

Frank A. Guba - His Life and His Art

by his great granddaughter, Nancy Phillips

One might look at how Frank A. Guba lived and say he was a man of his time – a hard working family man who became an artist and worked intensely at it his whole life through. But upon closer look, there is more – so much more – about Frank Guba that makes him stand out among the artists not only of his time, but of all time.



Frank Adolf Guba

Let me tell you the story of my great grandfather's life as it was told to me by Emil Guba (his last surviving son at the time), as well as Emil's children Ann and Bob, my mother Marilyn Guba Phillips, and by all the other friends and family I've met along the way in my journey to re-create his past.

He was born Frank Adolf Guba on April 20th, 1867 the son of an impoverished German family who lived in the town of Hohlen in Bohemia. Then, Hohlen was north of Prague in Czechoslovakia, which is now known as the Czech Republic, having divided from Slovakia in 1993.

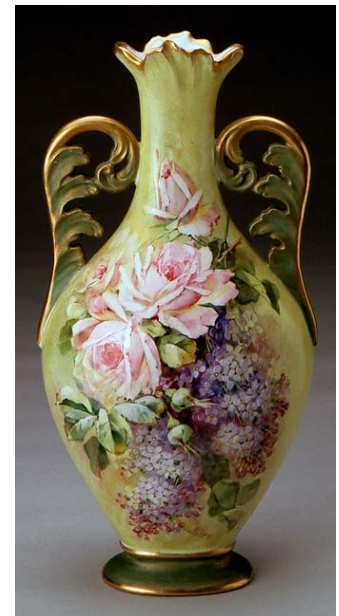
Very early on, probably around the age of 10, he began to serve an apprenticeship as an artist, for which he received, if anything at all, the most meager compensation. At some point his father died and, at the age of 17, he came with his sister and mother to the United States to seek work. They settled in the Bowery section of New York City and the very first job Frank took was as a decorator of china in Trenton, NJ and then in Greenpoint, New York. Several years later, in 1891, he took the second job of his career – also as a decorator of china – with the Pairpoint Corporation in New Bedford where he stayed for the remainder of his 45-year career.

Frank Guba often spoke about the beauty of his homeland to his family of six sons. His earliest art featured trees, forests, ponds, rivers and an extraordinary array of the most beautiful flowers and butterflies. He was instinctively a naturalist and this theme continued throughout his life not only in his magnificent paintings and decorated china and lamps but in every facet of his life and throughout his home and surroundings.

One of the stories that has touched me most about my great grandfather has been repeated to me by each of his grandchildren and also by the well known Pairpoint glass expert and author, Frank Avilla. In a personal letter to

me, he talks about the incredible garden Frank Guba cultivated at his Bourne St. home. Avilla called the garden 'an extraordinary work of art unto itself.' It was known throughout the town and became a focal point for the people of New Bedford as they visited it to take in its beauty.

It was there, in those gardens, that Frank Guba spent the early hours before breakfast and the remaining hours of evening daylight – after working from 7 in the morning until 6 at night. This garden was meticulously kept and arranged with great attention to color and form and the various species of plantings were all carefully chosen and catalogued.



Delicate limoge vase decorated by Frank A. Guba

My mother still remembers the extraordinary grape arbor in her grandfather's garden, and you will find themes of grapes and roses depicted throughout many venues of his art.

His garden was no doubt the inspiration for many of his greatest works and, like all of his art, was an extension of himself. His creative genius was predicated upon the depiction of natural beauty and the interpretation of a world of nature that meant so much to him that he became one with it at a very young age and continued his whole life through.

As I write, I regard one of my most prized possessions – a delicate limoge vase decorated by my great grandfather with moist pink garden roses and blue lavender lilac. His flowers envelop – not unlike those enormous floral forms by the artist Georgia O’Keefe – except that her starkness is replaced with his warmth. They are infused with that same quality of luminosity that is apparent in nearly all of his work – from the glimmer of his ocean waves, to glistening winter snows and muted sunlit landscapes. There is something far beyond special in the way he portrays his flowers. They provide comfort while exuding life – like he himself, today and always.

Frank Guba lived his art every moment of his life. If he was not hard at work at Pairpoint or in his garden, he would be found in his parlor, which served as his studio, painting long hours into the night. This parlor studio, for obvious reasons, was off limits to his sons except for special occasions and holidays when it

would be opened for the pleasure of visitors and family. The space, which was organized with his usual fastidious attention to detail, was said to be a magnificent small museum of his art.

Even as the highest paid decorator for the Pairpoint factory, his earnings by the end of his career had not exceeded fifty dollars per week. To earn the extra money he needed for his family, he worked on commissions in his studio and gave private art lessons to the people of New Bedford.

Frank Guba was his art. He painted nearly every day of his life from childhood on. He fell ill within a year of his retirement from Pairpoint and died but two years later in 1938 at the age of 70. To me it seems that his life and his painting were so intrinsically linked that he was not meant to have one without the other.

Yet how can we say that he has gone? To view an object that he painted – to actually feel the energy that went into his amazing work – is to know the reason for his being was to provide each of us with a small sense of that elusive piece of eternity we all strive for.



*Nancy Phillips
Great granddaughter of
Frank A. Guba*

Frank Adolph Guba lives on in my family. My mother had the good sense to marry an artist and though my father worked conventionally as an engineer, he still fills our life, even today at the age of 92, with his own art. And my nephew Jesse Comeau, the great great grandson of Frank Guba, who also began drawing instinctively as a young child, has in his blood the same artistic inclinations which are highlighted in the beautiful land and seascapes that are among his favored subjects.