

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

STUDIES IN INDIANA WOMEN'S HISTORY

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Wilhelmina Seegmiller: A Champion of the Democratization of Art Education

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During her time as the director of art education for Indianapolis' public schools—which began in 1895 and lasted until her early death in 1913—Wilhelmina Seegmiller rose meteorically to become internationally recognized as a leader in a community of thinkers who were changing the face of art education. Seegmiller's aesthetics and teaching ideologies of, as she called it, "art for humanity's sake," were deeply rooted in the tenants of the Arts and Crafts movement. She thought strategically about art and design's role in the lives of her working-class students, and its power to impart both moral influences and employable skills.

This paper will explore how Seegmiller propelled these values beyond simply artmaking and teaching by making important early advancements in the democratization of art education. Her strength lay in building bridges between traditional highbrow cultural institutions and the working class in Indianapolis while creating the tools for many other cities to do the same. Her landmark state legislation funded relationships between public schools and art museums in Indiana cities, and she herself headed the committee that oversaw that relationship between the John Herron Art Institute (now the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields) and Indianapolis's public schools. Her nationally popular art education books and patented classroom tools gracefully melded the observation of the everyday world around her students with an awareness of international art and practical handwork skills. Seen together, these achievements speak of a true commitment to an ideology of "art for humanity's sake" and a pioneering effort in the application of that ideology on a grand scale, efforts with which many cultural institutions and schools grapple to this day.

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