

Isabel Cooper and Greenwich Village

Greenwich Village in New York City was where you went in the 1910s if you were eccentric, gay, radical, or artistic. Pioneering activists, artists, and writers began settling there in the early 1910s. They set a tone for free-thinking and free-living that, along with cheap housing and cheap restaurants, and good light for art studios, seeded the quickening growth of a creative community. And the magnetic pull drew Isabel early in the emergence of America's Bohemia. She began to work in Washington Square, and live nearby by about 1912.ⁱ

The Village offered a counterbalance to the more proper, staid uptown neighborhoods, and its residents thought of it that way, as is clear from John Reed's poem, "A Day in Bohemia."

Yet we are free who live in Washington Square,
We dare to think as uptown wouldn't dare,
Blazing our nights with arguments uproarious;
What care we for a dull old world censorious,
When each is sure he'll fashion something glorious?
Blessed are thou, Anarchic Liberty
Who asketh nought but joy of such as we!
—Excerpt from "The Day in Bohemia," 1912, John Reed, journalist, poet,
communist

The Village drew mostly unmarried men and women for the chance to live "unencumbered by family obligations."ⁱⁱ It's easy to think of Isabel seeking to be so unencumbered; to at once free her self to do the creative work she loved and to find the freedom that only some young women were exercising in the early part of the 20th century.

The people of the Village came to be called "Bohemians." The word means someone with unconventional social habits and lifestyle. But Isabel used to say that a bohemian is a person with an art studio who doesn't really do art.



The Benedict Studios, Washington Square, where Isabel Cooper worked in the 1910s

In this rich mix of eccentricity and creativity, she found work in an interior decoration shop in Washington Square, and lived nearby.ⁱⁱⁱ The community brought her plenty of chances to try her hand at art and design. She continued to live and work there into the early 1920s.

Isabel had moved far from the staid Victorian parlor of her aunts' home to be a part of the raucous scene of Village tea rooms or all-night parties of artists, winding down only as the sun came up. Aunt Mary and Aunt Harriet must have grimaced at the thought of what their niece had become.

Isabel came to know other Greenwich Village artists and writers including the radical journalist John Reed, who was buried in the Kremlin, a reward for his coverage of the Bolshevik Revolution, and Sinclair Lewis, who based at least one character on aspects of Isabel.

Along the way, her social circles led her, by 1916 or 1917, to meet William Beebe, the naturalist-explorer, who liked parties, especially dances, and was well connected in the Village. And he opened a new stage for her adventurous life.

ⁱ In her scrapbook, Isabel noted, on a picture, a Washington Square studio she said a Dorothy Randolph “bequeathed” her in 1912.

ⁱⁱ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*, Basic Books, 1995.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Monk Saunders, “Jungle Creatures ‘Sit’ for Her in Their Own Back Yards,” *American Magazine*, February 1926, Vol. 101, p. 26.