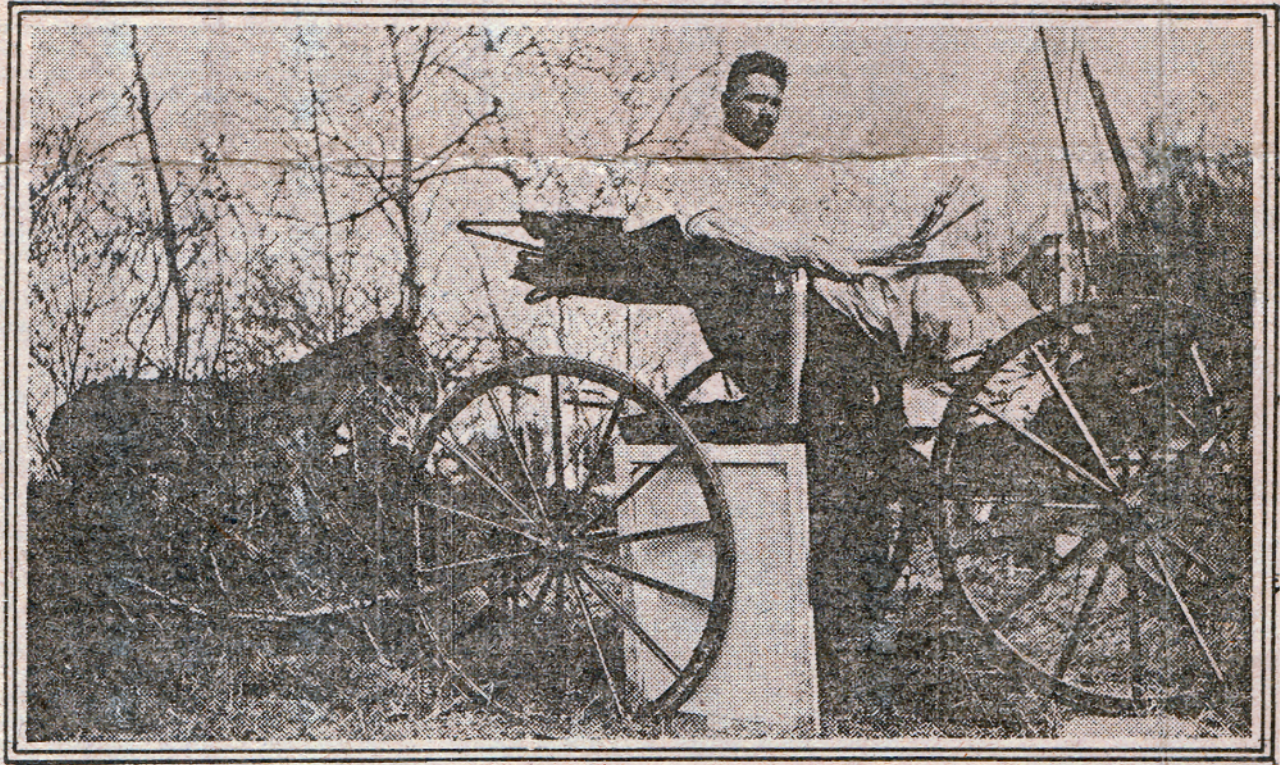


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From Engineer to Artist Perforce



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Though Under a Picturesque Handicap, Robert Strong Woodward's Courage Is Leading Him Along the Road to Fame and Honor

By Margaret C. Getchell

FROM the hills of Shelburne are coming paintings which in three short years have been growing more and more conspicuous, one of them winning the first Hallgarten prize at the National Academy, another being awarded the only honorable mention for painting at the recent Concord Art Association show, and, others gaining increasing interest at exhibits. Whence come these paintings, and why does the artist, who signs himself Robert Strong Woodward, never appear at the art centres?

In the answer to that simple question lies a story. For Mr. Woodward, through an accident, while hunting at the age of twenty-one, became paralyzed from the waist down. He is barred from the world at present because he wants his pictures to speak for him, as the work of a man who is mentally and spiritually virile. He fears that if he himself should appear at the galleries where they are shown, a sentimental interest might be awakened in

his work; and he wants no such superficial interest, but rather desires his power as an artist to be the foundation for the reputation which he is so rapidly building. And so, in the review of the New York and other newspapers when he was awarded the first Hallgarten prize in 1919, an honor which indicates that the artist under thirty-five years of age who has won it has "arrived," no word appeared, by his request, of the circumstances under which he works and which make him, humanly speaking, one of the most interesting figures in the art world of America.

It was only when an admirer of those strong, poetic, colorful paintings of the Shelburne hills went up into their midst to see them and the man who paints them, that the true meaning of his non-appearance in the studios and galleries of the cities became apparent. And then it was quickly forgotten, because Mr. Woodward has so strong and interesting a personality that it compels attention to be centered upon the man, his ideas and ideals, his hopes and aspirations, his achievements and his plan's, rather than upon that physical disability which compels him to spend his life in a wheelchair and phaeton.

The Artist as Host!

A day at Shelburne Falls and among its hills with Mr. Woodward is a day to be remembered always, for it brings that rare combination of communion with nature in one of the most beautiful moods which she assumes in New England, and contact with a man who makes an art of living as well as of painting.

If you are fortunate enough to be insured a welcome to his home and studio, he meets you at the station in his phaeton, drawn by his high-spirited horse, Thomas `a Kempis. Mr. Woodward is alone and drives. He is thirty-five years, old, of splendid physique with the frank eyes and modelled features which nature should endow all artists in whom she has inculcated a love of beauty. In the phaeton with Mr. Woodward, you drive away and are soon, lost in the hills, leaving civilization behind as Thomas `a Kempis takes you along the winding roads. It is as it should be that you ride behind Thomas, with the clack of his shoes on the hard road the only sound, instead of the noisy steel horses, heartless beasts more suited to the grimy city.

The hills are very lovely, even in November. Say "even in November" to Mr. Woodward, and he will expostulate. He loves November as it touches his hills, and thinks it is a much-abused month, for it brings many a scene which invites the artist's eye as forcefully by its very wistfulness, as does the frisky joy of the springtime, or the quiet peace of winter's snow-bound fields, or the hilarity of the gay-colored autumn. As he talks, you, too, begin to feel the power of these hills, which is one of the strongest things in his life. "I was born here in Shelburne Falls," he explains, "and although while I was a boy I had no home, for my father was traveling and we would go with him, settling for a few months in one city and then in another, still we always came to Shelburne in the summer. So, when I found that I must select one place to live in all the time, I came back to my boyhood home.

Shelburne vs. California

"I was then in California, where my father and mother still are. I like California, and found it paintable to a certain extent, not in the "season" there, in the winter when everything is fresh, but in the summer, when everything is dried and the colors become

beautiful. I do not know why more artists have not found their subjects there. Perhaps because it is too big; perhaps because there is something languid about it. But I could not paint in California all the year-round, while here in Shelburne there is fresh inspiration each month. I can't tell you how strongly I feel about the hills. I have lived here so much and have grown to love them so that it seems as though I had almost become a part of them. They have so much to say to me, that I want to express it to the world. They seem even more paintable than large mountains: there is something so intimate about them." Ashe talks, you are gradually driving away from the village and into the heart of the hills. He promises that someday he will take you out of the valley and upon those higher places where nature seems near and civilization remote. Then you come upon a white house which was his grandfather's, and beyond it the home of his uncle, who is a forester and keeps the observation tower on the top of one of the highest hills.

Between his uncle's house and the woods is his little red studio, formerly the milk house. It is a quaint place, which started as little more than a shed, and has gradually sprouted here addition for his kitchen, and there another addition to house the piano which was given him by a friend. Even the front door is in a corner, and before it hangs a welcoming lantern. You pass by without entering, to visit first the little white farmhouse beyond, in which he makes his home. The trained nurse, who is now serving also as housekeeper takes you in by the back door, in proper country style, and in the low-ceilinged rooms you see a wealth of old-fashioned things which invite you to linger over the pewter and old glass, the quaint furniture and bric-a-brac. But you are here to visit the artist, rather than the man, so you return to the studio, where the hired man is waiting for Thomas a Kempis and his master.

In the Studio [page clipped too much] ...you glance around at the many interesting things which bespeak the personality of its owner, your eye is drawn towards the window and the beautiful view of the winter woods without. The window is between the bookcases. In the foreground of the bit of nature which it frames is a brook, frozen in winter, rushing over the pebbles in spring, sluggish in summer. The rest of the picture consists mainly of the trunks of the trees, with their many colors subdued in the November light.

Yet, when the fire is lighted in the little stove, the bookcase and the great wide divan invite you to come back indoors. You cast your eye over the books, for in the titles alone may be glimpsed another note in the personality of the man who is your host. The old poets are there— Wordsworth, Browning, and a gilt-edged, hand-tooled, and hand-bound copy of Keats's letters. Why is it that Keats must always be edged with gilt?

And there are books on art, in which this artist, hungry for contact with others of the same profession must find nearly the only avenue of communication open to him. There are new books, coming from his friends, and out books which he picked up in his boyhood in second-hand book-stores.

In another corner is the piano with Beethoven and Chopin waiting to be played. There is no piano stool, as the wheel chair must fill this role. And then, all about the room, are the hundred and one delightful sketches and curios and bits reminiscent of the arts of our grandfathers, such as you expect to find in the studio of a man of taste. If it is supper time, he will light the candles, and bring the table over to the divan, where you can curl up on

the sofa pillows, and feast on roast chicken from the farm and corn that was raised there, and pumpkin pie, and cider—plenty of cider, from the jug which was kept out the window until the last second. Coffee bubbling in the copper samovar is the only sound.

The Paintings

But if it is not supper time and the candles need not be lit, you do not mind, for this means that you can see the paintings without waiting for tomorrow morning light. And it is the paintings after all which you have ostensibly come all these many miles to see. Before you is a large canvas of a great tree, with its spreading branches purple under the setting sun. The sky in the zenith is the rich blue of the romance of sunset, while on the horizon it shades into the gradation of delicate colors which spell the fantasy of this hour of the day. It is painted with strength and virility, with a keen sense of decoration and the vividness of a strong poetic feeling.

As he shows you his pictures, Mr. Woodward now chats lightly, now talks earnestly of his work. Before his accident he was an engineer, but even then he intended eventually to devote his time to art. Then came the long months when he expected never again to be able to do anything, and when, looking jealously at the people walking back and forth, he used to determine if he could ever get outside to see the sunlight, wear a stiff starched collar and eat a beefsteak, he would never again complain.

The sunlight now is his for the asking, and the collar is there, too. At least, it is today, when he has company. But you rather suspect that when he is alone he takes more kindly to the soft collar which is pleasanter for work and life in the country. As for beefsteak, in these days of the high cost of living, with a menage to support by his brush, being able to eat it is the least of his delights.

Having arrived at this state, which looked so blissful to him back fourteen years ago, Mr. Woodward is now glorying in his work and his fighting spirit is whole-heartedly put into it. For several years he lived in his Shelburne home, supporting himself and his establishment, for which he had to hire a nurse and a man, by making hand-illuminated texts, poems, Christmas cards, and by designing book-plates. One of his early business cards also bears the line: "Poetry written to order for all occasions." If he made a card for Aunt Maria's birthday, or 'Cousin, Hiram's wedding anniversary, for which he must also compose the original and appropriate verse then he could more than double his price! You musingly wonder if he charged by the foot, or if it was the kind of free verse in which feet are unmeasurable.

All the time he was doing this intended some day to paint. But "someday" often turns into a vanishing point, when expenses are hard to meet even by work which is already established. Then one day he looked in the mirror, that piece of glass framed in the quaint old gilt frame that was his great-grandmother's, and in that old glass, he saw what looked like a gray hair. That settled it, and he decided it must be "now or never." Throwing to the wind the business it had taken so long to build up, and turning down all orders, he started out to paint pictures.

Like all true artists, he is certain he has it in him to succeed in his work and to paint something which is real art. In his case, his confidence seems well established, for he has

been painting for only three years, and has already been admitted to many of the prominent art shows, and has won honors such as many a capable man has longed and striven for in vain. And during these three years, he has actually supported himself by his brush, and in his case, this means he has paid and fed two attendants. He has had no instruction in art save from one of the leading American landscape artists who has a country studio in the neighborhood, and he has not been able to go to the cities to see what other artists are doing, to become known, or to become acquainted with dealers and patrons of art. The first painting which he sent to an exhibition was accepted at the National Academy, New York, in 1918. Since then his work has been shown in such prominent galleries as the Albright Gallery, Buffalo, Carnegie Gallery, Pittsburgh, Boston Art Club, and Worcester Art Museum.

[page clipped to much] ... and over fields, wherever Thomas `a Kempis can make his way, until they arrive at the spot where the artist wishes to paint. Then he sets up his canvas, and guys it down by a method of his own, and paints from the seat of the phaeton. The main disadvantage is that he must stay within a few feet of his work, and cannot get the effect from a distance as he goes along. Generally his hired man goes with him, and the man takes Thomas `a Kempis out of the shafts, returning to harness him again when the day is over.

What effect have these circumstances' upon his work?

That, indeed, is an interesting question. He thought continually about painting, studied the work of others, so far as he could see it in reproduction, and planned what he would do until he was over thirty years old. This meant that the mental development of student days took place while he was unable to work, and that, when he did start, he plunged in with peculiar rapidity.

His technique is interesting, especially when it is remembered that it is all of his own making and his style is distinctly his own. So marked has been his progress that it is easy to take a dozen of his paintings and arrange them chronologically without a mistake. His early pictures were realistic studies of the country life which he knew and loved so well. In his intimacy with his scenes, his tendency was to paint details. But now he is getting away from that and has forged through a period of decorative realism into work that is rather decoratively imaginative.

Such distinctions in the type of his work may seem impossible in three years, but it must be remembered that living alone as he does, his work and his thought can be more intensified than the artist who is affronted with the diversions of the city. There may be advantages in his isolation, for, while it deprives him of the companionship of his fellow-workers, it also spares him from seeing the trash being painted today and from being influenced by the extremes which in every age proves to be but a passing fad. The best work that is done, he gets in colored reproductions, and this he studies with avidity.

Not a Modernist

It is needless to say that he is not in sympathy with the modernistic work. He believes in law and in form. Living in such close touch with nature, he has a keen realization of the laws and rhythm which are the very essence of its being, and he feels that law, also, should be the essence of art. He has no patience with the formless masses of paint which the

extremists of today label pictures. On the other hand, he realizes the danger of being too academic, and that the present tendencies in art are a natural reaction from over-emphasis on form.

Anyone would know, however, from looking at Mr. Woodward's work that he is a painter of today, for he is distinctly modern in his use of brilliant color and in his big and sweeping brush handling. The color is strong, vivid and decidedly masculine. He does not accord with the modern tendency towards thick paint. however, but uses his thin. He claims that thick paint is not lasting, that the real artists, although they may use it for a time in their youth, generally give it up in later life, and that the effects which the old masters secured with this paint, can be secured today.

All in all, one wonders if Mr. Woodward is not doing better work today than he would have done if he had spent the last fourteen years studying in the regulation manner in the schools of the cities. Certain it is that at the end of three years he is taking strides which are leading him ahead of many a man of his age who has gone through the prescribed routine and is still longing to have his name in the Carnegie Catalogue, and Mr. Woodward by his award at the Concord Art show was his second honor to be mentioned in it.

Furthermore, the first essential of the artist is that he have something to say: knowing how to say it comes second. The thing, which lies deepest in Mr. Woodward's character, his deep appreciation and love of nature as manifested in the beauty for "his hills," is constantly being nourished as he comes in contact with them until he almost grows to feel that he is a part of them.

Were he in New York, would he have so strong a pull to express himself?