Recovering May Alcott Nieriker’s Life and Work
A One-Day Conference: 28th June 2018
Université Paris Diderot, Paris 7 | 5 Rue Thomas Mann, 75013 Paris, France

Keynote Speaker: Dr Daniel Shealy (University of North Carolina, Charlotte)

Call for Papers | Deadline, 31st January 2018

May Alcott Nieriker was a nineteenth-century American painter who lived as a single woman in Paris between the years of 1870-1879. At a time when women were not admitted to the beaux arts and were forced to pay double in tuition at the private ateliers, May daringly travelled alone to pursue a career at the age of thirty. She made a great impact on the Parisian art scene; being exhibited at the Paris Salon twice (1877, 1879), and publishing a book, ‘Studying Art Abroad and How to Do It Cheaply’ (Roberts Brothers 1879), providing practical advice for other young American women who wished to pursue careers in painting in Europe. Beyond Paris, her career began with a book of sketches of the homes of famous authors from her hometown of Concord, Massachusetts (Concord Sketches, 1869), and she also lived for a short period in London—being exhibited at the Dudley Museum (1877), where she was also allegedly hailed by Ruskin as ‘the only artist worthy to copy Turner’.

However, May continues to remain in the shadow of her more famous sister, Louisa May Alcott, and, as Judy Bullington has observed, her life and achievements are consistently ‘emeshed’ with the fictional character of Amy March of Little Women (‘Inscriptions of Identity,’ 2007). Recovering May Alcott Nieriker’s Life and Work is a one-day conference, opportunistically held in Paris, that aims to gather new interest for, and invite new perspectives on, any aspect of the life and work of this forgotten transatlantic artist, a painter and a writer and a figure of the troubled Parisian scene of the 1870s. Of particular interest are the new contexts of reception of her oeuvre, both her painting and her writing, new archival work, the question of co-authorship (notably with her sister Louisa) and creditation, the mapping of (transatlantic and European) artistic networks in the 1870s.

The symposium will feature the work of postgraduate students of the AHRC CHASE consortium. It is open to academics, independent researchers and international postgraduates from a variety of disciplines: Americanists, nineteenth-century historians, biographers, literary scholars, art historians and artists with an interest in the Alcott family from across the world.

Topics can include, but are not limited to: May Alcott Nieriker’s visual art, especially her portrayal of enslaved and freed people in such works as La Négresse (1879) and the lost portrait, “The Prince of Timbuctoo” (1877); the political dimension of her art in the context of French and international politics; May Alcott Nieriker’s epistolary output and life-writings, housed at the Houghton Library, Harvard, her articles for the Boston Evening Transcript and Youth Companion, and her unfinished novel, An Artist’s Holiday (1873), co-authored with Louisa May Alcott. The importance of Studying Art Abroad; And How To Do It Cheaply (1879) (notably in shaping our understanding of the lifestyle and challenges facing nineteenth-century woman artists, especially those who were expatriates) Mapping May Alcott Nieriker’s Paris; May Alcott Nieriker and her contemporaries (artistic networks, expatriate networks, influence of, and on her peers) May Alcott Nieriker’s life: relationship with her husband Ernst Nieriker, her attempts to combine an artistic career with domestic life…May Alcott Nieriker’s influence on Louisa May Alcott’s portrayal of female artists in such works as A Marble Woman (1865), the Little Women trilogy (1868-1886), Psyche’s Art (1868), An Old Fashioned Girl (1869), and Diana and Persis (1879). May Alcott Nieriker’s relationships with the wider Alcott family; her father Bronson Alcott and mother, Abigail May, and her three sisters, Anna Bronson, Louisa May and Elizabeth Sewall. May Alcott Nieriker’s reception from biographers and critics, and her portrayal in popular culture and fiction, including works such as Jeanine Atkins’ 2013 novel, Little Woman in Blue, and Elise Hooper’s 2017 novel, The Other Alcott.

Scientific committee: Azelina Flint (University of East Anglia), Cleo Humphreys (University of East Anglia), Cécile Roudeau (Université Paris Diderot-LARCA), Christopher Timms (University of Essex), Heather Mc Knight (University of Sussex)

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