Irma René Koen
AN ARTIST REDISCOVERED

FIGGE ART MUSEUM | DAVENPORT, IOWA
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Cover:  
*Untitled (Sailboats)*, circa 1930  
Oil on panel  
Courtesy of Mrs. Jean Priester

Title page:  
*Irma Kohn in an exhibition gallery (detail)*, 1921  
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American, 1868-1925  
*Portrait of Irma Kohn with dog*, 1913  
Scan from original glass negative  
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City of Davenport Art Collection
Museum purchase: Friends of Art Acquisition Fund, 1929.407
Acknowledgments

The Figge Art Museum is pleased and proud to present this exhibition and catalogue of the work of Rock Island-born Irma René Koen, whose talent and determination earned her an intriguing life as a professional artist and world traveler. Her “rediscovery” is due in large part to the efforts of Cynthia Wiedemann Empen, Ph.D., guest curator, whose research has brought to light the extent of Koen’s career and the recognition she received during her lifetime.

Cynthia’s essay provides a fascinating glimpse of the art world in the Midwest and in the nation during the early part of the 20th century. Vanessa Sage, Figge assistant curator, has tirelessly pursued the works for the exhibition, and has contributed her own essay on Koen’s place in the dialogue on art of her time. Thanks as well to the Figge exhibitions team, Andrew Wallace and Joshua Johnson, and to our talented designer, Leanne Paetz, for their assistance.

We offer special thanks to our generous sponsors for making this exhibition and publication possible: the Osherenko-Young Foundation, the William Butterworth Foundation, the Rock Island Art Guild and the Quad City International Airport. Finally, we thank the collectors for sharing their precious works with us. Their support for the project continues the rich tradition of presenting fine arts and culture in the Quad Cities—formerly the Tri Cities—of which Irma René Koen was an early advocate and supporter.

Tim Schiffer
Executive Director, Figge Art Museum
Gloucester in Autumn, circa 1930
Oil on canvas
Collection of the Rock Island Public Library
Donated by Irma René Koen, in honor of her father, Louis Kohn (April 1943)
“A Modern Painter”:
The Art and Life of Irma René Koen

“This is an age for mentality. Make your picture a mental thing before you make it a material one,” said the American modern painter Irma René Koen during a lecture to the Hoosier Salon in 1929. With this helpful suggestion, the sole woman member of the jury urged the artists to harness their thoughts and reactions to nature in creating their best individual work.¹ For more than 70 years, Koen responded to the beauty of nature and to the ever-changing trends of art with dabs of flickering light, a deliberate vision of structured design and bold expressive strokes of color.

This exhibition follows Koen’s development as a modern painter, from amateur to professional, for the first time. It recovers her history as a professional woman artist, revered in innumerable newspaper articles and art magazines, listed in biographical dictionaries and included in databases featuring Illinois artists.² Extensive new research drawn from Koen’s papers and excerpts from her correspondence and writings, as well as press articles and reviews, reveals a remarkable life.

Rock Island, Chicago and Beyond

The daughter of first-generation American parents of German-Jewish descent, Irma Julia Kohn was born on October 8, 1883, in Rock Island, Illinois. Her father, Louis Kohn, was a prominent citizen and merchant, co-owner of the Rock Island shoe and clothing company Mosenfelder & Kohn, known locally as M & K. Her mother, Regina Mosenfelder Kohn, was a skilled pianist, organist and Sunday school teacher. Beginning when Koen was a young child, her name appeared in the local newspapers’ society sections, with family functions and musical performances noted in the daily happenings of the Tri-City region of western Illinois and eastern Iowa. Koen initially attended high school at St. Katherine’s in Davenport, Iowa, but graduated from Rock Island High School with her younger sister, Margo, in 1903. Although a gifted pianist and cellist, Koen chose to pursue drawing and painting instead.³

Note: Irma René Koen's birth name was Kohn. She changed her professional name to Koen in the 1920s. The artist is referred to as Koen throughout this essay.
A heated “discussion” about proportion would launch Koen’s formal art training. She had enrolled in art classes at nearby Augustana College in September 1903, studying with Swedish-American artist Jonas Olof Grafström. On just the third day of class, Koen and Professor Grafström argued over a lesson in proportion, and Koen was proven right. Grafström encouraged Koen’s parents to enroll their “unusually talented” daughter immediately at the Art Institute of Chicago, which they did the following week. There she studied with Charles Francis Browne, who became the foremost landscape painter of the Eagle’s Nest Art Colony in Oregon, Illinois, and with leading Danish-American artist John Christen Johansen. Graduating in 1908, she remained to teach Saturday classes and pursue postgraduate work.4

After the Art Institute, Koen focused on landscape painting, and for several years joined summer classes held at art colonies. In Grand Detour, Illinois, she again studied with Charles Francis Browne for several summers. She also visited the colony at Lyme, Connecticut, and attended the newly opened summer season at the Woodstock School of Landscape Painting (New York) in 1910, where students received “instruction in atmospheric painting.”5 There, she studied with John Carlson and influential teacher Birge Harrison, an esteemed genre and Tonalist landscape painter known for poetic winter scenes.

In 1909, Koen and her sister opened the Arts & Crafts Studio in downtown Rock Island, adjacent to their father’s store. Seasonal newspaper ads from 1909-11 promoted their successful studio shop, which sold “unique and charming” handcrafted gifts and featured exhibits of Japanese prints as well as works by Koen and her colleagues.6 After reportedly “studying in various schools of landscape,” including with John Johansen in Vermont, Koen embarked on an artist’s traditional tour abroad, visiting Italy, France, Germany and England’s Cornish coast in 1914. There she studied under English-born painter Henry B. Snell at St. Ives, Cornwall, an international art colony known for its plein air landscape tradition. Returning just after the war erupted, she exhibited a collection of three watercolors in the annual New York Watercolor Club exhibition, including the architectural watercolor sketch titled In Chester Cathedral.7 The following summer Koen painted in Monterey and at the Carmel Summer School of Art in California, and also exhibited two landscapes from her England visit at the Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco.8

While maintaining a studio in Chicago or Rock Island from 1916 to the early 1930s, Koen frequently spent the summer and autumn months in New England, painting at art colonies and villages in and around New Hope, Pennsylvania; Boothby Harbor, Maine; and Gloucester, Massachusetts. She studied with Pennsylvania Impressionists Henry B. Snell and William Lathrop in the rural river town of New Hope, a thriving art colony begun by Lathrop and Edward Redfield. Gloucester, a quaint fishing village and bustling seaport, also became a well-known summer oasis for visiting artists on the Cape Ann peninsula northeast of Boston.9 To continue their formal training, artists often gathered at such seasonal, picturesque locales. Certain towns and colonies were visited so frequently by artists they became known as the “picture places of the world” where easels sprang up “like mushrooms” before favorite iconic views—the rocks of Boothbay, fishing boats in Gloucester.
In Chester Cathedral (England), 1914
Watercolor, gouache and charcoal on paper
Collection of Martin Bush
and the valley in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. In addition to providing inspiring subject matter, these art colonies fostered a social network among women artists, creating connections with colleagues in various cities.

In 1921, Koen established a Chicago studio, and in the same year she created her first still-life painting. Titled *A Concentrated Garden*, it featured an arrangement of old-fashioned flowers and was exhibited along with 21 other paintings at the Rock Island Public Library gallery. The brilliant splashes of color in *Untitled (Zinnias with Pomegranate)* capture Koen’s lifelong affinity for flowers and gardens. Titles of her early impressionist paintings record views of seaside gardens and beds of poppies. She exhibited with the Des Moines Garden Club, presented lectures on flower arranging and later became active with the Tri-City Garden Club throughout the 1930s and early 1940s.

Koen took her second formative trip abroad in 1923, leaving on the steamship *Reliance* to spend 15 months in Europe. She sketched and painted along the French coast of Brittany, with a stay at the American art colony in Concarneau, a fishing port city. By that November, she reportedly had opened studios, first in Brittany and then Paris, where she “settled down to hard work.” Her oil painting *To the Sea* (also *Out to Sea*), a Boothbay Harbor scene from 1922, was accepted into the 1923 Salon d’Automne. In the 1924 spring Salon, four of Koen’s paintings were all “well hung” and prominently placed “on the line.” After France, Koen traveled to North Africa, visiting Tunis and Algiers along the Mediterranean and staying for two months in the ancient Islamic holy city of Kairouan, Tunisia, all popular locales for artists to capture the exotic charms of the so-called Orient. The trip produced an abundance of subjects for subsequent exhibitions.

After Koen’s trip to Europe, exhibition pamphlets and newspaper articles from 1925 and 1926 reveal a change in her professional name from her Germanic-Jewish surname Kohn. Initially she signed and exhibited certain works from France and Tunisia as “Irma Roen.” With growing anti-German attitudes and anti-Semitism, many artists and public figures made similar changes. Beginning in 1926, she consistently used the signature and name “Irma René Koen.”

Koen’s lengthy exhibition history began in 1907 with the Art Students’ League spring show while she was still enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago. Between 1907 and 1941, more than 70 of her watercolors and oil paintings were accepted into 33 juried Art Institute exhibitions. Most often her work appeared in the Institute’s annual juried exhibition of *Works by Chicago Artists and Vicinity*, and she won several prizes. Koen also exhibited with The Society of Western Artists and later with A Painter Group of the Middle West, both formed to counter the East Coast’s dominance in American art.
painting *The Ferry Wharf*, depicting old ferry houses silhouetted against a splendid yellow evening sky, won the first prize medal from the Peoria Society of Allied Arts at the *First Exhibition of Oil Paintings by Illinois Artists*. Impressed by Koen's painting, a juror and director of the Toledo Museum of Art purchased *The Ferry Wharf* for the Toledo museum's collection.18 Her paintings were shown in prominent exhibitions at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., and in New York City and Philadelphia, and traveled to various national venues as part of rotary exhibits organized by the Art Institute. After 1926, Koen's work often was featured at the Chicago Galleries Association and in its traveling exhibitions around the Midwest.19

Locally, Koen exhibited frequently in the Tri Cities and in Des Moines. She was a charter member of the Tri-City Art League, formally organized in 1915 in Davenport. Local photographer and painter Roberta Hostetler (1892–1982) and miniature painter Edna Robeson (1883–1966) founded the League as an outgrowth of the Davenport Art Association. Modeled after the art students’ leagues in Chicago and New York, the Tri-City Art League gathered art enthusiasts for meetings and classes and hosted exhibits at the public libraries in Rock Island, Moline and Davenport. The League disbanded in 1925, transferring its holdings to the newly formed Davenport Municipal Art Gallery, one of Iowa’s first full-scale art centers and forerunner of the Figge Art Museum.20 In 1929, Davenport’s gallery purchased a large Koen painting for its collection titled *All on a Summer’s Day* (p. 4), a colorful scene that captures the bustling activity along one of the piers dotting picturesque Gloucester harbor.21

Family ties drew Koen to the Des Moines art community after 1911, when her sister, Margo Kohn, wed Younker Brothers department store executive Henry Frankel. Koen visited Des Moines often to attend holiday gatherings and exhibition openings, and to give lectures. She exhibited frequently at the Des Moines Public Library gallery headed by the newly formed Fine Arts Association, of which her sister was a charter member. Her paintings ended up in many Des Moines homes, and Koen was considered by 1932 to be prominent in Des Moines art circles. Newspaper reviews reveal Des Moines residents’ particular appreciation for Koen’s “story touch” within her compositions, her deft ability to convey sunlight and versatility in the medium, and for her strength in “color, design and decorative appeal.”22

Following other leading artists who rejected moving permanently out east or to Europe, Koen retained her ties to the Midwest while establishing a reputation and career of national standing.23 Between periods of study and travel, Koen returned to participate in and help formulate the emerging art and civic community of the Tri-City area and the Midwest. The *Rock Island Argus* traced her dedication to civic welfare causes and education, as Koen became the music program director for the West End Settlement in Rock Island and a charter member of the Woman’s Club of Rock Island, serving on its bylaws and constitution committee.24 She also offered her musical talents, playing cello and even dancing solo performances in benefits for the YMCA and Bethany Home. During World War I, Koen served on the local war camp community service executive committee.
She gave education lectures for local women's clubs and regional art associations as both became important in the general awakening of interest in art throughout the Midwest. One news article featured Koen as a distinguished speaker for the 17th biennial of the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs held in Davenport, reporting that Koen was called by Dudley Crafts Watson “one of the three greatest American women painters.” An exhibit of her paintings at the Davenport Municipal Art Gallery accompanied the biennial festivities and her lecture. The exhibit announcement in May 1927 described Koen as a “modern painter,” and gallery director R.J. McKinney commended Koen, saying “she is a master of color and composition.” McKinney further added: “In every canvas there is a secure feeling, an assurance that the entire subject has been carefully thought out. Tho [sic] her paintings are all distinctly modern, yet at no time does she allow them to approach the ridiculous.” Koen remained ever aware of the shifting artistic styles of American modernism. In her own address to the women's convention, Fashions in Art, she said: “Beauty is a permanent thing,” adding “but the human concept of it, influenced by the spirit of the day, changes and therefore we have fashions in art.” A year later, when interviewed by the Des Moines Register, Koen noted that the more radical and abstract “futuristic art, labeled ‘freak’ by common people” was “toned down” and becoming subdued.

In addition to her professional art activities, travels and lectures, Koen wrote articles for the secular newspaper Christian Science Monitor. In 1886, Koen’s parents left the Jewish faith after her mother had been healed by a Christian Science practitioner. Both her parents were instrumental in the founding of Illinois' first Christian Science church in Rock Island. Koen herself wrote that she had “always sidestepped church work” until she herself was healed from an illness sometime in the late 1930s and then became second reader at Rock Island's First Church of Christ, Scientist around 1940. Christian Science Monitor took notice of Koen’s art as early as 1918 and had published several images of her paintings. Koen wrote articles as a special correspondent with her byline first appearing in 1928. Her timely 1932 article, “The Art of Grant Wood,” was Wood’s earliest statement of the value he placed on Midwestern material culture, and often is cited in modern scholarship on Wood. Koen likely interviewed Wood when she hosted the artist in her home just after he achieved national fame for American Gothic. According to Koen's grandniece Gail Osherenko, Christian Science—a religion uniquely American and founded by an American woman—certainly “played a major role in Koen's upbringing, life and work” and “gave her a positive outlook on life” that allowed her the freedom to be herself and to travel alone all over the world.
Untitled (Likely a View from the Artist’s Studio Window in Rock Island, Ill.), circa 1930
Oil on board
Collection of Mrs. David K. Gottlieb
Midwest Modernism

Koen’s artistic career was firmly established by the late 1920s, with works in the permanent collections of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Toledo Museum of Art, Peoria Art Association and in the “City of Chicago” collection. Koen also displayed and sold work in galleries and department stores in both Chicago and Des Moines. Carson Pirie Scott, Marshall Fields, and Younkers in Des Moines all used innovative tactics to display modernist paintings like Koen’s and to market their integration into modern home interiors. The colorful canvas *Clear Day, Maine* (p. 26) was included among five works displayed at Younker Brothers art gallery in 1928. Rather quiet in the press regarding the commercial success of her art, Koen once unguardedly confessed that she sold her “entire output.”

The regional and national press widely recognized Koen and her art. The *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern* called her a “famous woman artist” when reporting on an exhibit with seven of Koen’s watercolors. Upon her return from a summer stay at Boothbay Harbor and a visit to Canada in 1926, *The Davenport Democrat and Leader* referred to Koen as a “distinguished young painter,” even at her current age of 42. The following year, the *Christian Science Monitor* also noted that Koen was “often designated as America’s leading woman artist.” Koen spent part of 1929 in Chicago and won the Fine Arts Building Purchase Prize of $500 at the Art Institute’s annual exhibition for Chicago and vicinity artists for her regatta scene titled *White Wings*. In this same year, the central regional conference of the YWCA honored Koen among 113 women, for distinction in painting and her “pioneering spirit and outstanding brilliant work” in leadership.

Koen’s most active years in Chicago were bracketed by the landmark 1913 Chicago Armory Show and the city’s 1933 Century of Progress Exposition, both celebrations of modernity. This interwar era enveloped Chicago’s struggle to become a center of art and culture and was punctuated by Chicago’s so-called “battle of modernism.” Through the years, Koen’s own stance toward the philosophical and aesthetic tenets of American modernism remained steadfast—upholding the ideals of quality craftsmanship, color and design—yet shifted slightly, as did the movement itself. Early in her career she was a member of The Artists’ Guild and Arts Club, both in Chicago. The Arts Club was formed in 1916 by traveled and cultured younger painters who were “sympathetic to the more radical phase of art.” Her association in 1923 with the newly formed The Painters and Sculptors of Chicago, which split from the Chicago Society of Artists, placed her within the more conservative spectrum of modernism. As a member of the Chicago Galleries Association (CGA), Koen was established as a Chicago talent and exhibited there regularly, including a solo show in 1929. Her long-term association with the CGA from 1926 until the 1960s placed her in the more moderate camp of modernists. For many decades, Koen deftly navigated a successful professional career amid the changing styles of early 20th-century modern art, the fervent calls for the “virile masculinity of
the real modern artist,” and the anxiety over the liberated “New Woman.””41 With the keen ability to meld pleasing subject matter with an oft-described “vigorous” style, Koen achieved the unique feat of satisfying the “likes of both radical and conservative critics.”42

Late Career and Mexico

During the 1930s and early 1940s, Koen remained active, painting and exhibiting works in regional shows. She captured the quiet resonance of local rural Illinois and small Midwest towns along the Mississippi River, while still taking excursions to Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. As a long-serving director with
Untitled (Market Scene with Pink Awnings),
post 1944
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of a Private Collection
the Friends of Art group, Koen also stayed deeply involved with activities that supported the Davenport Municipal Art Gallery. Koen never married, and she returned to her parents’ new home in Rock Island in late 1932 or 1933—perhaps because of her mother’s death in May 1933. Koen had overseen the design and construction of the home, later called Mille Fleurs, from 1922 to 1924, and maintained a third-story studio there until 1943. In December 1943, after her father’s death, she sold the house and cleared her studio. That year, Koen gifted her harbor scene *Gloucester in Autumn* (p. 6) to the Rock Island Public Library collection in memory of her late father and as a lasting memento for her hometown.

Koen’s later years prove as interesting as her early life. During World War II, she drove to Mexico with her sister and traveled for two months, visiting Acapulco and other locales. Soon after she applied for residential papers, a decision she considered the best of her life, and settled in Mexico permanently. She lived in various Mexican towns, including San Miguel de Allende and Oaxaca, and traveled all over Mexico and into Guatemala. Koen learned Spanish, and in 1957 purchased and renovated a home in Cuernavaca with a monetary legacy left by an aunt. Her charming home had a lovely garden with separate guest and servants’ cottages, one of them used for a studio.

The move to Mexico fostered a “renewed and truly creative venturesomeness,” according to one Mexican art critic. A new lyrical quality distinguished her Mexican genre and landscape scenes that were “fused with a rhythmic movement of incandescent color” with their undiluted pigments and heavy strokes. Koen painted in watercolor, created about one studio oil painting a month, and continued exhibiting in Mexico City, Cuernavaca, Des Moines, Beverly Hills and Chicago. She favored painting fishermen, fiestas and the markets—pottery, flowers, fruit—in genre scenes featuring a decidedly human presence. Blossoming trees, weather effects and the local topography—volcanoes, lakes, mountains, highlands and gorges—also appear frequently in these later works, which have a renewed sense of vitality and color, due in part to her use of a palette knife to lay the paint on the canvas. Prominent Mexican art critic Luis Lara Pardo praised her early Mexican works in 1947 as vigorous, extraordinary and very personal.

While living in Mexico, Koen remained an avid traveler, visiting Spain, the Far East and Iran. Once she was arrested for sketching and photographing women, jailed and then quickly released. She embarked on two extensive trips in her late 70s to India, Nepal, Japan, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In letters sent to her niece and grandnieces, Koen wrote with wonder, expressing her continued joy in experiencing new cultures and inspirational locales during her second trip: “This place is wonderful. Just full of Buddhist temples. Full. People are picturesque. Lovely place to paint.” Koen returned to the United States only a few times in the decades following her move to Mexico. She maintained an active social life in Cuernavaca among a friendly community of American expats and fellow Christian Scientists. In December 1973, at age 90, Koen held her last known exhibit at the Galería de Arte Van
Gelder in Cuernavaca. While government records log her death in Montecito/Santa Barbara, letters and documents indicate she passed away on July 16, 1975, in Cuernavaca after an illness.

Described as strong-minded and independent by her grandniece Gail Osherenko, Irma René Koen forged a remarkable 70-year career as a professional artist. She belonged to the first generation of professional women artists, and her Midwestern years were spent within an emergent and ever-changing dynamic culture of modernism—a life of academic and European training, national recognition, membership in professional associations and inspiring travels. A dedicated landscape painter, she found her own individual expression in thoughtful paintings of picturesque American regional locales, in addition to capturing colorful scenes of life in Mexico and around the world. Koen's published writing on “expressionism in art” perhaps best defines her own feelings as a modern painter and her position within the history of 20th-century American art:

“So-called modernistic painting has liberated the artist, but only a few artists have taken advantage of this liberation. They are the painters who think for themselves, watching their own feeling toward beauty, painting what they choose and in the manner they choose. When the painter sees beauty for himself he becomes an artist and helps create a national art.”

Cynthia Wiedemann Empen, Ph.D.

Guest Curator

Cynthia Wiedemann Empen, Ph.D., is an independent art historian based in Rock Island, Illinois. A graduate of Augustana College and Vanderbilt University, Dr. Empen earned her doctorate from Indiana University at Bloomington.


10 “Bonassola Added to Growing List of Art Colonies,” The News-Herald (Franklin, PA), June 20, 1928, p. 8.

11 “Fishing Village Scenes and Seascapes Done by Miss Irma Kohn Are Rare Treat for Art Lovers,” Argus, December 2, 1921, p. 10.


13 “Miss Irma Kohn Goes to Brittany for Summer Work, DDL, April 3, 1923, p. 8; quotes from “Picture By Miss Irma Kohn Hung In Paris Salon,” DDL, November 27, 1923, p. 4. See also “Miss Irma Kohn Home From Year In France,” DDL, July 20, 1924, p. 9. Spring Salon quotes from “Exhibit Miss Kohn’s Pictures Attracts Many, Afternoon Tea,” DDL, November 26, 1924, p. 12.

14 It is not entirely clear why Irma changed her Germanic–Jewish surname Kohn to “Koen,” a variant spelling of Kohn but more known as a surname of Gaelic/Irish, Dutch or Germanic lineage. Most likely she began using her new name while in France or just after, when intense anti-German feelings grew in the early 1920s, becoming one possible factor in Irma’s decision to change her trade name. Irma signed works as “Irma Roen” and “Irmia Koen” before using “Irma René Koen” consistently in 1926 and after. See “Irma Roen” listed in Fifth International Water Color Exhibition, May 1–June 4, 1925, The Art Institute of...
15 Her new name "Irma Rene Koen" is listed in "Paris Painter Visits Sister," Des Moines Register, January 1, 1926, p. 7 (hereafter DMR). A more formal change to "Irma René Koen" was necessitated by her move to Mexico. Letter from Joseph Frankel to Rock Island attorney Elmore A. Gripp, January 5, 1944, and letter from Elmore A. Gripp to Irma R. Koen, January 16, 1945, Koen Archive.

16 Most of Koen's works are undated. Exhibition records and tags on frames, documents in the Koen Archive, her various signatures, and her move to Mexico provide a few clues to placing her works chronologically. Works signed "Irma Kohn" were painted or exhibited primarily before 1923. Certain works painted in 1923-24 and exhibited in 1925 were signed "Irma Roen." News articles and exhibition pamphlets reveal her professional name change to "Irma René Koen" beginning in January 1926 and after. Koen's permanent move to Mexico in 1944, a looser signature style, and subjects from locales she visited after 1944 place late works in the period of 1944 to 1975. Some late works are signed "Irma René."


38 Koen’s painting The River [circa 1932, photograph in Koen Archive], was exhibited at the 1933-34 Chicago World’s Fair. See no. 29 in “Exhibition of Art in the Gibson Lounge By Members of Association of Chicago Painters and Sculptors – Home Planning Hall – A Century of Progress – Chicago,” [1933], p. 2. Thank you to Dr. Wendy Greenhouse for sharing this resource.


42 “Irma Rene Koen Leads Field in Chicago Exhibit,” TDT, February 24, 1932, p. 13. It was also noted that “her technique is so vigorous and direct it is often taken for the work of a man,” in “Many Noted Speakers on Program of I.F.W.C. Biennial to Be Held Here in May,” TDT, March 9, 1927, p. 3.


44 “Presents Painting to Rock Island Public Library,” Argus, April 6, 1943, p. 6.

45 Irma’s life in Mexico is compiled from various documents and clippings in the Koen Archive, including “Recollections of my Aunt Irma,” pp. 1-4; and “Personality of the Week,” The News (Mexico D.F.), April 21, 1956, (page unknown), clipping. See also Koen, “Visit to Eronguariquicuaro,” CSM, October 15, 1952, p. 8.

46 Quotes from Guillermo Rivas, “Irma René Koen,” Mexican Life (February 1948), 27+, clippings in Koen Archive.

47 Mexican review by Luis Lara Pardo, originally published in the Mexican magazine Revista de Revistas (October 26, 1947), reprinted and translated in “Mexican Critic Has: Warm Praise for Artistry of a Des Moines Painter in Mexico,” 1948, [page unknown], clipping [The News, Mexico, D.F.], Koen Archive.


The City (Chicago), 1921-1925  
Watercolor and gouache on paper  
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections  
Gift of the Henry Frankel Estate, 1957.17
Irma René Koen and a Vital American Art

The bronze lions had stood guard at the entrance to the Art Institute of Chicago for just 10 years when Irma René Koen arrived as a student in 1903. Her enrollment at the Art Institute heralded the beginning of an extraordinary life in the arts. Following graduation and continued study in Europe, Koen frequently exhibited at Chicago galleries and at the Art Institute. Koen's early career, and the vibrant landscapes and coastal scenes she completed during that time, reflect wider trends in American art and culture during the early 20th century. Along with her instructors and peers, many of whom she met at art colonies across the country, Koen was part of a movement that promoted an American art based in individual vision and on the regional landscape.

The catalog for the School of the Art Institute for the 1902-1903 year makes it clear that students were expected to engage in "severe academic practice" rooted in classical European traditions. Aspiring artists like Koen studied works from antiquity and took courses in anatomy and perspective. Many of the instructors had French pedigrees, having studied at the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts or at the Académie Julian in Paris. While the Art Institute was conservative in its instruction, its leaders were determined to remain current and competitive with art centers on the East Coast by exhibiting contemporary art in the galleries. The Armory Show of 1913, which was shown in Chicago after its sensational debut in New York, featured American Impressionists like Childe Hassam, urban realists such as Robert Henri, and most notably the European avant-garde, including the experimental work of Picasso, Matisse, Duchamp and others. The Art Institute's more conservative staff and student body saw the European modernists as subversive and hostile to traditional values in art and morality. Students held protests and a mock trial, and even planned to burn Matisse in effigy for crimes against art. The struggle between 19th-century artistic foundations and the "new spirit" that tossed them aside helped define the period in which Koen worked. She had a tempered response to these rapid changes and different modes of working. In 1927, Koen remarked that if one was to review the exhibitions of the last 25 years (1902-1927), "we would readily see that every five years there was a radical change." She also felt that each school had "something to give," revealing her openness to innovation in service of artistic vision. Although aware of the latest tendencies, she worked in a representational mode and associated with artists working in the...
same manner. Following her tenure at the Art Institute, Koen visited art colonies and artist-run schools, where she found mentors navigating traditional and new ways of working to portray the American landscape.

In 1910, Koen traveled to the Woodstock School of Landscape Painting, where she studied with Birge Harrison (1854-1929). Nestled beside the dramatic Catskill Mountains 100 miles north of New York City, Woodstock and its surroundings were first made famous by Hudson River School artists like Thomas Cole (1801-1848). Harrison is an important figure in art history, in large part due to his role as head instructor of the Woodstock School and for his writings on art practice. He was an advocate of Tonalism, a style of atmospheric painting stressing mood, the natural landscape and personal vision. The style emerged in the 1880s, when its poetic scenes of the American wilderness offered a spiritual respite in an era of increasing industrialization. Harrison was determined that the Woodstock School would not produce artists copying the work of the instructors, stating that “lacking the note of personality; no real art is possible.” Although he encouraged individuality, he maintained that technical skill and finish were necessary to make “good art.”

Koen painted Evening, Illinois Plains in June of 1932. Though it was created decades after her enrollment at the Woodstock School, there are many elements in the work that show Harrison’s influence. The small painting on board features an intimate corner of a field. The sunlight fades into a soft pink glow behind a small group of silhouetted trees. The painting’s tone and atmosphere are evocative of a summer evening in the Midwest. In Harrison’s Winter Landscape, from the City of Davenport Art Collection, we see the seasonal counterpart to Koen’s painting. Qualities present in both works are described in Harrison’s influential instructional text, Landscape Painting, published in 1909, the year before Koen visited Woodstock. In the book, Harrison details theory, principle and practice—advocating scenes of natural beauty, the use of underpainting to achieve subtle tonal variations and vibration, asymmetrical composition, and small flashes of bright color to “enliven the effect.” Vibrant dabs of orange form the small windows of the central structure in Harrison’s painting while bright red paint highlights a tree trunk in Koen’s work. In addition to promoting a balance between technical craft and individual vision, Harrison was concerned with the development of an “American school,” an art “…whose symbols will be the American flora and fauna as seen by American eyes and felt through the American temperament.” Although Tonalism was a strong force in American landscape painting, the bright and expressive impressionist style quickly became favored among artists and the public.
In 1894, influential author and essayist Hamlin Garland saw impressionism as a welcome move away from the traditional and “cooked up” paintings of European tradition. There was still resistance to the unfinished style among conservative painters, like Charles Francis Browne (1859-1920), a revered landscape painter and one of Koen’s professors at the Art Institute. Garland used the term “impressionism” to refer to its principles and techniques, rather than limiting it to the movement in France which arose in the 1870s. He defined impressionism as work painted on the spot, communicating the artist’s impressions of light and form, and as a style dependent on personal vision and a specific sense of place and time. He felt its qualities were well suited to communicating the local spirit he linked to vitality in art. Leading artists like William Merritt Chase (1849-1916) and Childe Hassam (1859-1935) were among the first to integrate impressionistic techniques into their work. Both were active in art colonies where they had the opportunity to influence younger generations of artists.

In search of scenic beauty and places demonstrative of American character, artists were drawn to the coastal villages of New England. They gathered, formally and informally, in locations like Gloucester, Massachusetts, and Lyme, Connecticut, which were accessible by train from New York. The colonies were particularly appealing to aspiring painters seeking kindred spirits and the mentorship of established artists. As the popularity of impressionism rose, so did tourism in these locations, with the result that picturesque towns were flooded with visitors and artists alike. This trend was not limited to the East Coast, but occurred across the country, with colonies springing up in Taos, New Mexico, and Monterey, California (both of which Koen visited) and elsewhere. Artists like Koen sought out the remnants of pre-industrial life, at once nostalgic and beautiful. She focused on the small villages along the Eastern seaboard, scenes of rural life and sailing vessels. In contrast to Koen, urban realists explored life in American cities and all the grit that accompanied industrialization and urbanization. Whether in the city or the country, communicating a sense of “place” became increasingly important to artists and helped establish regional identity as an important element in American art.

Koen would return time and time again to locations along the East Coast,
Clear Day, Maine, circa 1927
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of the Rexroth Family Collection
spending numerous summers in New Hope, Pennsylvania, and Boothbay Harbor, Maine, in continuous exploration of the landscape and its innate qualities.\textsuperscript{24} In both locations, she studied with instructor Henry B. Snell (1858–1943). Snell was a supportive presence, specifically for artists like Koen at a time when it was uncommon for women to make a career in the arts.\textsuperscript{25} Koen’s scenes of the East Coast are engaging and accessible, with a fresh palette, energetic brushwork and thoughtful compositions. \textit{All on a Summer’s Day} (p. 4) is an example of the type, featuring fishermen returning from a day’s work, boats floating in the water, and a quaint village in the background. The painting, completed circa 1927, is likely of Gloucester, Massachusetts, and represents the confluence of different styles in Koen’s work. The brushwork is loose, but lacks the raw edge of the French Impressionists. The color is applied evenly and confidently to create spatial relationships between masses and forms, similar to the work of some Post-Impressionists. Although in line with other artwork of the era produced by artists working on the East Coast, Koen’s point of view is distinctly her own.

Koen’s life and work create an engaging dialogue with American artistic development during the early 20th century. She was active at a time when academic training based in 19th-century ideals was challenged by new styles and methods. Her direct associations with artists like Birge Harrison give insight into how landscape artists navigated the shifting trends of the art world and produced a uniquely American art. Koen celebrated the country’s different regions and depended on her personal vision to communicate the spirit of those places. This regional focus and the belief in one’s individual sensibility in artmaking reflect recurrent themes in American art.

\textbf{Vanessa Sage}

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\textit{Vanessa Sage is a graduate of the University of Iowa and earned an M.A. in museum studies from Western Illinois University.}


3 Ibid., 9-10.


6 Ibid.


9 Ibid.

10 “Miss Irma Kohn,” *Argus*, December 10, 1910, 10.


15 Ibid., 142.


19 Ibid., 122-123.

20 Ibid., 129, 131.


Untitled (Boats with Red Sails), circa 1930
Oil on canvas
Collection of Mrs. David K. Gottlieb
Market Scene (France), 1923-1924
Watercolor and gouache on paper
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections
Gift of the Henry Frankel Estate, 1957.18
Exhibition Checklist

AFRICA

*Untitled (Tunisian Street Scene)*, circa 1924
Gouache on paper, 9 ½ x 9 ½ in.
Collection of Mrs. David K. Gottlieb

ASIA

*Untitled (Japan)*, circa 1961
Watercolor on paper, 10 ¾ x 14 ¾ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

EUROPE

*In Chester Cathedral (England)*, 1914
Watercolor, gouache and charcoal on paper, 14 x 12 in.
Collection of Martin Bush

*Market Scene (France)*, 1923–1924
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 9 ¾ x 9 ¾ in.
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections; Gift of the Henry Frankel Estate, 1957.18

*Untitled (Boats with Red Sails)*, circa 1930
Oil on canvas, 28 ½ x 28 ½ in.
Collection of Mrs. David K. Gottlieb

*Untitled (Drying Sails in Majorca, Spain)*, circa 1957
Watercolor on paper, 9 ½ x 13 ¼ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

*Untitled (French Port Scene)*, 1923–1925
Gouache on paper, 9 ½ x 9 ½ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

*MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA*

*Dawn*, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in.
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections; Gift of Henry Frankel, 1950.226

*Day of the Dead*, post 1944
Oil on canvas, 21 x 24 in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

*Untitled (Birds in Flight)*, circa 1970
Oil on canvas, 23 ½ x 31 in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

*Untitled (Casahuate Tree with Mexican Indians)*, circa 1950
Watercolor on paper, 10 ¼ x 14 ¼ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

*Untitled (Fiesta in Cuernavaca)*, post 1944
Oil on canvas, 24 ½ x 29 ½ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

*Untitled (Melon Market, Guatemala)*, post 1944
Watercolor on paper, 11 x 15 in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

*MIDWEST*

*Evening, Illinois Plains*, 1932
Oil on board, 11 ¼ x 11 ¼ in.
Collection of Dr. Richard Arnell

*First Church of Christ, Scientist (Rock Island, Ill.)*, 1903–1915
Gouache and charcoal on paper, 12 ¼ x 12 ¼ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

*Rock River, Ill.*, circa 1924
Oil on board, 11 ¼ x 11 ¼ in.
Courtesy of Theodore J. Priester

*The City (Chicago)*, 1921–1925
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 9 ¼ x 9 ¼ in.
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections; Gift of the Henry Frankel Estate, 1957.17

*Untitled (Likely a View from the Artist's Studio Window in Rock Island, Ill.)*, circa 1930
Oil on panel, 11 ¼ x 11 ¼ in.
Collection of Mrs. David K. Gottlieb
NEW ENGLAND

All on a Summer’s Day, circa 1927
Oil on canvas, 28 ¾ x 29 ¾ in.
City of Davenport Art Collection
Museum purchase: Friends of Art Acquisition Fund, 1929.407

Clear Day, Maine, circa 1927
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 in.
Courtesy of the Rexroth Family Collection

From Hill to Hill, circa 1921
Oil on canvas, 33 ½ x 39 ½ in.
Courtesy of the Illinois Legacy Collection, Illinois State Museum

Gloucester in Autumn, circa 1930
Oil on canvas, 32 x 40 in.
Collection of the Rock Island Public Library
Donated by Irma René Koen, in honor of her father, Louis Kohn (April 1943)

Sea, Sky and Ships, circa 1927
Oil on canvas, 29 ¾ x 29 ½ in.
Courtesy of the Norman and Mary MacDonald Family

Untitled (Autumn Landscape), circa 1930
Oil on canvas, 24 ¼ x 29 ½ in.
Collection of Charles M. Priester

Untitled (Coastal Village Scene), circa 1930
Oil on canvas, 29 ¼ x 29 ½ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

Untitled (Commercial Street, Boothbay Harbor, Maine), 1922-1932
Oil on canvas, 24 ½ x 29 ½ in.
Courtesy of the Marilyn M. Rock Living Trust

Untitled (Cove at Low Tide), circa 1930
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 ¼ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

Untitled (Dock Scene), circa 1926
Gouache on paper, 9 ¾ x 9 ¾ in.
Courtesy of Theodore J. Priester

Untitled (New England Harbor), circa 1930
Oil on canvas, 16 ¼ x 20 ¼ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

Untitled (Old Wharf, Boothbay Harbor, Maine), circa 1930
Gouache on paper, 10 x 10 in.
Collection of Mrs. David K. Gottlieb

Untitled (Red Fishing Shack, Rockport, Massachusetts), circa 1930
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 in.
Collection of Mrs. David K. Gottlieb

Untitled (Sailboats), circa 1930
Oil on panel, 15 ¾ x 15 ¼ in.
Courtesy of Mrs. Jean Priester

SOUTHWEST

Untitled (Southwestern Scene), circa 1929
Gouache on paper, 9 ¾ x 9 ¾ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

STILL LIFE

Untitled (Zinnias with Pomegranate), circa 1930
Oil on canvas, 23 ½ x 25 ½ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

LOCATION UNKNOWN

Untitled (Rural Landscape with Barn), circa 1930
Oil on canvas, 25 ¼ x 30 ¼ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

Untitled (Tall Ships in the Harbor), pre-1926
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 in.
Collection of Mrs. David K. Gottlieb

EPHEMERA

First prize medallion awarded to Irma Kohn from the Peoria Society of Allied Arts, 1918
Metal, 2 ½ in. diameter
Courtesy of a Private Collection

Irma Kohn in an exhibition gallery, 1921
Scan from original glass negative
DN-0072902, Chicago Daily News Negatives Collection, Chicago History Museum
© Chicago Historical Society

Irma René Koen's hacienda in Cuernavaca, Mexico, circa 1960
Photograph
Courtesy of a Private Collection

Irma René Koen in a garden, circa 1956
Photograph
Courtesy of a Private Collection

Mexican travel sketchbook, post 1944
Graphite, paper, 6 x 8 ½ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

Passports (2) with stamps from Asia, 1960s
Paper, ink, 6 x 3 ¾ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

J. B. Hostetler
American, 1868-1925
Portrait of Irma Kohn with dog, 1913
Scan from original glass negative
Hostetler Studio Collection from the Richardson Sloane Special Collections, Davenport Public Library

Sketch sheets with holiday cards, circa 1909
Pencil, ink and pigment on paper, 10 ¼ x 7 ½ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection

Studio portrait of Irma René Koen, circa 1930
Photograph, 6 ½ x 4 ½ in.
Courtesy of a Private Collection
Irma René Koen (1883–1975) was a distinguished artist born in Rock Island, Illinois. A graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Koen traveled the world and exhibited at numerous galleries and museums during her 70-year career, including at the predecessor of the Figge Art Museum (the Davenport Municipal Art Gallery). Her legacy was largely forgotten until Dr. Cynthia Wiedemann Empen began researching the artist in depth.