



HELEN TORR  
I, 1935

## SIGNIFICANT OTHERS:

### *Artist Wives of Artists*

January 9–February 13, 1993



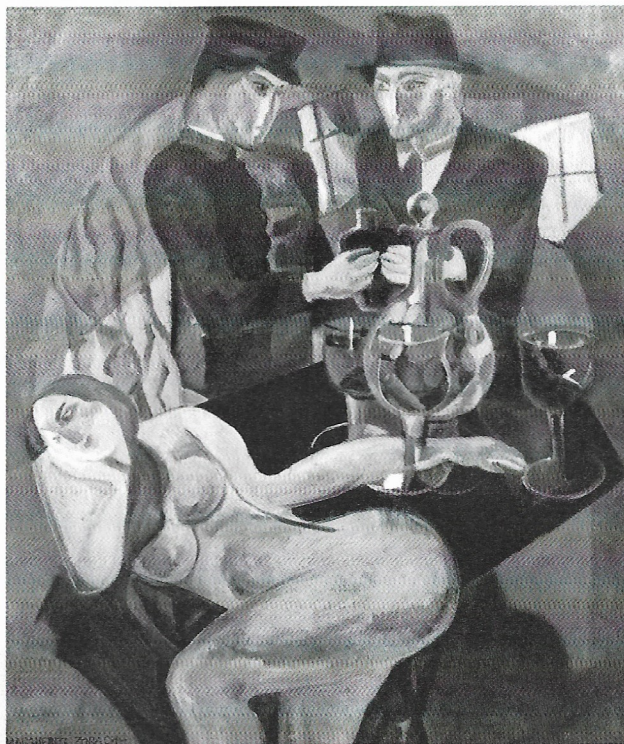
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# SIGNIFICANT OTHERS:

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Curated by AMY J. WOLF



MARGUERITE ZORACH  
*Prohibition*, 1920

By making visible the work of those whose lives as artists often took place in the shadows, one questions the veracity of so-called official histories. This exhibition is devoted to a selection of women artists working during the first half of the century, all married to important and influential artists whose careers eclipsed that of their wives. Not only does the experience of these women as the “other” testify to the incompleteness of traditional art histories, but it claims an exacting toll on individual artists and on art making in general.

A multitude of factors contributed to the marginalization of the work of women artists both within their own families and in society at large. Many artist couples grew out of a teacher/student relationship which naturally reinforced the women’s secondary position. Some women, distracted by financial constraints, developed their commercial skills at the expense of their artistic pursuits in order to meet the



family's obligations. Demands of childrearing further diverted women from focusing solely on art-making. Others who shared close and loving relationships with their artist husbands were committed to supporting them emotionally and artistically in the face of illness or hardship even at the expense of their own work. However, for others the strains of a two artist family led to estrangement and divorce or the decision to remain childless.

Even though many of these women enjoyed profound artistic and personal encouragement from their mates, fundamental to their sustained efforts at art making, their work was often invisible to the outside world. They were defined primarily as the wife of a more famous artist and were omitted from the critical and artistic dialogue. Forged in isolation, much of this work received little or no attention. Given these conditions women found it difficult to continue to make work, often-times abandoning it for long periods or else crowding it into precious spare time and space.

Many women sought to counteract these domestic pressures and systematic discrimination. They eagerly pursued activities that allowed a more equal footing with men and an entrée into the mainstream art world. Some attended university art schools; others were active in artistic organizations and societies; many participated within the greater community of artists in the government-sponsored support programs during the 1930s and 1940s.

Despite the commonality of these women's experience, it is impossible to classify their work as belonging to one particular sensibility, style or outlook. This exhibition includes a variety of work from the first half of this century which in most cases was not exhibited at the time it was made. The Ashcan School-inspired artists, Edith Dimock, Florence Shinn, Marjorie Organ, Ethel Myers and Helen Farr, commented on the reality of daily life for the average person. While formerly this approach to subject matter was considered unfit for fine art, it extended from caricature and earthy realism to a biting social commentary as evidenced by Bernarda Bryson's, Elizabeth Catlett's and Katherine Schmidt's depictions of society's disenfranchised and outsiders.

Doris Lee approached her regionalist subjects with the sophisticated eye and touch of a trained artist and the heart of a folk painter. Sally Michel, like Lee, enjoyed the companionship and support of the Woodstock art colony where she painted many of her lyrical domestic and nature scenes. Gwendolyn Knight contrasted colorful patterns and voids to capture the energy and diversity of New Orleans street life.

Other artists sought inspiration less from the streets or social concerns and more from aesthetic issues. Helen Torr's elegant depictions of objects of nature, still life and portraiture are remarkably refined compositions of emotional restraint. Elsie Driggs, known primarily for her Precisionist renditions of the industrial landscape, explored the expressive and physical character of watercolor. Rebecca James, who accompanied Georgia O'Keeffe on her first trip to New Mexico in 1929, painted evocative interpretations of nature and flowers on glass and in pastel.

In opposition to the social realism and regionalism of the 1930s, a small group of artists, inspired by the revolutionary activities of the European avant-garde, organized the American Abstract Artists to support the making and exhibition of geometric abstraction. Gertrude Greene, who coordinated the group's first exhibition, produced wooden relief constructions based on designs initiated in small cut-out paper collages. Rosalind Bengelsdorf, who also wrote important position papers in support of abstract art, painted the first abstract mural in the U.S. for the Federal

Art Project. Esphyr Slobodkina, whose commitment to her own work was enhanced by the break-up of her marriage and release from domestic chores, produced remarkable abstract paintings combining biomorphic and geometric shapes.

Another European art movement which influenced many American artists was Surrealism. Dorothy Dehner's dream like drawings from the 1940s were followed by totemic sculptures constructed of personal images and gestures. Margaret French, whose work is indebted to that of her husband and the austere disorienting dreamscapes of de Chirico, Magritte and Delvaux, painted only for herself and rarely exhibited her work.

It can be argued that with nothing to lose women's alienation from the artistic mainstream also allowed for greater freedoms of expression and experimentation in their choice of non-traditional subjects, medium or method. Marguerite Zorach followed her pioneering days as a Fauve-inspired modernist painter with extraordinary needleworks. Martha Ryther transformed a neglected folk medium into quirky and highly personal paintings on glass.

The women included in this exhibition were the lucky ones. Remarkably, they continued the struggle to create work in the face of great financial, personal and physical obstacles. Georgia O'Keeffe's poignant description of Helen Torr in a letter to an art historian in 1972 summed up the problems facing women artists as a whole. "I think she is a person who would have flowered considerably if she had been given attention. It seems a pity when you look at what she did anyway." Who knows what would have been possible for these women and for those labeled "other" if, at least, the writing and reporting of the history of art making had included their efforts as well.

AMY J. WOLF



ESPHYR SLOBODKINA  
*Flame Thrower*, 1945



**ROSALIND BENGELSDORF**

(1916–1979)

*Three Mural Studies for the Central Nurses' Home, Welfare Island, New York City*, 1937, watercolor and pencil,  $3\frac{1}{4} \times 9$ ;  $6 \times 6\frac{5}{8}$ ;  $3\frac{1}{4} \times 9\frac{5}{8}$

**BERNARDA BRYSON** (1903–)

*Immigrants #2 Middle Passage*, 1936, etching,  $18\frac{1}{2} \times 15\frac{3}{4}$   
*Princeton University Eating (Illustration for Life)*, pen and ink,  $11\frac{1}{2} \times 10\frac{3}{4}$

**ELIZABETH CATLETT** (1919–)

*Pensive*, 1949, bronze,  $17 \times 10 \times 8$   
*Trash*, c. 1945, oil on canvas,  $24 \times 20$

**DOROTHY DEHNER** (1901–)

*The All American Girl*, 1955, bronze (unique),  $12 \times 2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$   
*The Courtship*, 1949, pen and ink,  $17 \times 26$

**EDITH DIMOCK** (1876–1955)

*Butter and Eggs*, 1927, watercolor,  $8\frac{1}{2} \times 10\frac{1}{2}$   
*New England Congregation*, watercolor,  $7 \times 9\frac{1}{2}$

**ELSIE DRIGGS** (1898–1992)

*Leaf Forms*, 1918, oil on canvas,  $11 \times 9$   
*Young People*, circa 1928, pen and watercolor,  $10\frac{7}{8} \times 8\frac{1}{4}$

**HELEN FARR** (1911–)

*New Hampshire Village*, 1955, oil on board,  $12 \times 16$   
*People in the Park*, 1935, oil on masonite,  $27 \times 23$

**MARGARET FRENCH** (1906–)

*Circus #2*, circa 1950, egg tempera on gesso panel,  $21 \times 13\frac{3}{4}$   
*Untitled*, circa 1950, egg tempera on gesso panel,  $19 \times 12\frac{1}{2}$

**GERTRUDE GREENE** (1904–1956)

*Composition*, 1938, painted wood construction,  $27 \times 30\frac{7}{8}$   
*36-01*, 1936, collage,  $8 \times 12$

**REBECCA JAMES** (1891–1968)

*Pansies in Vase*, 1930s, pastel on board,  $28 \times 22$   
*Untitled (Magnolia)*, oil on glass,  $18\frac{1}{4}$  diameter



REBECCA JAMES  
*Untitled (Magnolia)*

**GWENDOLYN KNIGHT (1913–)**

*New Orleans, Scene I*, 1941, waterbase on paper, 11 × 6¼

*New Orleans, Scene II*, 1941, waterbase on paper, 9 × 6¼

**DORIS LEE (1905–1983)**

*Bells on the Trees*, c. 1950, oil on canvas, 20 × 24 inches

*Darts*, oil on canvas, 21 × 30 inches

**SALLY MICHEL (1905–)**

*March Sketching*, 1947, watercolor, 18 × 12

*Vermont*, 1939, watercolor, 12 × 18

**ETHEL MYERS (1881–1960)**

*Flowered Gown*, bronze, 8¼ × 5½ × 5½

*Street Scene: Woman with Balloons*, oil on canvas, 9 × 7

**MARJORIE ORGAN (1886–1936)**

*Faithful Followers*, 1918, watercolor, 12 × 18¾

*Watching Le Touriste*, c. 1910, ink, 12 × 8

**MARTHA RYTHER (1896–1981)**

*Interior*, oil on glass, 10 × 7

*Through the Keyhole*, oil on glass, 9½ × 5½

**KATHERINE SCHMIDT (1898–)**

*Brown Paper Bag*, oil on canvas, 13½ × 11½

*Standing Man with Right Hand in Pocket*, 1935, ink, 11½ × 7½

**FLORENCE SCOVEL SHINN**

(1869–1940)

*The Slaternly Pirate-Grimy Dan (The Battle of Clothesline Bay)*, ink, 9¼ × 8¼

*We're Used to Bosses; This Here's the Second One We've Had*, 1903 pencil, watercolor and ink, 13¼ × 12

**ESPHYR SLOBODKINA (1914–)**

*Flame Thrower*, 1945, oil on board, 23 × 27

*Untitled*, 1946, oil on board, 21½ × 30

**HELEN TORR (1886–1967)**

*I*, 1935, oil on canvas, 19¼ × 13¼

*Plant in Glass*, oil on composition board, 14½ × 9¼

**MARGUERITE ZORACH**

(1887–1968)

*For Bill and Lucy L'Engle*, 1924, wool on linen, 28 × 21¼

*Prohibition*, 1920, oil on canvas, 30 × 25

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What began as the frustrating answer to an incessant query: "Yes, Marguerite is the wife of the sculptor William Zorach" developed into the realization that there were many wives we never realized were also artists. Although this exhibition is hardly all encompassing (the work of several artists was not available) we hope it will begin to focus attention on the contribution of these women.

We are grateful to Amy Wolf for her tireless assistance in the organization of this exhibition. Our thanks to the following lenders for their generosity in making it possible: Mrs. Sally Avery, Steven Browne, the Delaware Art Museum, Sid Deutsch Gallery, Deborah Eigen, James Graham & Sons, Mrs. Cera Leacock, Mrs. Janet LeClair, Jack Litewka, Midtown Payson Gallery, Gerald Peters Gallery, Francine Seders Gallery, Snyder Fine Art, Twining Gallery, Richard York Gallery, D. Wigmore Fine Arts, Zabriskie Gallery, and the anonymous private collectors.

The artists in the exhibition were, or are married to the following artists:

Rosalind Bengelsdorf (Byron Browne), Bernarda Bryson (Ben Shahn), Elizabeth Catlett (Francisco Mora), Dorothy Dehner (David Smith), Edith Dimock (William Glackens), Elsie Driggs (Lee Gatch), Helen Farr (John Sloan), Margaret French (Jared French), Gertrude Greene (Balcomb Greene), Rebecca James (Paul Strand), Gwendolyn Knight (Jacob Lawrence), Doris Lee (Arnold Blanche), Sally Michel (Milton Avery), Ethel Myers (Jerome Myers), Marjorie Organ (Robert Henri), Martha Ryther (Morris Kantor), Katherine Schmidt (Yasuo Kuniyoshi), Florence Scovel Shinn (Everett Shinn), Esphyr Slobodkina (Ilya Bolotowsky), Helen Torr (Arthur Dove), Marguerite Thompson Zorach (William Zorach).

**KRAUSHAAR GALLERIES**

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