Taylor: South Carolina Artist and World Traveler

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A visual artist is typically defined by his or her artwork, not by the confidential words penned to family and friends during quiet moments. While a canvas is intended for the public, a letter is a reflection of the private self, shared only with those closest to the writer. Many interesting individuals in creative professions, however, have corresponded with a select group of confidantes rather than keeping a journal, often depending on the recipients to preserve these exhaustive papers for posterity to learn from and enjoy.

This is the case with Anna Heyward Taylor (1879-1956), a South Carolina artist known for her naturalistic watercolors and innovative printmaking. In this fascinating compilation, the woman behind the paintbrush emerges. This early feminist thrived in an independent, free-spirited environment of her own, never succumbing to the traditional expectations upheld by the social order of her time. Like many talented intellectuals, her priorities weren't centered on conventions that her contemporaries focused on without question, such as marriage and childbearing. During the early decades of the twentieth century, the period in which she was most active, society struggled with musty Victorian morals left over from the late 1800s and gave rise to the flappers, a gutsy group of women asserting their equality to men. Taylor's outstanding artistic achievements went into the annals of history and made her a prominent figure in the Charleston Renaissance.

The artist honed her skills under the tutelage of William Merritt Chase, an American painter and teacher. She began working with him in 1900 at his New York School of Art. Throughout her productive life, she traveled extensively, inspired by the beautiful flora and fauna in tropical locales and soaking up the history and sophistication of Europe. The Orient gave her a new cultural perspective, infusing her work with a rich Asian essence. Taylor's only adherence to established custom manifested itself during World War I when she served with the American Red Cross, forsaking her career for a higher purpose.

Edited by Edmund R. Taylor, the nephew of Anna Heyward Taylor, and Alexander Moore, a historian, this absorbing collection of letters gives the reader a behind-the-scenes look at a world-renowned artist as she grows and thrives. Her candid impressions of other artists and natives of the lands she visits, along with details of the activities that fill her days of work and leisure, will allow the art enthusiast to see her famous canvases from an authentic, privileged perspective.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (January 13, 2011)

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