



Skating, ca. 1960-75, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Isabel Messing and David A. Kobler

The artist showed her memory paintings at the first Fine Arts Festival sponsored by the Town of Lewiston, New York in 1966 and sold several pieces. A hand-lettered sign Kobler made identifying herself as a "folk artist" may have encouraged these sales.

While spending winters in Florida during the 1960s and '70s, her paintings were sold through a gallery in Jensen Beach. According to family accounts, Perry

Como and Robert Goulet purchased Kobler's work through this Florida gallery.

In late life, Kobler made her home at Spallino Towers, a housing complex for Senior Citizens in Niagara Falls. While there, she began to teach other seniors how to paint, encouraging them to share their own memories through visual expression.

**Kate Koperski, Curator of Folk Arts**

### Exhibition Checklist

Note: All paintings were created ca. 1960-75 of acrylic on canvas.

<i>Corn Roast</i> 24 x 44 in.	<i>Ladies' Rural Club</i> 27 x 45 in.	<i>North LaSalle School</i> 18 x 28 in.	<i>Saturday Night Bath</i> 24 x 42 in.	<i>Sunday Dinner</i> 24 x 42 in.	<i>Wash Day 1910</i> 24 x 42 in.
<i>District No. 9 (School)</i> 24 x 42 in.	<i>Mayley's Wagon Shop</i> 22 x 40 in.	<i>Picking Grapes 1905</i> 24 x 42	<i>Skating</i> 24 x 42 in.	<i>Untitled (Making Apple Butter)</i> 24 x 42 in.	<i>Wild Berry Time</i> 22 x 30 in.
<i>Home Made Ice Cream</i> 24 x 36 in.	<i>Midnight Call</i> 24 x 40 in.	<i>Pumpkin Pie Time</i> 24 x 40 in.	<i>Smok(e) House</i> 24 x 42 in.		<i>Winter Fun 1910</i> 20 x 24 in.



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Cover: *Ladies' Rural Club* (detail), ca. 1960-75, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Isabel Messing and David A. Kobler. Mary Kobler's childhood home is pictured in the background.



**Folk Arts Program** Castellani Art Museum

**Memory Paintings: Mary Kobler, 1893-1975**

November 3, 2006 - February 25, 2007

# Memory Paintings: Mary Kobler, 1893-1975

Local painter Mary Kobler was born in 1893 and grew up on a thriving family farm near Colonial Village, a small hamlet about ten miles from Niagara Falls, New York. Family members describe the young Kobler as a tomboy who was “a bit wild.” She especially loved working out of doors and riding. When fire partially destroyed the farm in 1918, she moved to Niagara Falls with her family.

Kobler first began to paint a decade later, during the years of the Great Depression. Isabel Messing, Kobler’s daughter, recalls that her mother hand painted pillows, handkerchiefs, and men’s ties, which she sold at Niagara Falls’ outdoor “City Market” to supplement the family’s income. Messing explains that her mother was a self-taught artist who often used familiar flowers as models for the decorative motifs she painted on fabric.

During the 1960s, as Kobler entered her seventies, she began to create acrylic paintings on canvas that brought life to the memories of her rural childhood. At this point, Kobler worked “completely from her imagination,” says Messing. “I never saw her sit down with any kind of photograph or model. When she started a painting, she would completely cover the canvas in a background color, then add large shapes, and, finally, the details.” Inspired by the new focus of her work, Kobler “painted constantly” for the rest of her life, according to family members.

Kobler’s later work and career bear a striking resemblance to those of the famed self-taught painter, Anna Mary Robertson, or “Grandma Moses.” The two women started painting well beyond middle-age and both drew on turn-of-the-century rural life for inspiration. Robertson’s work reflects the area around Greenwich, New York, near the Vermont border. Kobler’s images, however, are often tied very specifically to Niagara County. Special places, now gone from the regional landscape, are preserved in works like *Ladies Rural Club*, *North LaSalle School*, and *Mayley’s Wagon Shop*. *Picking Grapes* and *Making Apple Butter* document activities perhaps too-familiar in a county known throughout the northeast for its apple and Concord grape crops.

Family members speculate that Kobler’s passion for memory painting may have been connected to her long-standing interest in writing. Both she and her mother Anne wrote memoirs. As a young teenager, Anne wrote an engaging account of her visits to Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., during the centennial celebration of the United States in 1876. This treasured journal was passed down to Kobler and remains in the family. Interestingly, the painter wrote detailed narratives for all of the works that reflect her childhood experiences. In a sense, the paintings serve as illustrations for Kobler’s texts—and the two expressions complete each other.

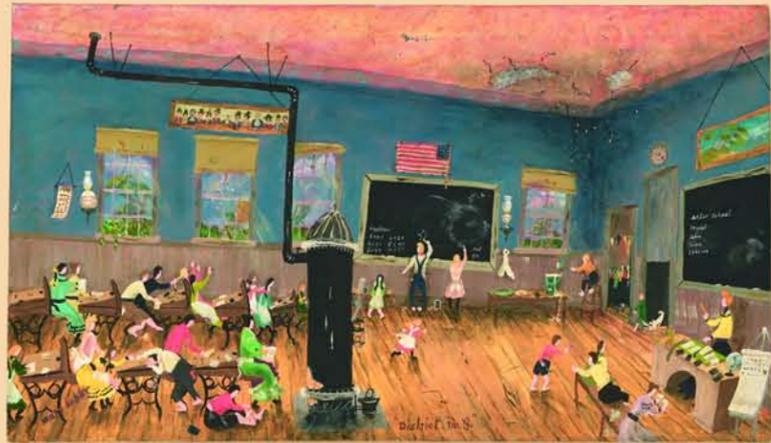
Kobler’s memory paintings vividly recall the hard work, everyday chores, and simple pleasures of agrarian Niagara County at the turn-of-the-century. Created at a time when this way of life no longer existed, the paintings convey an urgent need to record these stories before they were

completely forgotten. Depictions of her family’s spacious farmhouse kitchen, for example, brim with vibrant details, supplying an encyclopedic account of the activities that took place in this well-used room. The kitchen—with its black iron stove; huge kettles, pots, and pans; overflowing kindling box; pump-handle sink;

brightly-colored rag rugs; white lace curtains; windowsill plants; frisky household pets; oil lamps; and ample round table—appears in *Sunday Dinner*, *Wash Day 1910*, and *Saturday Night Bath*.

Many of Kobler’s best works take us beyond cozy domestic settings. The painter’s well-rendered outdoor scenes reveal how closely she and her family were connected to the natural world around them and to the delights of the changing seasons. In *Wild Berry Time*, children (with no adults in sight) run through lush, late-spring grass. They climb trees, hold hands, jump naked into a small pond, and fill buckets

with fruit from tall berry canes. In *Corn Roast*, a yellow harvest moon rises behind bare tree branches as children race around a leaping bonfire that throws orange flames and billowing smoke into the darkening autumnal sky. In these, and many other works, Kobler powerfully recalls the sheer energy of childhood and the pleasure of living fully in the moment.



*District No. 9 (School)*, ca. 1960-75, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Isabel Messing and David A. Kobler

During the 1960s, as Kobler entered her seventies, she began to create acrylic paintings on canvas that brought life to the memories of her rural childhood.



*Pumpkin Pie Time*, ca. 1960-75, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Isabel Messing and David A. Kobler



*Wash Day 1910*, ca. 1960-75, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Isabel Messing and David A. Kobler