

Resisting the homely snout of commercialism

In the 1910s there was no training for scientific illustrators in New York, and Isabel Cooper didn't know she was destined to do that kind of work. She loved art, and wanted to be an artist. Newly independent, she saw that she needed work that would satisfy her but also pay her a living.



Isabel Cooper at 25

Isabel had done a freshman year, 1909-1910, at Bryn Mawr College. By her account she was a lackadaisical student.¹ Those who knew her later saw a wide-ranging and powerful mind that could have taken her deep into almost any kind of scholarship. But art drew her most.

After freshman year, she returned to New York. She enrolled in Fine Arts at Columbia Teachers College, and began studies at the Art Students' League, then and still an independent art school in Manhattan. And she found a mentor, taking summer classes with the painter Alon Bement at Lyme Connecticut.

In her training, she tracked close to the path of Georgia O'Keeffe, who also studied at Columbia, at the Art Students League, and with Alon Bement, all at about the same time.

Isabel gravitated toward design classes, and began to work in interior design, perhaps as a surer way to make a living. Paid and unpaid, she tried: drawing from life, rug and tapestry design, clay sculpture, pottery, metalwork, interior decoration, and stage costuming.ⁱ It is unfortunate we don't have any examples of Isabel's craft or design work from this time. Somewhere rugs she designed may still survive.

Isabel was good at interior design. It's likely she worked in the early 1910s for Anton Hellmann, who had a interior decoration practice and school at the Benedict Studios on Washington Square.ⁱⁱⁱ

But she found interior decorating too commercially demanding.^{iv} Then she tried costume design. She was good at that too, and creating distinct costumes and stage hangings, each time something unique, satisfied her. But then a theater manager, liking a particular costume she had done, demanded fifty more just like it. As she must have conveyed carefully to her interviewer, "commercialism continued to poke its homely snout into her artwork."^v

Something was still not right. She was built for novelty and adventure, not commercial toil. In fact, later in her life, after she was married and didn't need to support herself, she resisted selling paintings. In gallery shows, she'd price her work high to ward off buyers. Only a few paintings got away from her in shows, and she tried more than once to buy paintings back.

Once launched in her career as a scientific artist in 1917, Isabel looked back at these years as "going bleakly about my various occupations, such as assisting at the legerdemain of interior decorators, or degrading oriental perfections to terms of modern rug factory..."^{vi} She was ready for something more interesting.

ⁱ Letter, Isabel Cooper to Charles D. Mahaffie, October 17, 1926.

ⁱⁱ John Monk Saunders, "Jungle Creatures 'Sit' for Her in Their Own Back Yards," *American Magazine*, February 1926, Vol. 101, p. 26.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Upholsterer*, June 1916, Vol. 55, p. 83.

^{iv} John Monk Saunders, "Jungle Creatures 'Sit' for Her in Their Own Back Yards," *American Magazine*, February 1926, Vol. 101, p. 26.

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^{vi} "Alumnae Activities," *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Bulletin*, 1924.