

HUMAN HISTORY

MARY MORTON MASTERS

Curated From The Te Ahu Museum Collections



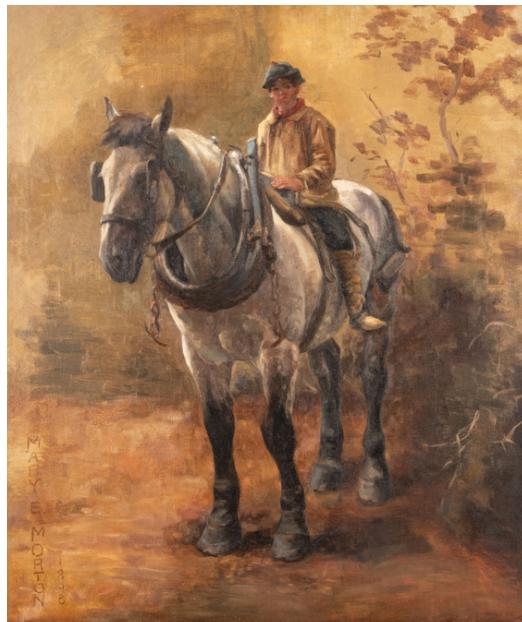
Portrait of Mary M Masters, 1915.
Te Ahu Museum collections.

In the Te Ahu museum collections we have three oil paintings on canvas by the artist Mary Morton Masters who married Kaitaia farmer and businessman Charles Herbert Masters who donated these paintings to the museum.

Mary Elizabeth Morton was born Oct 1867 in Birkenhead, Cheshire, England and was the eldest child of five to Captain Berkeley Digby Morton and Elizabeth Mary nee Grist.

Morton retired from his command in the Pacific Steam Navigation company and brought the family over to New Zealand when he came as an army officer at the end of the New Zealand land wars. By 1878 Morton joined an Ulsterman settlement set up by George Vesey Stewart in Katikati; a year later Mrs Morton began to teach at the school there.

However, by 1893 Captain Morton left Katikati, made their way north to Auckland and then eventually settled in Ahipara, where he became a school teacher at Ahipara School.



Boy on Horse. Oil on canvas. London by Mary M Masters. 1898. Te Ahu Museum collections

There isn't much known about Mary during this time other than she traveled back to England, and it is thought that she had some formal art training in London.

Her paintings resembled the style of the Fontainebleau school of the 19th century painters like Rousseau, Diaz, Dupre and Chintreuil. Obviously admiring works of other animal painters of this time, as Masters' specialised in painting animals, often commissioned to paint prized horses, bullocks and cattle.

Her works were reproduced in the New Zealand Graphic during the late 1890s, and a painting of Masters was part of the Auckland Society of Arts Exhibition opened on 12 July 1905. An important exhibition of the current New Zealand artists at the early part of the 20th Century.



Percy Crenes' Horse. Oil on canvas. Date unknown by Mary M Masters. Te Ahu Museum collections.

A critic published a review of the Auckland exhibition, and criticised her work. A portrait of the stallion "Lord Nelson" was condemned but extricated the artist.

"...The picture is well drawn, and parts of the head, especially the eye, are very cleverly painted, but the picture is quite spoilt by the careless treatment of the mane, which is far from being perfect, and is much below the artist's usual high standard."

Despite the criticism Masters painting hung rightfully with other remarkable early New Zealand artists like Frances Hodgkins, Louis John Steele and Charles Fredrick Goldie (who claimed all the accolades for his portraits of Maori).

In 1907, Masters gained all the prizes for animal paintings at the New Zealand International Exhibition in Auckland then again in 1912 in Christchurch.



Comrades in Arms Maggie and Major two draught horses, Oil on canvas.
1916 by Mary M Masters.
Te Ahu Museum collections.

Masters continued to paint, became an arts teacher in Kaitaia and contributed to the World War One efforts by donating some of her artworks to fundraise for the cause.

Sadly, Masters never saw the end of the war as she died suddenly in childbirth on Wednesday, 8 August 1917. Her husband kept her paintings and painting materials in a separate small building at their farm "The Gables", but this was unfortunately destroyed by fire.

Masters was recognised for her contribution to New Zealand art in the 1980 book by Una Platts *Nineteenth Century New Zealand Artists: a guide and handbook*.

References:

- Auckland Society of Arts, The Annual Exhibition.* New Zealand Herald, 14 July 1905.
- Auckland Society of Arts.* New Zealand Herald, 20 July 1905.
- Obituary - Captain Berkeley Digby Morton.* North Auckland Age. 9 December 1907.
- Our Star Artist.* North Auckland Age, 2 May 1912.
- Correspondence from Berkeley Morton to the museum.* 10 November 2005.