

Books & People

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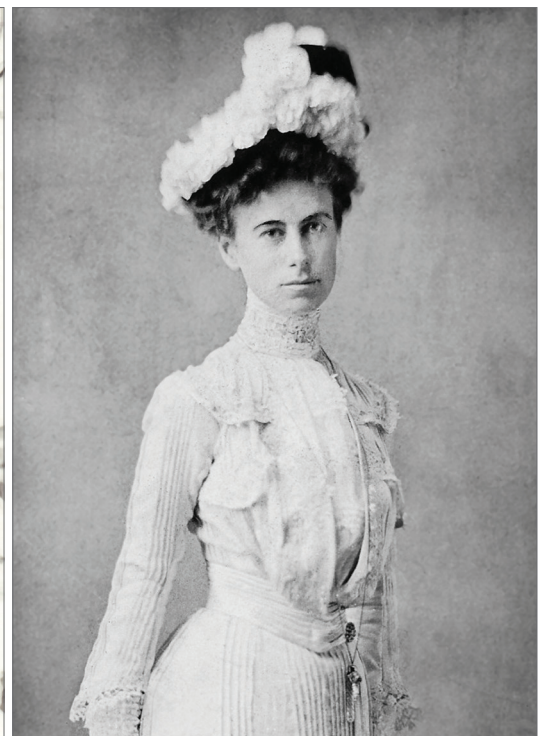
Left: Margaret Armstrong on the grounds
of Danskammer, the family house
in Newburgh, NY, n.d.
Right: Margaret Armstrong, c. 1890,
From the Armstrong Family Collection

Margaret Armstrong: Genius Developed in Women

Barbara Bieck, Special Collections Librarian

“Men have been willing to see any amount of literary or artistic genius developed in women - when these ladies have consented to attribute their work to a husband or brother, and say nothing about it.” —Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911)

These words by women’s rights advocate Thomas Wentworth Higginson, editor of Emily Dickinson’s poetry, ring true about the difficulty women in the arts faced around the turn of the twentieth century. Like Dickinson, the majority of women struggled to gain a foothold in fields dominated by men. Hamilton Fish Armstrong, a Library trustee in the 1940s, chose the above quote in his autobiography to introduce the work of his two sisters, Margaret and Helen Armstrong. An intrepid woman, Margaret Armstrong not only gained a foothold in the field of binding design and launched her career as an artist, but also outpaced the male designers by leaps and bounds. Now one of the most celebrated and recognized women in binding design history, Armstrong made a significant and lasting mark on the profession.



Greetings from the Head Librarian

Books and People. It's not only the name of this newsletter but the title of Marion King's iconic history of the Library (027K). It's also a phrase that perfectly encapsulates the very essence of the Library.

The problem is, we're running out of space for both. Perhaps you've wondered how we find room for the 4,000 new books we buy each year. Maybe you've been reluctant to tell friends about the Library because of the increasingly crowded Hornblower Room. If you've ever peeked into the Circulation Workroom on the First Floor, aka Stack 4, you might have taken pity on staff trying to work in a space designed for books.

Over the past year, we've been discussing these challenges and the future needs of the Library with Doug Larson of Larson Architecture Works. Doug has brilliantly reimaged the building, carving out additional member spaces, increasing storage for books, and improving staff work areas.

The proposed plan envisions building an addition in the rear yard as well as returning Stack 4 to book storage, not only ensuring that our entire collection remains onsite, but also allowing it to grow for many years into the future. A multi-functional space for reading and study, events, and receptions would be opened to members on the Fourth Floor. Work areas for all staff members would be vastly improved, with many moving to a redesigned space where Closed Stacks are now. And there are many more benefits to the plan.

In the coming months, we'll be providing more details about this transformative project. I'm excited, and I'm looking forward to discussing it with you and planning for the future of our Library.

—Carolyn Waters, Head Librarian



From the Armstrong Family Collection

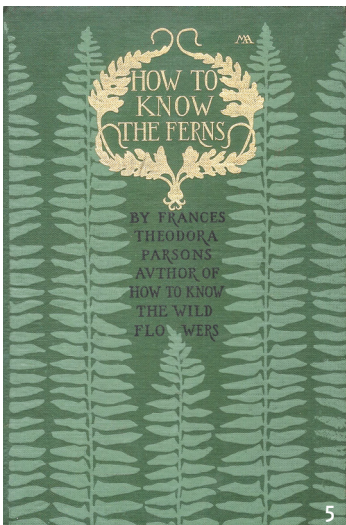
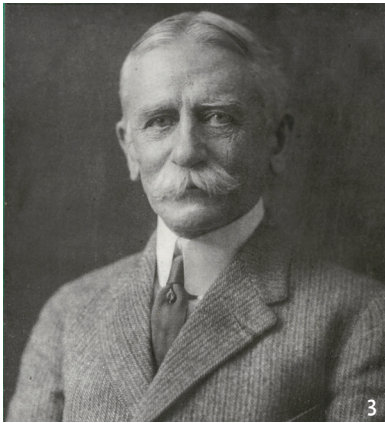
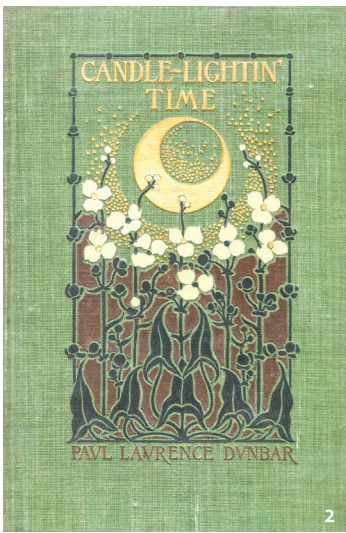
Born in 1867 into the well-to-do Armstrong family, Margaret enjoyed a privileged upbringing in an artistic household. Her father, D. Maitland Armstrong, was a stained glass master and diplomat who encouraged his children in their crafts. He surrounded his family with influential artists and intellectuals during gatherings at their home on West 10th Street. While she received little formal schooling or artistic training, we know from her brother's autobiography that the Armstrong children were raised in a household that encouraged all intellectual and artistic pursuits, highly focused on providing culture to the children. The family retained a membership at the Society Library, and from these records we know the family read avidly and were interested in varied subjects, from the latest popular fiction to travel books.

Margaret studied painting, but she took most to decorative work. For a time she followed in her father's footsteps and designed stained glass commissions. However she quickly devoted herself to book-cover design, a relatively new profession that did not develop until the later nineteenth century. Bookbinding changed dramatically during the century; the advent of the Industrial Revolution brought with it new machines designed to mass-produce stamped cloth bindings. Now, rather than sending books to a bindery for a leather binding, publishers could bind their own books in stamped cloth bindings. Publishers began to realize they could use an attractive book cover to advertise and sell more copies, and during the 1880s publishers began to court trained artists to design book covers.

Although Margaret was not formally trained in the arts, she possessed enough knowledge and raw talent to skillfully compose remarkably beautiful and inventive book-cover designs. Her background in stained glass design heavily influenced her aesthetic: many correlations between the two media make it a natural path for Margaret to forge. The family influence certainly helped shape her style. She worked with her father and sister Helen in a shared studio, all creating stained glass and bindings in a collegial space. Margaret's proficiency in this style created stunning bindings and set her apart from other book cover designers from a young age.

But before she became known for her publishers' bindings, Margaret first had to break into the male-dominated profession, working against considerable gender stereotypes.

When she began her career, Margaret met with resistance trying to place her designs with publishers. She had to consciously sign her sample work using only



her initials, M.N. Armstrong, knowing the people reviewing her work would think she was a man and make their decisions based on skill rather than sex. Persevering, she was eventually hired in 1890 to decorate and illustrate a novel published by A.C. McClurg. Both Margaret and Helen were hired to work on this project: Helen created 16 full-page uncolored illustrations, and Margaret designed a series of small drawings for use as chapter vignettes, as well as the cover. It is not known when in the process Margaret and Helen revealed their full names; however the credit line on the title page does read *Illustrated by Helen and Margaret Armstrong*.

After this initial endeavor, Margaret went on to establish herself firmly in the world of publishers' binding design. Margaret won many accolades during her lifetime, quite a few early in her career. When the call for submissions came for the Woman's Building in the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893, Margaret entered a binding. Her contribution proved successful, earning her a spot in the pavilion for millions to view her work. It even garnered an award before the Exposition opened, while the binding was displayed in a New York City exhibit of the 453 successful entries. Several of Margaret's bindings were included in other exhibits around NYC during this time. The Aldine Club included her work in its 1892 exhibit *Book Bindings and Designs*, and she was one of four women whose work was included in the 1894 Grolier Club exhibition *Commercial Bookbindings*. Grolier's accompanying catalog notes, "[Armstrong's] skill in adapting, combining, and creating designs which are almost flawless in excellence has made her book-covers famous."

As an example of the work women designers could and should aspire to, Margaret's bindings were included in P.G. Hubert Jr.'s chapter in the 1894 *The Woman's Book*, titled "Occupations for Women." Hubert reported that of the several thousand female designers in New York, the design and publishing communities considered Armstrong to be foremost among her generation of designers. After just four years in the profession, Margaret's skill and creativity placed her in the top of the field. It is important to note that Margaret was recognized as a popular and famous binding designer during the time she actively worked in the trade. Her skill and recognition as a peer of male artists demonstrated to women that they, too, had a place in competitive business and could stand as equals to men in some professions.

During her career, Margaret designed over 300 book covers. Currently, 314 covers are attributed to her, though this number could change as more book covers she designed, but did not initial, are identified. Her distinctive style helps scholars determine which unsigned bindings are part of her industrious output. Starting around 1915, as dust jackets came into vogue, Margaret moved on from binding design and started a new career as an author. She took one long adventurous trip out west that culminated in her *Field Book of Western Wild Flowers* (1915). This field guide featuring her immaculate illustrations remains the definitive field book for flower identification west of the Rocky Mountains. She went on to publish six more books.

Margaret Armstrong's success served as inspiration to a generation of women. Her contemporaries witnessed the recognition Margaret received, observing an independent woman who was not content to let her work fall into obscurity under anonymity or a false male name. Margaret made sure she received credit for her work and worked with dedication on what she chose and enjoyed, unapologetically forging forward into projects and carving out a spot for herself in book history. She leaves a legacy of more than book covers, her published books, and an indomitable and pioneering spirit.

1. Seated left to right: Maitland Armstrong (father) with his children Helen Maitland, Hamilton Fish and Margaret Neilson. Standing left to right: son Noel, wife Helen Neilson Armstrong and children Marion, Edward, and Edward's wife Maud Gwendolen King, c. 1910.
3. Maitland Armstrong, trustee of the New York Society Library 1897-1918.
4. Hamilton Fish Armstrong, chairman of the New York Society Library 1944-1957.
- 2 & 5. Book covers from the collection of The New York Society Library

This article is written in conjunction with the exhibit *The Book Beautiful: Margaret Armstrong and Her Bindings*, on display in the Peluso Family Exhibition Gallery through August 31, 2020.

THE DECADE IN R



2010

- ◆ The Goodhue Society, of members who are including the Library in their wills, is launched.
- ◆ The Library holds its first Literary Magazine Salon, a Writing Life event underwritten by Jenny Lawrence.
- ◆ George Washington's Mount Vernon ceremonially "returns" one of the books still on Washington's charging record.
- ◆ The Dorothy Strelsin Book Fund for Performing Arts & Contemporary Fiction is created.
- ◆ The Tea & Trollope reading group begins its popular monthly meetings to discuss the Victorian master novelist.
- ◆ **The Library restores the skylight and dedicates the Peluso Family Exhibition Gallery and the Hornblower Room.**
- ◆ Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* has the greatest number of checkouts.



2011

- ◆ The Library hosts the annual meeting of the national Membership Libraries Group.
- ◆ **The exhibition *Writing the Garden: A Literary Conversation Across Two Centuries* takes place.**
- ◆ The Alexandra Mayes Birnbaum Fund for British Literature, Arts, and History enhances the collection.
- ◆ Longtime Assistant Head Librarian Jane Goldstein retires.
- ◆ *Cleopatra*, by Library member Stacy Schiff, is our most-read book of the year.

2012

- ◆ Barbara Hadley Stanton becomes a member of the Library's Board of Trustees.
- ◆ The exhibition *Edith Wharton: A Glance* draws hundreds of visitors.
- ◆ **The Young Writers Awards ceremony is held with the publication of the collection.**
- ◆ Trustee Robert A. Caro lectures on his multi-volume biography *The American People*.
- ◆ Live from the Library becomes a regular feature.
- ◆ Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* is our most popular book.

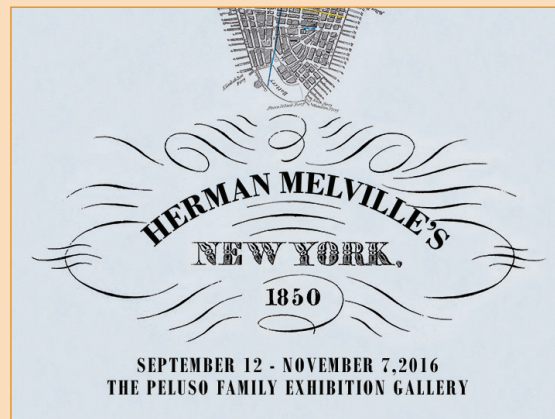
2015

- ◆ Hours expand to our current 61 open hours per week.
- ◆ Tom Glynn's book *Reading Publics* includes a chapter on the Society Library and wins a New York City Book Award.
- ◆ The Byron & Elizabeth Dobell Fund for World Literature in Translation improves that area of the collection.
- ◆ **Mark Bartlett departs the staff, and Carolyn Waters becomes the twenty-first Head Librarian.**
- ◆ A donation from Richard Peck spurs the Young Adult/High School collection, available in Stack 9.
- ◆ Historic charging ledgers are relaunched as *City Readers*.
- ◆ Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* is the year's most-read title.



2016

- ◆ The Library's benefactor Sarah Parker Goodhue is the subject of an exhibition.
- ◆ **A short-term exhibition explores member Herman Melville's time in New York City.**
- ◆ The Library performs a full-membership survey.
- ◆ The Members' Room is beautifully refurbished.
- ◆ The New York City Book Awards observe their twentieth anniversary.
- ◆ Library member Elizabeth Strout's *My Name is Lucy Barton* gets the year's biggest circulation.

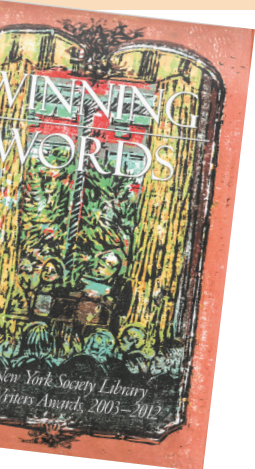


2017

- ◆ Teatime begins, weekdays at 2:00 PM.
- ◆ **The Children's Library offers a new program.**
- ◆ The exhibition *Broken Beauty: The Art of Edith Wharton* takes place in the Peluso Family Exhibition Gallery.
- ◆ Carol Collins Malone becomes a member of the Library's Board of Trustees.
- ◆ *What Stacks Up: A Short-Term Survey* is the first member-sourced exhibition.
- ◆ The Library joins Instagram @SocietyLibrary.
- ◆ Uptown at Night brings in community members.
- ◆ A new ALL ARE WELCOME sign is installed.
- ◆ Amor Towles' *A Gentleman in Moscow* is our most-read book.



REVIEW 2010-2019



...es the first female Chair
...ees.

...s New York City: A Backward
...itors.

...celebrate their tenth anniversary
...ollection **Winning Words**.

...es on his monumental
...Years of Lyndon Johnson.

...s a biannual event.

...Ending is the year's



2013

- ◆ A new unified graphic identity and new website go live.
- ◆ The *Extraordinary Gifts* exhibition displays rare books presented to the Library 1754-2012.
- ◆ The Hammond Collection of rare gothic fiction is fully cataloged.
- ◆ The Kallisto Fund for Ancient Cultures & Civilizations adds to classics and history holdings.
- ◆ **The Children's Library reopens following its renovation with a major event featuring *Babar* creator Laurent de Brunhoff.**
- ◆ Ian McEwan's *Sweet Tooth* is checked out the most.



2014

- ◆ The Peluso Family Exhibition Gallery features *From the Western Front and Beyond: The Writings of World War One*.
- ◆ **The Lyn Chase Poetry Collection is dedicated in the Whitridge Room.**
- ◆ The Marilyn L. Herskovitz Fund for Biography adds to Stack 7.
- ◆ Circulation/Acquisitions Assistant Janet Howard celebrates fifty years on the Library's staff.
- ◆ Member author Phyllis Rose presents her book *The Shelf: From LEQ to LES*, featuring our Stack 6.
- ◆ Singer Stephanie Horowitz kicks off the performance series sponsored by Alexander Sanger in honor of Jeannette Watson Sanger.
- ◆ *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt gets the greatest circulation.

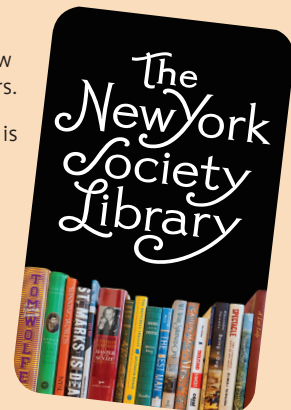
2018

- ◆ Public gallery talks begin with the *New York World of Willa Cather* exhibition.
- ◆ **A major bequest from author and trustee Shirley Hazzard includes future royalties from her books.**
- ◆ The e-membership category and Day Passes become available.
- ◆ The Art & Activism of the Anthropocene series, co-sponsored with *Guernica*, explores climate change.
- ◆ Happy Hour happens monthly in the Whitridge Room.
- ◆ Erica Armstrong Dunbar gives the Henry S.F. Cooper Jr. Lecture on Early American History & Literature on *Never Caught*.
- ◆ The electronic Loeb Classical Library joins the collection.
- ◆ The Meet the Publishing Pros series begins.
- ◆ The Necromancers of the Public Domain draw inspiration from our stacks for variety shows.



2019

- ◆ **The Library premieres its first-ever membership cards.**
- ◆ Family Fun Day welcomes 278 kids and adults for crafts and storytelling.
- ◆ The exhibition *Women Get the Vote* provides a historic look at the suffrage movement and the 19th Amendment.
- ◆ Circulation Assistant Linnea Holman Savapoulas is honored for forty years on staff.
- ◆ Short plays inspired by the people and history of the Library are performed in a special Writing Life presentation.
- ◆ "Little Whit" opens for quiet reading and writing on the third floor.
- ◆ The Library celebrates new books by member authors.
- ◆ Tara Westover's *Educated* is checked out the most.



New Members Party

On December 2, the Library hosted a gathering for members who joined since last June.



Above: Alix Winter, Maria Maggenti, and Pam Mancini; Upper right: Esen Gonul, Carolyn Waters, and Susanna Goldfinger; Lower right: Jerrold Confino and Helen Squire.

Photos by Karen Smul

Celebration of Major Donors

On February 24th, a reception was held to thank our members and friends who supported the Library in 2019 with a gift of \$1,000 or more. Archival material relating to the current exhibition, *The Book Beautiful: Margaret Armstrong & Her Bindings* was featured, with co-curators Harriet Shapiro and Barbara Bieck offering special insight into this extraordinary artist and her work.



Above: George L.K. Frelinghuysen and Bill Crookston; Carolyn Waters, Sydney LeBlanc, and Alix Lombardo; Susan L. Robbins and Carol Collins Malone; Megan Lew and Julian Golay; Below: Geraldine Kunstadter and Marilyn Sauline; Ellen McGoldrick and guest

Photos by Karen Smul

The Book Beautiful Opening

Co-curators Harriet Shapiro and Barbara Bieck joined Armstrong family members for the opening reception of our new exhibition on January 15. Margaret Armstrong scholar Lowell Thing (*lower right*) gave remarks.



Photos by Karen Smul



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One More Picture



The Children's Library is delighted to nurture the curiosity of our youngest readers!