

MARY BAKER EDDY MUSEUM  
and Historic Sites



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MAX BOHM, ARTIST



Max Bohm about 1898

Courtesy Esther Bohm Locke

In the spring of 1917 an artist of international fame prepared meticulously to paint a portrait of Mary Baker Eddy. He gathered together every available photograph, print, engraving and color reproduction of the Discoverer and Founder of Christian Science, and talked to those who had known her well. The artist was Max Bohm, a Christian Scientist, commissioned by Mrs. Mary B. Longyear to paint a number of portraits now in the collection of the Mary Baker Eddy Museum.

The careful preparation and study that went into Mrs. Eddy's portrait are indicated in the following statement by Mr. Bohm: "The objects, photographs, reproductions, knowledge, reports, evidences, drawings, testimonies of eye-witnesses, etc. were all carefully considered and examined. Those which showed evidence of not being quite correct, or

having been redrawn or added to in any way were put aside from those that bore the test of scrutiny. Only these last were admitted as documents to be used for the portrait. . . . Besides other measurements, it was very fortunate to have two full-length figure photographs, one sitting and one standing, to establish the construction of the figure and find the correct proportion."

The full-length, nearly full-size, standing portrait of Mrs. Eddy was completed in April 1918. It portrays Mrs. Eddy, dressed in pink and white, standing on a rocky eminence with her left hand resting on two books, and her right hand outstretched in a gesture similar to the one in the familiar balcony photograph taken at Pleasant View in 1903. The sky is a striking greenish-blue and in the background can be seen a fruitful tree, a field of grain, a river and the dome of a church.

Mrs. Longyear kept the painting at her home in Brookline, Massachusetts where she was collecting documents and memorabilia relating to the early years of Christian Science for a proposed historical museum (now the Mary Baker Eddy Museum). Many of Mrs. Longyear's friends were pioneer Christian Scientists, and some who saw the portrait wrote down their comments on it. Most agreed that Mr. Bohm had succeeded in capturing a good likeness. George Kinter, who served Mrs. Eddy at Pleasant View, wrote, "I have viewed this remarkable piece of portraiture with singular interest, pleasure and satisfaction."

The portrait of Mrs. Eddy was also exhibited publicly, first in March 1919 at the Knoedler Galleries in New York, as part of an exhibit of works by American artists who lived in Paris, including John Singer Sargent. Mr. Bohm's painting hung in the place of honor and created quite a stir among



Mary Baker Eddy, detail from portrait by Max Bohm

the public and press. The exhibit then traveled to several American cities, including Chicago, Detroit, St. Paul, Cleveland and Milwaukee. The painting of Mrs. Eddy sparked interest and controversy wherever it was shown.

Arthur Hazard, an artist whose portraits also hang in the Mary Baker Eddy Museum, saw this painting of Mrs. Eddy and commented as follows: "The figure of Mrs. Eddy — tall, slight, commanding — is conceived with infinite rhythm, tenderness, and grace, bathed in purest light. One feels in the presence of wonderful purity and power. . . . As a work of spiritual beauty I believe this picture stands by itself and is epoch making."<sup>1</sup>

How Max Bohm came to this point in his career — how his talent developed sufficiently to paint such a thought-provoking and controversial work — is a story in itself.

Max Bohm was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1868, named for General Maximilian, the former emperor of Mexico, whom his father admired. His grandfather, a German judge and

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Mr. Bohm about 1901

Courtesy Esther Bohm Locke

writer of considerable ability, had emigrated to this country for political reasons when his sons were young boys. Max's father, Henry Bohm, had a lumber business in Cleveland. Young Max showed early talent as an artist, his subjects including ships, animals and famous Americans. With his parents' consent he left high school to attend art school.

A great influence on Max Bohm's art career was his aunt — his "Tante" Anna Weitz. She, too, was an artist and took him to Europe in 1887 to work and study. They visited Holland, Germany and France, staying together for over 12 years. During his studies and for years afterward, Max wrote home in German to his beloved mother, Emilie Stuhr Bohm, telling of his travels and his art. One adventure occurred in a small French village where Max encountered the artist, Paul Gauguin, back from his celebrated stay in the South Seas, complete with entourage of island women and parrots. Max heard him making insulting remarks about the United States and challenged him to a duel, but by morning Gauguin's colorful group had left.

Max studied in Paris at the Julien School under Laurens, Constant and LeFebvre, and exhibited at the Paris Salon starting in 1889. He also made an exhaustive study of works by the old masters in the museums of England and the Continent.

In 1895 Max Bohm started teaching his own art classes at the small fishing village of Etaples, in northern France. Many of his students were English; others came from as far away as Poland, Armenia and America. For a short while, Mrs. Longyear attended his classes. She and Max became good friends and kept up a

lively correspondence for many years.

In 1898, Max Bohm's large seascape entitled "En Mer" won a gold medal at the Paris Salon, causing such a sensation that it had to be roped off to prevent the crowds from damaging it. One of the enthusiastic viewers of the painting was Zella Newcomb, a Minnesota farm girl studying art in Paris. She went back several times to see "En Mer" and decided she had to study with the artist. Expecting to meet a man of considerable years and experience, she was greatly surprised when the door at Etaples was opened by a handsome, young American. The two were married in London in October 1898.

A few years later, after the passing of their first child, Max and Zella Bohm were introduced to Christian Science. Zella was healed of tuberculosis and later Max was freed from an injury to his tongue incurred during a bicycle accident. When they traveled to the United States in 1901, they introduced their families to Christian Science. Max and Zella had Primary class instruction from Miss Mary Brookins of Minneapolis, a student of Mrs. Eddy's. Max's sister, Martha, later became a Christian Science practitioner in Cleveland.

The Bohms' son, Max Bradford Bohm, was born in Minneapolis in 1902. His parents longed for their simple country life in France, so they returned to Etaples later that year. The Bohms were a poor artist's family, although Max's successful art classes continued during the summer months. Zella gave up painting because she said there was enough money to buy materials for only one



Courtesy Esther Bohm Locke

Max Bohm (back left) and his art class in Etaples, 1896

artist in the family. They moved to a farm house in Trepied, near Etaples, where their daughter Esther was born in 1903. A year later they started wintering in London, returning to the French seacoast at Equihen for the summers. Daughter Elizabeth was born in London in 1906.

The Bohm daughters remember much about their life in France and England, and Esther has written at length of her experiences. Their father made their toys, including a doll carriage from a barrel and a rocking horse fashioned from a bent tree trunk. There was even a doll house made from a packing case, completely furnished, with tiny paintings on the walls. Their friends were mostly offspring of art-related people. While living in Paris, they played with Eva Le Gallienne and often saw the children of Isadora Duncan playing in the park in their Grecian costumes.

In 1910 the whole family traveled to the United States so Max could install mural decorations in the Cleveland Court House. When they returned to France the following year, they lived in Paris, continuing to summer on the northern coast. The classes were discontinued, however, so Max could concentrate on his own work. He made one exception and taught Mrs. Longyear when she came to visit during the summer of 1913.

Stylistically, Mr. Bohm has been classified as a Romantic Impressionist. His canvases are large, colorful and light-filled. In a collection of his writings on art, he stated, "Do not paint THINGS, paint the conditions in which things are, the light and the reflections in the atmosphere. The thing itself is temporary and decays, but the conditions have always been and will remain true."<sup>2</sup> His style evolved from a traditional realism to a later more visionary and imaginative approach, capturing the essence of a figure or landscape with a simple bold treatment, never a literal representation.

Max Bohm eliminated everything unnecessary from his compositions and concentrated on masses, forms, line and color. It was not important to him to show every wrinkle in the drapery or to define clearly every lock of hair. He wrote to Mrs. Longyear, "Often in the best pictures the objects are only indicated without too much of what is called realism so that the unity of the idea can stand out. . . . Of all the demands upon the

greatest painters, the demand for a work like realism is the one they have the most strenuously resisted."

Though avoiding realism, Mr. Bohm did not resort to abstraction, nor did he sacrifice character or lifelikeness in his works. The subjects of his paintings seem to radiate an inner glow, and the viewer speculates that Mr. Bohm has caught the essence of his sitter and transferred it to canvas. He studied nature and absorbed it, using what he learned to paint from memory and imagination. To him, simply copying nature was not art; he used nature in his art to stand for grand ideas.

Max Bohm's subject matter varied, but his works nearly always contain figures. At the start, he painted many vigorous seascapes, full of hard-working fishermen and small, storm-tossed boats. Later, as his family grew, he concentrated on tender studies of women and children, using his family as models. Children in the bath, at play, fast asleep, — all were carefully studied and captured on canvas by the loving father.

As an artist, Max Bohm worked slowly, thoughtfully. His brushes were long, some up to six feet, and he would dab paint on the canvas and then rock back in his chair to study the effect. He had endless patience to work with each canvas until it brought out exactly what he wanted to say.

What Mr. Bohm considered his best mural is a three-panel decoration in the Music Room of the Mary Baker Eddy Museum, formerly the Longyear home. Entitled "Music in Nature," it was commissioned by Mrs. Longyear in 1913 while the Bohms were still living in France. The following summer they left St. Valery-sur-Somme and fled to England as refugees from the German advance. Here Mr. Bohm finished the preliminary sketches for the work, which he described in detail: "The paramount ideas in the sketch as you will see are joy, harmony, the sounds of the music of nature. There is the murmuring brook, the wind in the trees, the chantey of the sailors, the music of the anvil, the voices of singing children and the oldest and most continuous sound in the world, — that of the breaking waves. Throughout the work will be found by those who look for it and will see beyond the mere aspect of nature, another meaning. . . . In the center panel we have lying

in the foreground an ancient Corinthian column recalling the art, genius, and beauty of times past. It is a support for the central figure half kneeling upon it. She listens. She is inspired by the sounds, the wisdom, the music which is above what may be around her. Perhaps she hears the singing of the stars. . . . A new day is coming, the anchor of hope is being forged. The color, the form, the masses, extend from panel to panel, correlated in idea and line, all working together for good, happiness. The realization of good, present and to come."

In 1915, after returning to Paris to collect their belongings, the Bohm

The Bohm daughters remember their father as a strict but loving man who could be playful but was always dignified. They grew up posing for him and sometimes he let them take the brush and add a stroke or two to the canvas. He was an avid reader, liked history particularly and was fascinated by prehistoric man. He was a champion chess player, a great conversationalist and enjoyed the companionship of other artists at clubs to which he belonged wherever he lived, including the Paris Society of American Painters, the Salmagundi Club in New York, and in Provincetown, the Beachcombers Club.



Longyear Music Room mural, "Music in Nature," in 1917

family moved permanently to the United States. Mr. Bohm completed the mural canvases, each 11 feet high and 8 feet wide, in his New York studio in 1916. Before final installation at Brookline, the mural was displayed at the Knoedler Galleries and was enthusiastically received.

About this time, Mrs. Longyear offered to build the Bohms a house on the grounds of her estate. However, Max's independent nature finally rebelled at the idea of becoming a "court painter," and he refused the offer. Mrs. Longyear was understanding, and the money which continued to come in from Longyear commissions enabled Max to build a handsome home and studio in Bronxville, New York, and later to send his son to Harvard.

The Bohms spent summers in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where Max was an early leader in the town's growing art colony. In a few years they bought a house there, overlooking the bay. Called "Grand View," it is still owned by the family.

After 1916, Max Bohm devoted himself almost completely to commissions from Mrs. Longyear, which allowed him little time to work entirely on his own. He started with the aforementioned standing portrait of Mary Baker Eddy. Then he painted portraits of Mrs. Eddy and Asa Gilbert Eddy, depicting them about the time of their marriage. A younger, seated portrait of Mrs. Eddy followed, and a large landscape showing the Baker Homestead in Bow, New Hampshire.

Mrs. Longyear arranged to have color reproductions of these five major works made by the Medici Society in London. The paintings were shipped to London in 1920, and Max Bohm spent the winter of 1920-21 overseeing the production of the lithographic plates. Many changes had to be made to ensure that the prints would resemble the paintings as closely as possible. Copies of the resulting fine reproductions are still available for sale at the Mary Baker Eddy Museum.



Left to right, charcoal sketch of Zella Bohm, 1907 (Courtesy Esther B. Locke); "Children of the Sand," 1917 (Courtesy National Academy of Design); "The Happy Mother," 1913 (Courtesy National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution; Gift of Mrs. J. M. Longyear)

In addition to these paintings, Mr. Bohm painted nine portraits of early Christian Scientists for Mrs. Longyear's historical collection, and a large painting of Jesus. The last paintings he completed for his patron were those of herself and her husband, John Munro Longyear. These Max worked on in the Longyear home during the summer of 1923.

During his lifetime, Max Bohm was well-known, particularly in Europe, as a fine American artist. He won many awards, including silver medals at the Paris Exposition in 1900 and the St. Louis Exposition of 1904, and a gold medal at the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. The Musee de Luxembourg in Paris purchased his painting "Golden Hours" for its permanent collection, and in 1917 his work entitled "Children of the Sand" won the Clark Prize for best composition from the National Academy of Design. Because most of his career was spent in Europe, however, he was just becoming well established in this country at the time of his passing in September 1923. He was a member of the National Academy, and is represented in museums and private collections in cities throughout the country, including New York, Dallas, San Diego, Minneapolis and Cleveland. Mrs. Longyear purchased his painting "The Happy Mother" and donated it to the National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C.

A New York art critic wrote of him shortly after his passing, "The art of

Max Bohm is like nothing that has gone before; it is great because it is personal and came from an inherent talent backed up by a vast fund of knowledge and culture, a trained mind and a fine soul. He never imitated anyone, nor can he be imitated, for every picture he painted came from a fresh inspiration and the technique he employed was made to suit the subject rather than the opposite which is the case with men less independent in thought and action."<sup>3</sup>



Courtesy Esther Bohm Locke  
The artist in his Bronxville studio, about 1921

Perhaps what made Max Bohm's art so individual was his spiritual outlook and reliance on God for inspiration. He wrote, "A painter should try, as well as he is able, to constitute himself the channel, his work should be the reflection of Love, of Principle. As he grows there should be evidence in his work of more and more love and less and less self — sacrificing self, working according to Principle, showing individuality." Max Bohm's paintings show that he accomplished this to a great degree and it is particularly fitting that works by such an artist should be represented at the Mary Baker Eddy Museum.

Marylee Hursh

1. Quarterly News, Spring 1978, Vol. 15, No. 1.
2. Max Bohm, "An Artist's Philosophy."
3. Lula Merrick, "In the World of Art," *The Morning Telegraph*, September 30, 1923.

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