

Cassius Marcellus Coolidge

Cassius Marcellus Coolidge, also known as Cash Coolidge, created the whimsical "Poker Dogs," a series of oil paintings made in the 1920s depicting a group not only playing poker but engaged in other usually human activities.

He was born on September 18, 1844 on a farm between the small towns of Antwerp and Philadelphia, New York. Called "Cash" by his friends, he was named after Cassius Marcellus Clay, the brother of the famous statesmen Henry Clay. According to the "Catalogue of the Officers and Students of the Antwerp Liberal Literary Institute", he was a student there from March 1861 through August 1863. He received certificates from the State and National Business College in March 1864.

Coolidge, as a child, sketched portraits and scenes of the farm. Later in life, a co-worker saw drawings by Cash and thought he was wasting his talent. Coolidge went to New York City where he received formal art lessons from a portrait painter, but returned home several months later. This seems the sum total of Coolidge's formal art education.

By the time he turned twenty, he was becoming known as an artist, creating cartoons for the local newspaper and teaching penmanship. He also worked as a "lightning cartoonist," making quick sketches of people, charging audiences twenty-five to fifty cents to watch. He also illustrated books, including two by his cousin, Asenath Coolidge, "Prophet of Peace" and "The Independence Day Horror at Killsbury".

Coolidge was regarded as an amazing man of energy and enterpriseliterally the kind of man that made a young America grow. While involved in his art projects, in the mid-1860s, he also worked in, then bought, a drugstore; in 1872, he bought another. In 1871, he founded his hometown's first newspaper, the "Antwerp News". Coolidge also painted street signs and numbers on houses; acted as superintendent for a school district; worked at the Fanuel Hall Market House, Frank Leslie's Weekly, and the Antwerp Town Clerk's office. In addition he helped on his family farm by plowing, cultivating, and collecting sap from maple trees. In his spare time, Coolidge received a patent for a device to collect fares from street cars.

After reading books on the subject, and studying bookkeeping, math, and commercial law at Eastmans College, in Poughkeepsie, New York--where he worked as a bookkeeper at Eastmans College Bank--Coolidge actually founded the first bank in Antwerp, New York in 1871 or 1872. Sold in 1889, the bank survives as the Jefferson Bank. Coolidge was commissioned by Jefferson Bank to paint a self-portrait which is now in the collection of the library in Antwerp.

After visiting Great Britain and France in 1873, he moved to Rochester, New York, writing travel articles for the Watertown Times. In the 1880s, he wrote an opera and two comedies.

Besides the "Poker Dogs," Coolidge had another idea, an invention he called Comic Foregrounds, which are seen in carnivals today. These are the paintings of life-sized people and scenes with holes cut out so people can stick their heads through. Coolidge made hundreds of different paintings for these foregrounds, some of which had titles such as "Man Riding a Donkey" or "Fat Man in a Bathing Suit." He started a mail order business selling these caricatures, which provided most of his income later in his life.

Coolidge launched himself on the path that would lead to his fame as the creator of poker-playing dogs by creating artwork for local cigar companies that used his paintings for lithographed box covers or inner box lids. Around 1895, he painted a poster of a monkey riding a bicycle with a parrot on the handlebars for the Columbia Bicycle Company of Massachusetts.

In 1903 he signed a contract with the advertising firm Brown & Bigelow, in St. Paul, Minnesota, and was paid \$10,000 for two paintings. Coolidge eventually painted sixteen paintings of dogs in various situations for Brown & Bigelow, including A Bachelor's Dog, A Bold Bluff, Breach of Promise Suit, A Friend in Need, His Station and Four Aces, New Year's Eve in Dogville, One to Tie Two to Win, Pinched with Four Aces, Poker Sympathy, Post Mortem, The Reunion, Riding the Goat, Sitting up with a Sick

Friend, Stranger in Camp, Ten Miles to a Garage, and Waterloo. The scenarios of these paintings range from courtroom argument to a tea dance. The most popular scene, depicted in nine of the paintings, was dogs playing cards surrounded by alcohol, tobacco, and friends. Coolidge preferred large dogs to occupy his paintings: bulldogs, collies, great danes, and St. Bernards were favorites. "You can't imagine a cat playing poker it doesn't seem to go," Coolidge said. These works became part of pop culture as hundreds of thousands of reproductions were distributed throughout the country, achieving national recognition from the 1930s to the 1960s.

Coolidge was married for the first time in 1909, at age sixty-four, to twenty-nine year-old Gertrude Kimmell. He had employed her as a letter painter for his Comic Foreground mail order business. They moved to a house in Bay Bridge, Brooklyn, and a year later, the couple had their first and only child, a daughter named Marcella.

Cassius called the house Owl's Head after a nearby park. As a result of the couple's farming background, they tried raising chickens. Cassius even built a chicken coup. It, however, soon became evident it was uneconomical to raise chickens, and Marcella used the coup as a playhouse. Cassius also suffered a permanent injury living there. After trying to chase mischievous boys from an abandoned house, he fell from a window and hurt his knee, leaving him injured for the rest of his life.

During this time the demand for Cassius's caricatures decreased, and the family needed more money. Around 1916 Gertrude took a course to become a librarian to augment their income. She eventually found a job as a filing clerk for a large Manhattan law firm. This provided for the majority of the family's income. Cassius tried to supplement their income by writing but was unsuccessful. He did, however, do many of the chores around the house, which was uncommon for a man to do then.

In 1928, they built a new home in Grasmere, Staten Island. It was located in a rural location, and Cassius's wife and daughter spent approximately three hours a day commuting to and from work and school, respectively.

Coolidge died on January 13, 1934 just short of the age of 90.

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