

NINA FLETCHER LITTLE

Nina Fletcher Little, author, researcher, and pioneer collector in the field of American decorative arts and folk art, died on March 3, 1993, in Boston at the age of ninety. She lived most of her life in Brookline, where she was born, and where she served as a trustee of the Public Library and the Visiting Nurse Service, as president of the Brookline Friendly Society and chairman of the Brookline Counseling Service, and was a lifelong member of the First Parish. Her historical study of twenty-eight Brookline houses constructed before 1825 was published by the Brookline Historical Society in 1949 as *Some Old Brookline Houses*. In 1956, in recognition of her service to her community, the Brookline Rotary Club presented her with its award for Distinguished Public Service.

Nina attended the Park School and graduated from Miss May's School (now the Brimmer & May School), which she later served as a trustee from 1937 to 1957. Although she held no academic degree, she became a distinguished scholar, renowned for her thorough research, clear expository prose, and extensive list of publications. She defined her field as antiquarianism, without apology. She was fascinated by certain kinds of objects and the stories that could be learned about who made them, who used them, and how they were used. She focused her research on the minute details of New England's everyday life in the pre-Victorian period, finding pattern and meaning in mundane and prosaic objects long before the birth of the new social history.

Although Nina Little always shared her research and collecting interests with her husband, she was unquestionably the moving force behind their collecting. Beginning about 1928 with transfer printed Staffordshire pottery with American subjects, her interest in English and American ceramics expanded quickly and she assembled important collections of many kinds of rare forms and ornamental styles. Her friendship with Lura Woodside Watkins resulted in a collection of documented examples of New England redwares. She was a member of both the China Students Club of

Boston and the Wedgwood Club, presenting illustrated lectures at their meetings and submitting articles on ceramics and redware for publication in their newsletters and in the *Boston Herald*, the *Boston Transcript*, the *Antiquarian*, and a series of four articles in the *Christian Science Monitor*. Her first article in *The Magazine Antiques*, 'European Redware and Its Chinese Ancestors' (January 1938), grew out of these early interests.

Nina Fletcher Little's research, collecting, and publications eventually encompassed almost all aspects of New England decorative arts, folk art, wall painting, and floor coverings. It has been said that 'without fear of contradiction, . . . [she] has contributed more to American decorative arts scholarship—in both quantity and quality—during the twentieth century than any single person.' Nina Little published forty-six articles in *Antiques* between January 1938 and March 1987, more than any other author. We should always be grateful that Cyril Nelson of E. P. Dutton & Co., who published a new edition of her 1952 book *American Decorative Wall Painting* in 1972, encouraged Nina to compile a number of her earlier articles and rework them into the format which became the book *Country Arts in Early American Homes*. He then encouraged the extraordinary outpouring of publications which culminated in 1984 in the publication of the autobiographical *Little by Little: Six Decades of Collecting American Decorative Arts* and a contemporaneous exhibition of selections from the Littles' collections at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

In all, Nina Fletcher Little published more than 150 articles and monographs on a wide range of subjects, six books, and several exhibition catalogues, work always accomplished in collaboration with her husband, Bertram Kimball Little. It would be hard to forget their descriptions of Bert pounding away on a manual typewriter perched on an eighteenth-century tea table in the parlor or carrying weathervanes and flying decoys to the top of a ladder and there steadying them against a blue sky and a picturesque cloud until Nina could snap the perfect picture, but these were real experiences, the substance of their partnership.

Nina Little is perhaps best known today for her pioneering studies in American portraiture and decorative painting. She was the first to identify many New England provincial artists, carefully studying individual styles, painstakingly pursuing documentation in obscure historical sources, and tracing sitters' genealogies. A well-read woman, she was versed in classical iconography and understood the early artists' reliance on prints as sources of composition as well as subject matter. In those pre-Xerox days, she assembled huge files of photographs of paintings which were useful in organizing her research and suggesting attributions. Always the thrifty New Englander, however, she never commissioned a photograph without inquiring whether or not a negative already existed and getting a firm commitment about the price of a glossy print. Still, she recognized the importance of actually looking at the original paintings and once wrote to Clarence Brigham that 'actual comparison is the acid test.' Her exhaustive studies and detailed observations brought many new paintings to light and made possible important attributions and re-attributions of many well known paintings. Her monograph on Winthrop Chandler was published in *Art in America* in 1947 and reprints of it served as a catalogue for the first exhibition of portraits and landscapes by that artist which were shown at the Worcester Art Museum later that year. She continued her studies, identifying additional work by Chandler, as well as the distinctive hand of John Brewster, Jr., Michel Félice Corné, Asahel Powers, Rufus Hathaway, and many other New England artists. In the early 1950s she assisted with the design of the building for the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection at Colonial Williamsburg by suggesting that the ceilings be lowered and the interior become a series of domestic-scaled spaces. She did the first research on the collection, made attributions of paintings, and wrote the first catalogue of the collection published in 1957. She also added to the collection. She collaborated with Bert on several important exhibitions, among them *New England Provincial Painters*, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, during the 1976 Bicentennial.

Nina Little's interest in the profession of painting led to her study of painterly technique, the composition of paints, and the diversity of work undertaken by early artists. She recognized that many of the professional artists painted signs, coaches, furniture, and interior architectural details as well as occasional landscape or history paintings instead of portraits. Her interest in the work of the architectural painters led to a distinguished collection of painted overmantel panels and fireboards and to the publication of *American Decorative Wall Painting* in 1952. These studies also led the Littles to a friendship with Esther Stevens Brazier, to careful restoration of original ornamental painting in one of their own houses, and to Nina's becoming an active member of the Historical Society of Early American Decoration.

Together, Bert and Nina Little were active members of a wide variety of collectors clubs and historical societies, presenting programs, planning field trips, and generously sharing their discoveries of both objects and new information through informal conversations and public lectures. They both belonged to the Massachusetts Historical Society and the Colonial Society of Massachusetts. In addition, Nina Fletcher Little served as Trustee of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Essex Institute; the Essex (Massachusetts) Historical Society; the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown, New York; and Old Sturbridge Village, where she was chairman of the Curatorial Advisory Committee. She was also named an Honorary Fellow for Research in the Department of Decorative Arts at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Nina Little joined the staff of Old Sturbridge Village as a paid consultant in 1956 to lead the project team that conducted research and developed the furnishing plan for the 1796 General Salem Towne House. She carefully studied family genealogy, probate inventories and other documentary evidence, comparable local families, and evidence of rural lifestyles as the basis for the completed restoration. This was one of the first historic houses to be

restored following this kind of research. Both her methodology as well as her results were published promptly in *Antiques*.

Both Bert and Nina Little served on planning committees and presented illustrated lectures at the Williamsburg Antiques Forum, the Seminars in American Culture in Cooperstown, and Antiques Collectors Weekend at Old Sturbridge Village. Each year they entertained the Winterthur Fellows, the Cooperstown graduate students, and the Heritage Fellows from Historic Deerfield as they made their field trips to New England. The Littles' warm hospitality and superb collections never failed to impress these students, many of whom enthusiastically accepted Nina's invitation to write to her with research questions or to share new discoveries. She was always faithful in responding to inquiries from young students or well-established scholars, answering her own mail until her final hospitalization.

During the 1970s, with Bert at home in energetic retirement, the couple engaged in frequent day trips throughout New England. Together, they pursued field research, visiting historic houses, historical societies, studying genealogical and probate records, searching through town libraries and public record offices, bush whacking through neglected cemeteries, and digging through moldy vaults in search of documentary evidence and collaborative material. Their collections grew mightily during these years as well, and new discoveries led them to new research and new fields of publication.

For these and many other accomplishments, Bert and Nina Little jointly received the Louise Du Pont Crowninshield Award of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1964 and twenty years later they were presented the Winterthur Museum's Henry Francis Du Pont Award in honor of their contributions to the study, preservation, and interpretation of American art.

Nina Little made use of the scholarly resources of the American Antiquarian Society even before her husband was elected to membership in 1948. Nearly twenty years later, in 1967, she was elected

to membership in her own right and she expressed her 'hope to contribute especially something in the way of scholarship to the Society in return for the privileges of membership' as well as a hope to attend the meetings and to enjoy 'the stimulating people connected with it.'

Nina Fletcher Little was a distinguished scholar who made remarkable contributions to her field. She was also a wife and mother, a traditional woman of her own time and place. As one might expect, she assisted Bert in his work at SPNEA, in 1947 as a member of the 'committee in charge of the furnishings' for the Harrison Gray Otis House, serving on the advisory board for *Old Time New England*, and, of course, pouring thousands of cups of tea as a member of the Women's Council.

From 1938 until near the end of their lives, the Littles moved in the summertime to their salt water farm, Cogswell's Grant in Essex, Massachusetts, which they enjoyed with their three children, John B. Little, M.D., Warren M. Little, and Selina F. Little, their two daughters-in-law, and five grandchildren. This early-eighteenth-century farmhouse stimulated the entire family's interest in historical research and restoration. In addition it served as an exhibition gallery for many of their distinguished collections and as a laboratory for application of a wide range of concepts which were loosely termed 'country arts.' The Littles thoughtfully planned for the long-term preservation of their cherished retreat. Today the well-endowed farm, with all of its buildings and superb collections, is a museum property of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

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