

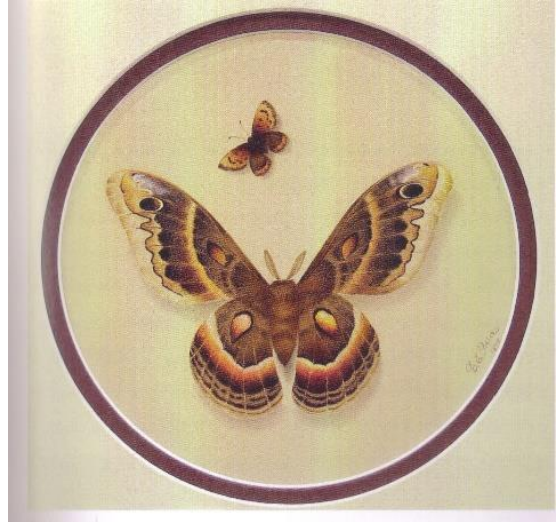
## Rockville's Charles Ethan Porter "African-American Master of Still Life"

By Jean Luddy

Rediscovered after many years, local artist Charles Ethan Porter strived to overcome society's prejudice toward African Americans and created a body of work that revealed his growth as an artist during the era of Impressionism.

Born in Hartford in 1847 or 1849, Charles Porter's family moved back to Rockville during his youth. Porter's artistic gifts were evident before he graduated from high school in 1865. Porter left Rockville to further his education, studying at the National Academy of Design in New York City from 1869 through 1873. He supported his education by giving art lessons. To help him pay for an additional year of school, Rockville citizens held a musical benefit for him at a local church in 1877. Porter left New York City in 1878 and moved to Hartford where he lived until 1881.

Charles Porter specialized in still life paintings of fruits, insects, butterflies, and flowers in a mixture of indoor and outdoor settings. His work was known for realistic details and precise brushstrokes.



An example of Porter's earlier style, "Moth" was painted in 1878.

While in Hartford, Porter became acquainted with people in the local art and literary communities including Samuel Clemens, also known as the writer Mark Twain. As an African American, Porter endeavored to prove that he had the talent and ambition to succeed as an artist.

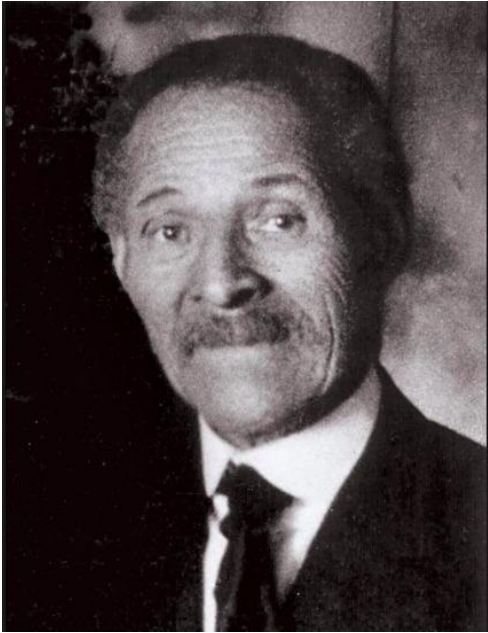
In 1881, Porter decided to study in France to learn about the new movement in art that would ultimately be labeled "Impressionism." Arriving in France, Porter carried letter of introduction from Samuel Clemens and other notable citizens from Hartford. He spent two years abroad and took courses at an art school in Paris. Before having to return to the United States due to a shortage of funds, Porter spent time in the French countryside which inspired him to paint landscapes.

Porter returned to Hartford in 1884. His later work revealed the influences of his time overseas. His still life paintings display looser brushwork and he used color and light in a more Impressionistic style.



"Peonies" painted in 1885 demonstrates the evolution of Porter's style.

Between 1884 and 1897, he divided his time between Hartford and New York as he worked on making a name for himself. These years were his most productive period. He sold a number of paintings, but not enough to completely support himself as an artist. Throughout his career, incidents occurred which made him conscious of the barriers that society imposed on his race.



After 1897, he settled permanently in Rockville. He occasionally exhibited his work. His income came from giving lessons to area artists and selling still life paintings and depictions of local scenes. Porter died in 1923. In his last years, he faced declining health and the loss of close relatives. Sometimes to get by, he would trade paintings in place of money to settle his bills.

Known only to people in Rockville at the time of his death, Porter and his work were rediscovered in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In one of his letters, Porter wrote that he felt that his struggle to become accepted as an artist and as an African American would pave the way for others of his race to achieve success in the arts.

Porter's art is appreciated by many museum visitors and art collectors. The story of the artist and the adversity he faced leads to a greater appreciation for his body of work.

*The information in this article was taken from the book:*

*Charles Ethan Porter, African-American Master of Still Life by Hildegard Cummings, published by the New Britain Museum of American Art in 2007.*