



HISTORIC
MASTERS

BY JEANNE SCHINTO

POLLY THAYER

PORTRAITIST, MODERNIST, PHILANTHROPIST



What's in a name? Consider our subject's multiple monikers. Her birth name was Ethel Randolph Thayer, although her blue-blooded Boston Brahmin family always called her Polly. Mrs. Donald C. Starr was what she had printed on her stationery after she married in 1933. Her eventual, legally changed name was Polly Thayer Starr. But Polly Thayer (Starr) — with a relegation of her husband's name to a parenthetical — was how she identified herself professionally late in her career.

And then there was May Sarton's pet name for her, Poll, as in "Darling golden-eyed Poll," the salutation the poet used in a note she sent Thayer in 1938. "I adored your letter and chortled over the dinner-party," Sarton wrote her friend. While in their 20s, the two had met in a theater group; they remained close for the rest of their lives. "Why didn't you say anything about your costume, the one thing I was dying to hear about?"

When Sarton wrote those words, included in a volume of the poet's correspondence, the reputation of Polly Thayer (1904–2006), which is how she signed most of her paintings, was still being established beyond Boston society circles. Today, she remains best known in her native city, where she lived and worked in a bay-windowed brownstone overlooking the Charles River in the historic Back Bay neighborhood. But as someone who refused to follow the example of her teachers and developed her own approach to painting — and to the challenges of life itself — she deserves to be more widely recognized, admired, and emulated.

The Algerian Tunic, 1927, oil on canvas, 35 x 30 in., private collection, photo: Polly Thayer (Starr) papers, 1846–2008, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



Interval/Interlude (Self-Portrait), 1930, oil on canvas, 52 1/4 x 39 1/2 in., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, bequest of Victoria Thayer Starr, 2014.335 ■ (RIGHT) *Circles*, 1928, oil on canvas, 72 x 48 in., New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut, gift of the artist, 1960.08



“PLACID LADIES” AND “PLEASANT BACKGROUNDS”

Thayer might easily have spent her entire privileged life as a lotus-eater. When one learns of her Connecticut boarding-school days filled with, as she put it, “delirious excitement,” the summers she spent on her family’s estate in Hingham on Boston’s South Shore, the lengthy line of Episcopal ministers on her mother’s side, and the fortune-making investments in 19th-century copper mines on her father’s, it’s easy to imagine Thayer fulfilling her destiny. She would merely have dabbled in artsy pursuits, flitted to the world’s fashionable places, and engaged back home in charitable works in the spirit of noblesse oblige and all that. And there wouldn’t have been anything exactly wrong with it — except that Thayer had the talent to make a serious artistic statement. She also had the need, even after she became the wife of a lawyer-cum-yachtsman-cum-clubman (11 club memberships, Thayer once counted) and the mother of two children.

So why did she take up painting in the first place? “I scratch where it itches,” she once wrote, adding rhetorically, “but — why the itch?” Her reply: “to peel off the covering of the familiar.” By then, she was in her 70s and slowly going blind via glaucoma and macular degeneration, but she still thought of painting in the present tense: “It is such a heady magic to evoke relatives, terror, moonlight, cows, or an idea, with a burnt stick and colored mud, that it is small wonder that the artist, like the drug addict, must have his fix.” Of course, one has to be introduced to one’s addiction. In Thayer’s case, like many people, she started drawing as a child. Then one day, shortly after her father, Ezra Ripley Thayer, a lawyer, law professor, and dean of Harvard Law School, died at age 49, the adolescent Polly happened to see students making charcoal drawings of plaster casts at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Luckily, as she explained much later in an oral history recorded

for the Smithsonian Institution, her mother noticed that she was rendered “bug-eyed” by the sight. “I couldn’t leave them ... So she entered me in a class with Beatrice Van Ness, who taught there, and that was heaven.”¹¹

Beatrice Whitney Van Ness (1888–1981) was a Boston School acolyte who had studied with some of the style’s most revered practitioners, including Edmund C. Tarbell and Philip Leslie Hale. Thayer herself began studying with Hale (1854–1934), initially at the museum, then privately. “Mr. Hale said as far as he was concerned there were three methods of painting,” she recounted years later. One was the Grizzly Bear Method. “You know grizzly bears stand up against a tree, make their mark, to see how tall they are against the other ones. You try to reach up to the others, and you measure yourself by the past.” What he dubbed the Spider Web Method was employed by someone who “just pulls it out from himself, his own thing.” Finally, there was Hale’s preference, the Chicken Hash Method, by which “you took the prettiest girl, and the nicest, handsomest Chinese coat or costume you could find, and the most beautiful background and Chinese jar — and you put them all together and you had the best of everything.”



(LEFT) Mark Anthony DeWolfe Howe, 1933, oil on canvas, 26 x 20 in., Boston Athenaeum, gift of Reginald Allen, 1982 ■ (ABOVE) Donald Starr, 1935, oil on canvas, 50 1/4 x 35 1/4 in., Boston Athenaeum, gift of Polly Thayer Starr, 1995 ■ (BELOW LEFT) Miss May Sarton, 1936, oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 32 1/4 in., Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, gift of Paul J. Sachs through Polly Thayer Starr and May Sarton, 1994.51



It's a deft description of the Boston School, and describes Thayer's 1927 self-portrait *The Algerian Tunic* — to a point. Her dress is an exotic garment in a violet-and-white print, but its short sleeves reveal her bare biceps, and it's opened from throat to mid-chest. She is posed against elegant, gold drapes, but the prop by her side isn't a Chinese jar; it's an overflowing bowl of voluptuous fruit. Her reddish-brown hair is bobbed, and her expression is insouciant, not compliant like the typical Boston School model, whose long hair is piled high and who, with teacup in hand, looks ready to surrender to the rest cure.

"Not to sell the Boston School short," Thayer averred. Hale and other teachers, including Charles W. Hawthorne, had equipped her with "all kinds of implements," she acknowledged, but even during her apprenticeship she knew she had to break free. She recalled asking herself: 'I wonder if Miss Thayer's going to drift into the way of the rest of them? I wonder if she's going to settle down into a painter of pretty girls, posed in the studio, still life made decorative, and if you like charming, but somehow dead things.' She knew "placid ladies" and "pleasant backgrounds" were not what she wanted to paint.

MODERNIST IN THE MAKING

Thayer's first solo exhibition, at Doll & Richards in Boston, opened on New Year's Eve, 1930, an auspicious debut that resulted in 18 portrait commissions. People who knew her were well-represented among them. "None better connected" is how Cleveland Amory characterized the Thayer clan in *The Proper Bostonians*, his 1947 cultural critique whose first edition featured "A Bostonian's Idea of the United States of America," a map that, for example, puts Omaha just north of San Francisco. Predating by 30 years *The New Yorker* artist Saul Steinberg's "View of the World from 9th Avenue," it's a reminder of the old joke about the Boston



Self-Portrait, 1943, oil on canvas, 40 1/4 x 35 1/4 in.,
Boston Athenaeum, gift of Polly Thayer, 1995

matrons who, on their first West Coast visit, blamed the heat on the ocean being 3,000 miles away.

To be fair, Thayer had already won a gold medal from the Boston Tercentenary Exhibition in 1930 for a second self-portrait, *Interval*, alternatively titled *Interlude*, either of which could signify a stage in her bold move away from her training. (When Hale saw it, he commented, “The slime of the serpent!”) Or either word could have a literal meaning: the twilight that envelops the room where she is posed. Whatever Thayer

intended, her gaze is direct, assertive, self-assured. By this time, she had also won the Hallgarten Prize from New York’s National Academy of Design for a magnificent, six-foot-high nude of 1928, *Circles*. Its subject, a professional model, is seated on a chair draped in black and white fabrics, her cleaved backside toward the viewer, one foot on a tiger-skin rug, one hand grasping an antique chair’s finial. Call it Boston School unchained. Thayer bought the background fabric on one of her trips to Paris. After the sitting, she had it made into a dress. “Before sewing



My Childhood Trees, 1938–39, oil on canvas, 17 x 21 in., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, gift of the Boston Society of Independent Artists, 40.212

Her modernist style in the ascendancy, Thayer produced a likeness of Sarton consisting of contrasting colors and contours: the oval of the poet's ivory face, her dark-brown, swept-back hair and sharply drawn eyebrows, the curving arms of her dark-green jacket, her blue lap robe and improbably blue cigarette with tip of red ash. (It's a good thing she ignored advice from an *ArtNews* critic, passed along by a friend: "She's strongest in black and white, tell her to stick to that.") Along with the poet's pose and far-off gaze — she leans away from the backrest of a Victorian armchair, perhaps toward an unseen companion — it conveys the subject's formidable character and intellect. Acquired by Paul Sachs for Harvard's Fogg Art Museum, the painting remained with Sarton, as arranged, until her death.

"HOW THE LANDSCAPE CHANGES!"

Thayer married Donald Starr, a Boston lawyer and her brother's Harvard classmate, when she was 29, late for a bride of the period. "I was pretty gun-shy of marriage when it would mean giving up painting," she explained, "and it took a long time to make up my mind." She gave in while Starr was circumnavigating the globe with friends on one of his boats. (The largest of 10 was a schooner named *Pilgrim*.) Thayer had agreed to marry him when he returned, but a cable summoned her to Genoa, where he wanted the wedding to take place, and she went. "He had webbed feet — always had to get on a boat," quipped Thayer, who herself suffered from seasickness. After their Paris honeymoon, he continued on his voyage while Thayer headed home to paint more portraits. In 1935, she painted her husband in evening dress. She thought that attire best reflected his "gregariousness," she said. "He loved going about."

In 1940, the year Thayer gave birth to her first child, Virginia — she would have her second daughter, Dinah, in 1945 — the MFA acquired her brooding landscape *My Childhood Trees*. It is composed of conifers and their shadows, which overwhelm a group of peak-roofed structures. Presumably, it was inspired by the Hingham place, where Polly and her husband built their own summer house. At the time the MFA owned fewer than 10 American modernist canvases — and none by a Bostonian. In 1943, she painted another self-portrait startlingly unlike either *The Algerian Tunic* or *Interval/Interlude*. Hanging in the Boston Athenaeum today, it shows her in a cocked pink hat and olive-green suit with a reddish-brown fur stole thrown over her shoulder. One hand is on her hip; on the other, an elaborate coral ring. Initially, that hand held a paint brush. (She holds one in *The Algerian Tunic*.) What did the substitution mean? Was it a design choice? Or an equivocation? In 1942, in search of spiritual guidance, she had joined the Quakers, who "never looked with much favor on the arts" and expected everyone to get involved with projects, leaving her with less time for her art — as did motherhood. It didn't matter that she "was lucky enough to be so situated I could get people to look after the children, or cook, or do whatever." She was conflicted, and pressed.

In the 1950s and '60s, despite her many obligations, familial, social, and spiritual, Thayer kept painting, mainly portraits, the type of work she felt grounded her. But she also produced landscapes, Boston cityscapes, and seascapes, especially of Martha's Vineyard, where she and Donald had bought another summer house so he and his boats could be nearer the water. "How do you like growing old — how old are you now?" she asked a friend, novelist Slater Brown, in a 1965 letter.² At the time he was in his late 60s; she was 59, and could not, of course, have predicted she would live to become a centenarian. "It is interesting how the landscape changes!" She was being metaphorical, but as her eyesight began to fail, the statement became literally true. A random gift of a jeweler's loupe had once delighted her — a new toy; in time, it morphed into a useful tool, especially when, in the 1970s and '80s, she pursued even more intensively a previous interest:

one must cut," a French philosopher once said. That she was definitely in the process of doing.

Thayer's 1931 portrait of Helen Stevens Coolidge embraced tradition, however. Standing by a marble fireplace, Mrs. Coolidge, hands clasped, looks prosperous in a satiny beige-and-periwinkle dress and pearls. She was one-half of a wealthy Boston couple who summered in North Andover, Massachusetts, on an estate her family had owned since 1729. Known today as the Stevens-Coolidge Place, the property now belongs to a land conservation group, the Trustees of Reservations, as do the portrait, dress, and effusive thank-you note that Mr. Coolidge — a diplomat, Thomas Jefferson descendant, and nephew of Isabella Stewart Gardner — sent with Thayer's \$1,000 fee.

Thayer also painted Mark Anthony DeWolfe Howe, the writer and *Atlantic Monthly* editor, early in her career. His three children had been her childhood companions. The 1933 portrait depicts the bespectacled Howe, pipe in hand, dressed formally in black jacket and tie with a pocket-watch key affixed to a gold chain draped across his white vest. Against a background propped with two tomes, he looks learned, distinguished, imperious, just as he undoubtedly saw himself. The painting belongs to the Boston Athenaeum, the venerable private library on Beacon Hill; Howe was its director in the mid-1930s. According to Thayer, the sitting took place at the Howes' summer "cottage" in Bristol, Rhode Island, while he read aloud to her from Henry James's *The American Scene*.

To be sure, it's hard to resist giving people what they want, especially if they are kin or kindred, paying clients, or prevailing arbiters of taste. In 1932, just before Thayer's first New York solo show opened at Wildenstein, a *Town & Country* columnist wrote, "Her painting is pleasing, conservative," and noted that one of her sitters, heiress-socialite-linguist Alice Vanderbilt Shepard Morris, had previously been painted by another "conservative portraitist," John Singer Sargent. In 1933, Boston's Vose Galleries included Thayer in a group exhibition along with Tarbell and two other Boston School artists, Frank Weston Benson and Frederick Bosley. That same year, however, she painted a dramatic, modernistic portrait of Olivia Chambers, a New York acquaintance, wrapped in a fringed, black shawl with a Spanish accent. Indeed, Goya's use of black in a work Thayer had copied at the Metropolitan Museum of Art was her inspiration. By the time Thayer painted her friend May Sarton's portrait in 1936, she had studied a bit in New York, at the Art Students League, with Harry Wickey. Mercilessly, he had marked up her work, and introduced her to abstract values. "That there was something that went on between the outline, other than just dark and light" was a revelation, she recalled. "The heavens opened."



Cabbages, 1936, oil on canvas, 21 x 25 in., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, museum purchase with funds by exchange from a Bequest of Mrs. George Oliver Wales, Gift of Clara C. Lyman in memory of Charles Boden Green, Charles H. Bayley Picture and Painting Fund, and Gift of Mrs. Walter R. Eaton, 2007.255

STEVEN TREFONIDES (b. 1926), *Polly Thayer Starr*, c. 198-?, photograph, Polly Thayer (Starr) papers, 1846–2008, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



painting the natural world, including animals, insects, vegetables, and flowers, some closeups of which rival Georgia O’Keeffe’s. She showed and sold little, partly because she wasn’t interested, but also probably because the art world wasn’t particularly interested in her.

RESURGENCE

“I can’t see much, so ... that’s it,” Thayer told the Smithsonian Institution in the mid-1990s when her oral history was recorded. “Now it’ll have to be insight,” she added with a laugh. But as she made the transition from her Boston residence to a suburban retirement community, where she lived for her last decade, there occurred a resurgence of interest in her work among Bostonians. It began with a 1994 show at Boston’s Copley Society of Art, which Thayer recalled “nearly sold out.” Another Copley exhibit followed in 1996. Then in August 2001, the MFA put Thayer’s Sarton portrait on a giant banner and hung it outside its entrance. It announced the landmark exhibition *A Studio of Her Own: Women Artists in Boston 1870–1940*. Thayer was the show’s only living exemplar, in the company of Ellen Day Hale (Philip’s sister), Lilian Westcott Hale (his wife), Elizabeth Boott Duveneck, Sarah Wyman Whitman, and others — over 40 artists in all. Vose put on a concurrent show, and subsequent ones, including *Centennial Exhibition: A Celebration of the Artist’s 100th Birthday* in 2004. Then came the memorials upon her death, and the circle grew wider.

In 2017, the Rockport Art Association & Museum in Massachusetts hosted her first major retrospective, *Polly Thayer Starr & The Alchemy of Painting*, featuring more than 80 works on loan from private collections and 19 public ones. In 2020, the Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, Massachusetts, exhibited *Polly Thayer Starr: Nearer the Essence*, whose curator, Christie Jackson, mined the artist’s papers at the Smithsonian, the Polly Thayer Starr Charitable Trust, and other sources for ephemera, sketchbooks, journals, studies, watercolors, and pastels, then displayed them alongside the familiar oils. The show’s title came from something Thayer

said late in life, choosing her words with care: “You never achieve what you want, but you’re always getting nearer to the essence. And that’s a drive and a search that never ends.” In telling Thayer’s story, Jackson also presented the artist’s carved-oak desk, on loan from Weir River Farm in Hingham. Her family’s summer estate, renamed, was given by Thayer to the Trustees of Reservations — only one of her many donations and bequests.

Today those who know Polly Thayer’s name are becoming more numerous than ever. As part of the MFA Boston’s sweeping survey *Women Take the Floor*, Thayer’s *The Algerian Tunic* and a vivid 1936 still life, *Cabbages*, have been on view since September 2019, and will remain there until November 28, 2021. In the company of such eminences as O’Keeffe, Alice Neel, Helen Frankenthaler, Elaine de Kooning, Lois Mailou Jones, and others, whose importance has been overlooked, these enduring works are exactly where they belong. ●

Information: pollythayerstarr.org; mfa.org. Visitors to *Weir River Farm in Hingham* (thetrustees.org/place/weir-river-farm) can enjoy the new outdoor installation *Polly Thayer Starr: Spirit of Discovery*, which features five “exploration stations” reproducing approximately 20 of the artist’s works, especially her paintings of the estate’s scenic landscapes.

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Endnotes

- 1 Quotations, except where noted, come from the Polly Thayer (Starr) papers, 1846–2008, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- 2 “Letters from Polly Thayer to Slater Brown, 1955–1965,” Boston Athenaeum, used by permission.