



# ANNA HEYWARD TAYLOR

BY KATHERINE W. GILES

Anna Heyward Taylor was born in Columbia in 1879, the daughter of prominent physician Benjamin Taylor and his wife, Marianna Heyward. A graduate of the South Carolina Presbyterian Institute for Young Ladies, Anna went on to study at Radcliffe College in Massachusetts, before returning home to graduate from the South Carolina College for Women. As a young woman of means, Taylor traveled extensively after graduation, touring Europe, Japan, China, and Korea. The aspiring artist studied with painter William Merritt Chase in England and Holland from 1903–1904. Her medium from this period was primarily oil painting, but it was her experience at an artists' colony back home in America that laid the foundation for her most well-known works.

During the summers of 1915 and 1916, Taylor traveled to Provincetown, Massachusetts, on the northern tip of Cape Cod. There she worked alongside other artists, including Swedish etcher B. J. O. Nordfeldt. In Provincetown, Nordfeldt had begun experimenting with a new method of woodblock printing, in which prints were created by carving images in reverse on a plank of wood. Unlike the traditional Japanese method, which required the use of multiple blocks to create an image made up of multiple colors, Nordfeldt established the “white-line method.” This technique required only one block per image, with the various color areas delineated by carving a deep groove between them. The groove created a paint-free, or white, line in the final print, emphasizing the design.

It is likely that Anna Heyward Taylor's interest in printmaking had its seeds in a 1914 trip to Japan, where she explored the traditional Japanese artform and became acquainted with American printmaker Helen Hyde. But it was in Provincetown that Taylor experimented with Nordfeldt's white-line method: “I am launched in the new method and find it quite thrilling....I really feel I will get a lot out of it, certainly in the matter of composing pictures.”

In addition to wood-block printing, Taylor worked with linoleum cuts, watercolors, screen design, and batik on silk. In 1916, she traveled to British Guiana to study vegetation. Her resulting watercolors from that trip, as well as from a 1920 jungle expedition with naturalist William Beebe, were exhibited in 1922 at New York's



*Gaden on he Head!*, circa 1938  
color wood-block print, 11 x 8 inches  
Collection of the Greenville County Museum of Art,  
museum purchase

Museum of Natural History and the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. Her flower studies were crisp and vividly colored, infused with a boldness that became characteristic of Taylor's work. In 1939, a writer for the *Charleston News and Courier* declared, “There are no soft, fuzzy lines to Anna Heyward Taylor. She has a forceful personality, a straight-forward unwavering approach to all things both personal and artistic...Whatever Anna Heyward Taylor looks at she sees in a clear and unmistakable design.”

Heyward returned to Europe during World War I, becoming the first woman from South Carolina to serve with the Red Cross in France during the conflict. After eighteen months of service, New York became her home base, though she continued to travel. Taylor returned frequently to South Carolina, renting a room on Atlantic Street in Charleston for prolonged visits (see p. 18). There she struck up friendships with Elizabeth O'Neill Verner, Leila Waring, and Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, and the group hosted an informal artists' colony in their Atlantic Street studios. In 1929, Taylor bought a home on Church Street, settling in Charleston for good.

Unlike Verner and other artists active during the Charleston Renaissance, Anna Heyward Taylor's extensive travels were reflected in her work, especially in

her depiction of exotic flora and fauna. Nonetheless, she brought her unique perspective to lowcountry subjects as well, adding a vibrant new layer to the exploding Charleston art scene. In her block prints, she replicated local street scenes, replete with flower sellers, historic buildings, and palmetto trees. The grain of the wood showed up in the prints, adding an earthy texture and raw authenticity to the images. In a series of articles printed in *The State* in 1930, New York writer Henry Bellaman had this to say about Anna Heyward Taylor: "The outstanding characteristic of her painting is a magnificent exteriority....There it is, she seems to say, hard and brilliant and flooded with sun; my job is to make a pattern of it and let it speak for itself....There is an admirable honesty about all of this."

Most of her block prints were rendered in black and white, particularly her lowcountry images and those designs reflecting her travels in Mexico during the mid-1930s. She created an entire collection of prints based on her observation of rice cultivation at FitzSimons Plantation near Adams Run. One of these images, *Harvesting Rice*, was exhibited at the 1939 New York World's Fair. Like so much of her artwork, her lowcountry prints portrayed a raw, vibrant reality. David Houston, previously of the South Carolina Arts Commission, once remarked of Taylor, "Even though she preferred coherence and order, there remains an element that borders on the primitive in her most successful works. Her success as a printmaker is tied up in this combination of the elemental and the rational."

In 1949, Taylor provided twenty-three linoleum-block illustrations for *This Our Land*, an agricultural history published by the Agricultural Society of South Carolina. It solidified her reputation as a printmaker, though her textile designs were exhibited in a variety of museums and competitions. Taylor was an active member of a number of artistic groups, including the National Association of Women Artists, the National Arts Club of New York, the Southern States Art League, the Columbia Art Association, and the Carolina Art Association. She was a member of the executive board of the Gibbes Art Gallery for more than twenty years, and an honorary member of the New York Society of Craftsmen.

In 1955, at the Italian premiere of *Porgy and Bess* at La Scala, ten of her lowcountry prints were exhibited alongside George Gershwin's self-portrait and his portrait of DuBose Heyward. Just a few months later, on March 4, 1956, Anna Heyward Taylor died in Charleston. The next day, a letter to

the editor appeared in the *News and Courier*, written by Taylor's friend Alice Ravenel Huger Smith: "To all of us associated with her artistically and in her numerous activities, her withdrawal is a great loss....Her artistic work is too well known and appreciated for my comment."



*The Strike*, 1933

watercolor, 21<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 25<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

Collection of the Greenville County Museum of Art, museum purchase with funds from the 1998 Museum Antiques Show



*Cypress Swamp and Heron*, 1933

oil on wood panels, 64 x 76 inches

Collection of the Greenville County Museum of Art, museum purchase