Laura Coombs Hills
Portraits from My Garden

The Cooley Gallery 25 Lyme Street Old Lyme, CT 06371
Lepore Fine Arts 58 Merrimac Street Newburyport, MA 01950
Vincent Vallarino Fine Art LTD 120 East 65th Street New York, NY 10065
1. *Flowers in a Yellow Jar*

Circa 1932, pastel on paper
10 ⅛ x 9 inches
Signed upper right
Introduction

For the past twenty-five years I have been a loyal and sometimes fanatical fan of the floral pastels by Laura Coombs Hills. I have always tried to have one in my inventory but many times went without for long periods. Earlier this year I was approached by a family who had one of the finest Laura Coombs Hills collections in existence. When one makes a great discovery the first thing you want to do is tell someone. Sandy Lepore of Lepore Fine Arts and Jeff Cooley of The Cooley Gallery, who I’ve worked with for the past twenty-five years, are two colleagues for whom I have great respect and who would understand the importance of this discovery. They were as excited as I and realized what a rare find this was.

Over the years we have owned and partnered many paintings together but this was a project we could finally all join forces on. Sandy is the authority and scholar on Laura Coombs Hills and Jeff’s love and enthusiasm for American art, coupled with his gallery in its historic Old Lyme setting seemed to be the perfect location for the exhibition. Sandy immediately informed us of the collections’ importance. The provenance was from the famed Quincy Adams Shaw family whose collection of Millets and Renaissance art was gifted to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, creating one of the finest of its kind.

There have been very few exhibitions dedicated to the work of Laura Coombs Hills in the past seventy years. Today, the works are so closely held that there are never enough works in one location to stage an exhibition. This is the largest collection of Hill’s pastels to come on the market since she regularly exhibited at Doll & Richards, as well as at the Copley Gallery and the Guild of Boston Artists. An editorial in the November 23rd, 1939 Boston Herald stated: “Somehow she manages to bring dancing sunlight and vibrant atmosphere within the four walls and to soak her flowers in it. One artist has said that the United States has never produced her equal.” The Herald continued, “The queue curled around the building to admit her loyal following of collectors who purchased virtually every piece in the show by noon.” Boston art critic A.J. Philpot stated, “Laura Hills has always been in a class by herself.” The following group of pastels was purchased by Quincy Adams Shaw’s daughter Pauline Shaw Fenno, all of which were purchased from the artist between 1932-1939. Pauline had a keen eye that was developed from her exposure to the art assembled by her parents and basically being around these wonderful masterpieces her entire life.

It is our honor to present Laura Coombs Hills: Portraits from My Garden as an exhibition and catalogue. The catalogue contains an insightful essay titled: Breaking the Accepted Rules of Color by Sandy Lepore and an essay by Joe Newman, director of The Cooley Gallery, titled: Laura Coombs Hills and the Cosmopolitan Moment. It is with great pleasure that after 25 years I am finally able to collaborate with my friends Sandy Lepore and Jeff Cooley on a project that is personal to me, and one that is equally as important to them.

Vincent Vallarino
Laura Coombs Hills was born on the eve of the Civil War, September 7, 1859. Having spearheaded the miniature revival in the decades preceding and following 1900, Laura Hills embarked on a second successful career in the 1920s. Failing eyesight and a diminishing interest in miniature portrait commissions prompted the sixty year old artist to shift her focus to floral pastels. During her career as a miniature painter, Hills had rendered flowers in watercolor and pastel; and exhibited them alongside her miniatures at exhibition arenas such as the Art Institute of Chicago, intermittently from 1902-1930, and the Boston Water Color Club from 1890 to 1916.

Beginning in 1921 with Frank Bayley’s Copley Gallery in Boston, and ending at the Guild of Boston Artists in 1947, Laura’s solo exhibitions at the end of each year were extremely popular. In a letter to fellow artist, Lucy Stanton (1875-1931) on January 8, 1928 she wrote: “All of the pictures were sold, forty the first morning and the remaining five in a few days. Great good fortune, wasn’t it?” She went on: “It means among other important things the best asbestos shingles for our Goldfish next spring.” Florence Spaulding wrote in 1936 that despite the effects of the Depression, Hills was selling three-fourths of her exhibitions. “Previous to this an eager public would gather before the gallery and when the doors opened would dash in and toward a picture—any picture—place their hand upon it and feel fortunate to have reached it first. Within a few minutes, all would be sold.” These exhibitions, in fact, provided a platform for friendly, but fierce, competition among Boston’s notable names: Hale, Crowninshield, Spaulding, Cabot, Moseley, Coolidge, Frothingham, Richardson, and Gardiner to name a few.

One name that shows up consistently in the Doll & Richards gallery records was that of “Mrs. L. Carteret Fenno,” Pauline Shaw Fenno, daughter of Quincy Adams Shaw. Shaw was perhaps the most important early benefactor to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Pauline had grown up in a home filled with Renaissance treasures as well as an important collection of work by Francois Millet (1814-1875). The record shows that Mrs. Fenno purchased seventeen pastels from Doll & Richards between 1932 to 1939, ten of which appear in this exhibition. It is possible that Mrs. Fenno purchased others, but the records of buyers from Copley Gallery and The Guild of Boston Artists have yet to be discovered. Pauline Fenno (left) had constructed a very large summer home in 1910 (pg.7) in neighboring Rowley; and was likely acquainted with Laura through Karoline Burnhome, whose son Clement was married to Pauline’s daughter, Florence. Karoline, who owned a large federal house on High Street in Newburyport, was a lifelong friend of Laura’s.

In fact, of Hills’ five trips to Europe in 1890, 1893, 1908, 1922 and 1929, Karoline Burnhome joined Laura and Lizzie on the latter two excursions. Hills’ letters home during these trips tell of the places they had seen, the many new and familiar people with whom they socialized, and of their many shopping excursions. Lizzie was the more fiscally conservative of the two sisters, but Laura justified her modest spending as a business expense.
2. Marsh Marigolds

Pastel on board
14 1/2 x 11 3/4 inches
Signed lower left
In a letter to Mildred Howells in 1929 she exclaimed “Yesterday I went to Salviati’s and bought some lovely glass to put my flowers in for my pictures. It is a delight to be as extravagant as I wish concerning backgrounds and things to use for pictures.” In *Roses and Glass* (plate 8, pg.19), Laura makes an elegant display of crisply drawn roses and a finely rendered glass vase reflecting a room which appears to be her bedroom at the Goldfish.

Will Howe Downes, a noted Boston art critic at the time, speculated in 1921: “there is something about a pastel as a medium for this particular kind of work that is especially adapted to the purpose; one of its peculiar advantages being the blooming quality of the surfaces, the fineness of the textures, and the combined brilliancy and delicacy of the colors.” Laura was very particular about the quality of her pastel sticks and personally purchased, or had her traveling friends purchase, most of them from a Parisian named Roche who made his own. It would appear that Hills found the range of color to be far more dazzling than the ones she could purchase at home.

There is a record of a dozen *Larkspur and Lilies* pastels sold in this period usually priced at five hundred dollars, which indicates that they were full sheet compositions. These works were extremely popular because of their large format, commanding presence, and sheer vitality. Hills had a particular dexterity with lilies. Having carefully arranged the just picked flowers, she would place them outside in full sunshine, and augment the sunlight with an electric light bulb. “It was the electric light that made the difference. It woke those lilies up, and made them speak,” she commented in a 1951 interview for the *Boston Sunday Post*. Pauline Fenno purchased her example (plate 6, pg.17) at the 1935 Doll & Richards exhibition; and in the following year she purchased three more works by Hills: *Peonies* (plate 5, pg.14), *Summer Roses* (plate 10, pg. 21), and *Night Blooming Cereus* (plate 12, pg. 23).

Peonies were another very popular subject for Laura, and there is a record of twenty-five examples exhibited during this period with the most famous being *Larkspur, Peonies and Canterbury Bells*, which was purchased by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 1926. The poster of this pastel has consistently been the largest selling image in the Museum gift shop. Capturing her subject at its peak of vitality was key to Hills’ success and popularity. Lizzie picked the flowers early in the morning, and Laura, without a sketch other than a visual in her mind, manipulated the arrangement to get the right composition and color balance, juxtaposed to a decorative background provided by a colorful scarf, shawl, or wallpaper. In *Marsh Marigolds* (plate 2, pg.6), for example, Hills positions the two vases of yellow flowers in front of a complex purple, blue, and green “balloon” backdrop. Seemingly, the composition would be too cluttered, but Hills has used color symphonies to make it work. It might take her as little as three days to complete a pastel, but sometimes the effort took as much as six. It was imperative to work quickly. “If a peony, for example, were to have the most conspicuous position in the flower arrangement, I would paint it first.” she said in 1921.

Laura also found great success with small, compact compositions such as *Yellow Pansies* (plate 4, pg.13) and *Flowers in a Yellow Jar* (plate 1, pg. 2). Cherokee Roses, primroses, snowberries, and especially camellias lent themselves to the small format, usually in the 12” x 10” range. Years of painting images on ivories eight inches tall or less, had taught Laura how to visually maximize small objects to give them a big picture impact. *Pansies* (plate 13, pg.24) which measures only 8 ½ X 7 ½” is a virtual Lemuel Gulliver in Liliput.
Falling between the full sheet formats and the small ones, were the half sheets measuring approximately 21” x 17”.

Harrison Roses (plate 9, pg. 20), Night Blooming Cereus (plate 12, pg. 22), White Phlox in Sunshine (plate 11, pg. 22), Summer Roses (plate 10, pg. 21), and White Azaleas (plate 3, pg. 8) illustrate Hills’ versatility with varying compositions and color combinations. From the simple and soft palette of White Phlox in Sunshine and White Azaleas to the lively color combinations of Harrison Roses and Summer Roses, Hills worked swiftly laying down colors and using her pinky for selective blending.

While Laura usually presented her flowers in a tabletop arrangement, she also ventured into compositions in which the flowers were viewed in their natural setting such as Rose in the Rain and Night Blooming Cereus. Since Hills executed these works en plein air, it is intriguing to think of her “painting” these two works. While she could have executed Rose in the Rain from the vantage of a protected window, I envision her at night with her light bulb ready, waiting for the cereus to fully open.

Laura Hills brought a fresh aesthetic to an age old subject. She was successful in posing her subjects against decorative motifs without compromising the color balance and focus of her pastel. Mostly, however, she brought a palette informed by modernism and other art movements of her time. In a letter to Mildred Howells in 1949 Hills remarked on the floral display at Fenway Court (the Gardner Museum). “The cinerarias are the dazzling ones now, purple, crimson, or intense blue and a glorious magenta. In fact, we have formed a Magenta Club.”

Frank Bayley of the Copley Gallery in Boston “accused her of committing everything short of murder in breaking the accepted rules of color”. Her response was, “I don’t know about the rules, I was experimenting. Use of color depends so much upon balance, shape and manipulation.”

Laura Hills died on February 21, 1952. Always modest, Laura would be exceedingly pleased to see the attention her work garners today from collectors and curators alike.

1 Hills correspondence to Lucy Stanton, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The University of Georgia.
3 Quincy Adams Shaw bequeathed "twenty-six oil paintings, twenty-seven pastels, two etchings and one etching washed in water colour, by Jean Francois Millet, together with nineteen pieces of Renaissance sculpture." Museum of Fine Arts, Boston exhibition catalog, April 18, 1918.
4 Mildred Howells, daughter of noted novelist William Dean Howells, was a painter and a poet. In 1897 Augustus Saint-Gaudens modeled a bronze relief of Mildred and her father. Laura and Mildred were lifelong friends.
6 “N.E. Flower Artist at 91 Finds Work Still in Demand- Has Won Many Medals.” Boston Sunday Post, A Section , 1, April 8, 1951.
3. White Azaleas
Pastel on board
21 3/4 x 18 inches, signed upper left
Laura Coombs Hills and the Cosmopolitan Moment

by Joseph F. Newman

“'I never was a good traveler,' Laura Coombs Hills claimed at age ninety-one, ‘though we went abroad many times—my sister Lizzie and I.'” Hills was perhaps misrepresenting herself. She did not like trains and associated inconveniences, like the ‘bore’ of dealing with customs agents who took the fun out of buying souvenirs. But she loved traveling. Beginning in 1890, Hills made five extended overseas tours of Europe. She spent her time hustling between locales in Spain, France, Italy, and England, never tarrying too long in one spot. Her correspondence is peppered with enthusiastic musings on architecture, the undulating countryside, and other details that inform her mode of viewing the foreign world. Her travels coincided with a renewal of interest in European arts and culture that occurred in the United States between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At the same time, a new domestic market developed for American artists traveling abroad and exposed to Europe’s cultural legacy. In short, it was America’s cosmopolitan moment, and by traveling throughout Europe and being open to its influences, Laura Coombs Hills participated in, and profited from, this new American curiosity.

Hills shared with other artists and writers abroad a pre-existing openness to a new or foreign experience. The crisis of nativism that had gripped most American urban centers in the years bracketing the Civil War had passed, and while some measure of xenophobia has always had a place in the American psychology, the work produced by this group of artists instilled a new sense of curiosity. It was a group effort among colleagues who often knew each other personally, many of whom had Boston connections. Hills’ coterie of correspondents included several such individuals, including Mildred Howells, daughter of William Dean Howells. Her father’s 1866 book, *Venetian Life*, fascinated readers with grand descriptions of everyday life in Venice and inspired a great swell of Americans to explore Europe for themselves, thus inaugurating the cosmopolitan moment in the United States. Hills’ 1890 trip overseas took her only as far as England, but when she writes to Mildred Howells seven years later at age thirty-eight, she still exhibits a girlish wonder for sights unseen. Regarding an upcoming trip to France, she asks of Howells: ‘even if you are not going until July, you are really going, aren’t you? And you will go to Paris—oh my!! When you get there, please see if it looks the least insecure or if you think it will keep until I come.” Hills was primed for the continental experience and open to its influence.

Prior to her 1890 voyage, Hills’ career had been assembled from various successes in children’s book and magazine illustration, and the design of greeting cards for Louis Prang. Born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, a thriving port city on the Massachusetts coast north of Boston, Hills was the third child of Philip Knapp Hills and Mary Gerrish Hills. Her father was respected in the community through his position as an officer of a local bank, the Institution for Savings. Hills’ mother came from a line of seafarers, including Hills’ grandfather, Enoch Gerrish, who wore a hoop earring, played the fiddle, and who is credited with instilling in Hills her lifelong love of music and drama. According to her own reminiscences, Hills’ art career began at age eleven, when she gathered some pussywillows, dropped them into a glass, and sketched them. The scene was witnessed by one of her mother’s friends, who exclaimed
that she ought to be immediately sent to Miss Emily Andrews, a local private teacher, for art lessons. From Miss Andrews’ parlor, it was on to Helen Knowlton in Boston, the Cowles Art School, and, by 1882, the Art Students’ League in New York. Hills enjoyed her first solo exhibition, a collection of sixteen landscapes, portraits, and several florals, all rendered in pastel, in 1889 at J. Eastman Chase Gallery in Boston. Her reputation quickly reached beyond Newburyport and Boston. That she would be drawn to the art centers of Europe was inevitable.

Her first trip overseas produced a fundamental change in her work. In England in 1890, Hills encountered miniature painting on ivory. As Erica Hirshler notes, portrait miniatures as sentimental keepsakes were popular during the colonial and federal periods, but had fallen out of favor with the rise of the daguerreotype in the 1840s. To a young woman born after even daguerreotypes had given way to new photographic technology, technology soon hastened by the Civil War, miniature portraits would have been a fresh and novel concept. Further, while the sentimental aspect of diminutive portraits would always endure, the sort of portraits Hills likely encountered, and became determined to replicate, were aesthetic objects in their own right and could be appreciated by viewers otherwise unrelated to the subject. When she returned to the United States, carrying with her all the gravitas of having been “in Europe,” Hills was positioned to both lead and profit from the miniature revival in America. For Hills, the experience of travel paid immediate dividends.

Even as her miniatures brought her fame and enough income to support an apartment and studio on Beacon Hill and a summer home of her own design, the Goldfish, in Newburyport, Hills kept up with pastels and exhibited them regularly in the years between her 1889 exhibition at J. Eastman Chase and her participation in “The Group,” an organization of women painters that exhibited occasionally between 1917 and 1919. Eventually, however, interest in miniatures receded once again and the reversal of this trend, coupled with weakened eyesight, motivated Hills to concentrate on larger works. Once again, Hills and her sister Lizzie departed for Europe, this time joined by Karoline Burnhome, a close friend and influential Newburyport doyenne whose son, Clement, would marry the daughter of Pauline Shaw Fenno, the noted collector who gathered most of the paintings presented in this exhibition.

Hills and her companions traveled to Madrid, Cannes, Tours, Calais, Brittany, Paris, Naples, Rome, Florence, and London between 1922 and 1923. Thirty years had passed since her first trip overseas. In that time, Hills had deepened her relationships with like-minded artists and writers who comprised the cosmopolitan set. The moment morphed into a tradition. Residing in Paris in the spring of 1923, Hills was joined at her hotel by the American artist Cecilia Beaux (1855-1942), who was also experiencing Europe and who, in a testament to their friendly relationship, kindly lent Hills her bottle of malted milk. Before a trip to the Paris Salon, Hills and Beaux discussed the modernist movement, a controversial topic among representational painters, and Hills comments in a letter that Beaux “doesn’t spare them.” Writing her sister Mary from Sicily earlier that year, Hills moves quickly from the discovery of ancient and stunning vases during the excavation of a villa to a discussion of Sinclair Lewis’ new novel, Babbitt (1922), which she abhors. Hills’ travels inspired a period of heightened intellectual engagement that allowed her to explore her myriad interests simultaneously.

And everywhere, of course, there were flowers. In Paris in June of 1922, she bought fresh pastels and was eager to paint the world blooming around her. Later, in Cannes, she feared that when in Rome she would not be able to do anything but “see sights,” adding, “I am dying to get at some little flower pictures for the flower market here is perfectly ravishing and I could make all sorts of experiments in color.” Hills’ experience in the flower market in Cannes could not be repeated at home. Charged with the excitement of travel and having
previously profited from travel-inspired experimentation, Hills was poised to assemble some of her best compositions, to collide uncommon colors to new effect, to become one of the great American flower painters of her day.

Hills’ final trip to Europe in 1929 was less hectic than her previous ones. She and Lizzie rented a cottage in England where they stayed for two months, Lizzie humming about domestic duties much as she did in Newburyport, capably aided by a handful of hired maids, while Laura painted flowers. In the seven years between her voyages overseas, Hills’ pastels grew nearly as popular as her miniatures had been decades before. In 1926, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, made its landmark purchase of Larkspur, Peonies, and Canterbury Bells and Hills’ regular pastel exhibitions at Copley Gallery were newsworthy events. Secure in her reputation and having satisfied her curiosity to experience Europe, Hills’ contented herself with enjoying the English summer. Following her return to Boston, Hills writes to fellow artist, Lucy Stanton: “Meanwhile, I have made two pastels of flowers—for I brought home from England eight that were sold and some people who did not get them were disappointed. There were two beautiful gardens and I could go into them and pick all the flowers I wanted. The wonder was, I brought these pastels home by hand in a box with glazed paper between each and when they were taken out there was not one smooch. It is a French paper and I hope I can get some more here”.

It was as if disparate components of her cosmopolitan experience assembled themselves on purpose—the English flowers, the rare French paper, the domestic clamor for her foreign flower portraits, and her implied willingness to re-create the affect of those pictures using home-grown subjects. Perhaps most importantly, what Hills really brought back with her in those paintings was a sense of the quiet English countryside, just as her vibrant compositions of flowers plucked in Cannes might sublimate the glint of the Mediterranean sun, or a complex gathering of Spanish flowers might recall the amalgamated architecture of the Alhambra. Her paintings translated her cosmopolitan experience for the benefit of her audience.

Quiet, humble, generally simple in her personal tastes, Hills nonetheless possessed an extraordinary curiosity. She was aware of her participation in the cosmopolitan moment—on the eve of packing off to Italy in 1923, she writes to her sister, “I read Mr. Howell’s Venetian Life over for the second time—it is the only book we have with us.” Her experience overseas aided her transitions between artistic phases and exposed her to diverse subject matter unavailable in Newburyport or Boston. For Hills, new environments led to new compositions and new ways of thinking about pastel. Each of her flower portraits is a little journey, rich with the excitement of seeing something exotic for the first time.

above: Laura and Lizzie on Plum Island, courtesy of the Historical Society of Old Newbury

below: Laura on the right

1  Eve Hills, "Laura Coombs Hills has Completed New Pastel," in The Newburyport Daily News, February 2nd, 1951. I would like to thank Ms. Sandy Lepore for her extraordinary advice and encouragement, and for her generous willingness to share with me her gallery’s Laura Coombs Hills archive. Her support made this essay possible.
7  Unknown newspaper clipping. Archives of Lepore Fine Arts.
8  Lepore, 18-19.
10  Ibid.
13  Laura C. Hills, letter to Lucy May Stanton, Boston, December 13th, 1929. Lucy M. Stanton papers. Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.
14  Ibid.
4. *Yellow Pansies*

Pastel on board

8 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches

Signed upper left;

Titled on verso:

“Yellow Pansies for Mrs. Bradlee”
5. *Peonies*
Pastel on paper
Circa 1936
23 x 28 3/4 inches
Signed lower left
6. *Larkspur & Lilies*

Circa 1935
Pastel on paper
28 3/4 x 23 1/2 inches
Signed lower right
7. *Roses in the Rain*

Circa 1937
Pastel on paper
16 1/2 x 14 inches
Signed upper left
8. *Roses and Glass*

Circa 1933, pastel on paper

18 x 12 1/2 inches, signed upper left
9. Harrison Roses

Pastel on paper
21 3/4 x 18 inches, Signed upper left
10. Summer Roses

Circa 1935, pastel on paper, 21 1/2 x 18 inches
Signed upper left
11. *White Phlox in Sunshine*
Circa 1935, pastel on paper, 21 ¼ x 17 ¾ inches, signed upper left

right page:

12. *Night Blooming Cereus*
Circa 1936, pastel on paper, 21 ¾ x 17 ¾ inches, signed upper left
13. *Pansies*

Circa 1935
Pastel on paper
10 5/8 x 11 3/8 inches
Signed upper right