Oregon Historical Society Opens New Exhibit Highlighting Paintings of Native Plants by Local Artist

“Frances Stilwell: Oregon’s Botanical Landscape”
On view at the Oregon Historical Society January 14 – May 1, 2022

Portland, OR — January 12, 2022 — Artist Frances Stilwell moved to Oregon in 1969 to continue her work in environmental sciences, including work as an ethologist, a biologist, a fisheries technician, a geomorphologist, and a botanist. However, in 1981 she decided to leave her career in science to pursue her lifelong passion for art. The Oregon Historical Society (OHS) is proud to share Stilwell’s stunning depictions of native Oregon plants in its newest exhibition, *Frances Stilwell: Oregon’s Botanical Landscape*, opening this Friday, January 14, 2022.

Stilwell was introduced to Oregon’s native plants through her friendship with Bessie Gragg Murphy, who grew up in a pioneer family in the Willamette Valley. Through this friendship, Stilwell met other plant enthusiasts and accompanied them on trips across Oregon. Stilwell found that illustrating plants helped her “familiarize [her]self with the whole of [her] new state...” Their friendship inspired Stilwell’s first book, *Come Walk Through Spring with Bessie Gragg Murphy* (self-published in 2000).

Working mainly in pastels, Stilwell developed a growing body of work, depicting Oregon plants in their native habitats. Her illustrations became the impetus for her second book, *Oregon’s Botanical Landscape: An Opportunity to Imagine Oregon Before 1800*. Featuring 81 illustrations, Stilwell traveled across Oregon to paint each plant in its natural habitat.

In 2019, Stilwell donated all 81 illustrations featured in *Oregon’s Botanical Landscape* to the Oregon Historical Society’s museum collection. OHS cares for a range of objects that document the history of the region, including clothing and textiles, Native American belongings, artworks, vehicles, equipment, and everyday items. OHS Deputy Museum Director Nicole Yasuhara was overjoyed to be the recipient of the artworks. “The collection is a time capsule of Oregon’s indigenous plants and landscapes, which have been and will continue to be affected by climate change along with cultural and
population shifts in Oregon,” said Yasuhara. “In addition to being beautiful, the illustrations are important historically.” Other notable artists represented in the museum’s art collection include Amanda Snyder, Cleveland Rockwell, J.E. Stuart, Hallie Heacock, Edward Quigley, Melville T. Wire, and Theodore Gegoux.

Stilwell worked closely with OHS’s museum staff to curate the exhibition, which includes scientific information alongside each illustration. Visitors will also have the opportunity to watch an interview with Stilwell where she shares her thoughts and experiences creating the artworks on display. Her wish for visitors who see these pieces of art is that they will, “inspire in you and the next generation a sense of home in the natural world of Oregon.”

For a taste of spring during the chilly winter months, plan a visit to Frances Stilwell: Oregon’s Botanical Landscape, on exhibit at the Oregon Historical Society from January 14 through May 1, 2022. Limited quantities of Oregon’s Botanical Landscape are also available to purchase in the OHS Museum Store. The Oregon Historical Society’s museum and store is open seven days a week, Monday – Saturday from 10am – 5pm and Sunday from 12pm – 5pm. Admission is $10, with discounts for students, seniors, teachers, and youth. Admission is free every day for OHS members and Multnomah County residents.

About the Oregon Historical Society
For more than a century, the Oregon Historical Society has served as the state’s collective memory, preserving a vast collection of artifacts, photographs, maps, manuscript materials, books, films, and oral histories. Our research library, museum, digital platforms & website (ohs.org), educational programming, and historical journal make Oregon’s history open and accessible to all. We exist because history is powerful, and because a history as deep and rich as Oregon’s cannot be contained within a single story or point of view.