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## Women Artists in Louisiana, 1825-1965: A Place of Their Own

by Judith Bonner

Nearly a century after this country's founding, America's first museum was established. Founded in 1773, the Charleston Museum aims to preserve and interpret the cultural and natural history of South Carolina. Charles Willson Peale subsequently opened his portrait gallery of American Revolutionary heroes in 1782, and in 1786 he founded a museum for the care and study of natural history and technological objects. First known as Peale's Museum and later as the Philadelphia Museum, it fulfilled Peale's objective to make expansive collections democratically accessible. It would take another century before the National Museum Women in the Arts opened its doors in our nation's capital. Established to expand our understanding of global history "to include the creative legacy of women artists," NMWA sets a high standard for the nation to emulate. The museum is all encompassing, for its collections include international works from the Renaissance to the present.

Cognizant of a vacuum in this state, the New Orleans Museum of Art and The Historic New Orleans Collection are presenting their fifth joint exhibition with *Women Artists in Louisiana, 1825-1965: A Place of Their Own*. NOMA recently presented French paintings in the highly successful blockbuster, *Femme, Femme, Femme: Paintings of Women in French Society from Daumier to Picasso from the Museums of France*. That exhibition focused on women as the subject -- ranging from infancy to old age -- and women of different social classes engaged in various activities and rituals. The majority of those paintings, however, were executed by male artists. Conversely, the NOMA-THNOC exhibition includes paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts dated from about 1825 through 1965 by more than forty women artists who have worked in Louisiana.

During the Spanish Colonial period, only one female artist is known, Francisca de Salazar y Magaña, who assisted her father José in painting portraits until his death in 1802. Unfortunately, her only known signed portrait was destroyed in the 1988 Cabildo fire. Following the Louisiana Purchase, women artists in the city continued to be rare. Nina Meucci, who studied art under her husband's tutelage, painted miniature portraits in collaboration with him between 1818 and 1827 until their departure from the city.

The first known female painter of competence, Zulmé Maspero, painted her oval bust-length self-portrait within the French neoclassical tradition. It was long believed that one of the three women in a large portrait of Emma Olivier, Olivia Olivier, and their sister-in-law, Zulmé, was an artist. A recent donation to The Historic New Orleans Collection of three portraits of the Olivier women included a circa-1853 oval portrait signed discreetly with a small letter "Z," revealing Zulmé Maspero as the painter. The source of Maspero's training is unknown, but her skill and technical proficiency are comparable with male painters of the same period.

Responding to the luminescent effect of J.M.W. Turner's landscapes, aesthete John Ruskin promoted the watercolor medium for its technical freedom and capability of capturing ephemeral effects of light and moisture. Like its European counterpart, the American watercolor movement elevated watercolor from a minor medium to a higher art. Watercolor painting was long accepted as a suitable endeavor for women. In the late nineteenth century, women artists like Louise Giesen Woodward and Marie-Pauline Coulon excelled in their watercolor compositions. Coulon's artistic activities were essentially subjugated to her familial responsibilities; however, she assisted her husband, George David Coulon, and their artist son and daughter, in portraiture commissions.

Not until the late 1880s and 1890s was there an obvious increase in the number of women artists who were active in the city. It was not uncommon for girls to study art privately, but this practice had minimal effect on the number of women known to be active artists. With the establishment of the Southern Art Union and its successor, the Artists' Association of New Orleans, several names emerge, including Marie Madeleine Seebold, Edith Sansum, and Julia M. Massey -- all of whom studied at the Artists' Association and whose works are included in this exhibition. Seebold, whose career was sustained from about 1885 to 1943, married her teacher and friend, Andres Molinary, literally on his deathbed. This elevation to the status of a widow gave her the ability to move freely through society without an escort. Blanche Blanchard, who studied under William Aiken Walker and Charles Giroux, often painted with Giroux, with the consequence that many of his compositions were signed by Blanchard. Her 1893 portrait of Major General William J. Behan, mayor of New Orleans (1882-1884), underscores Blanchard's reputation as a painter, for she also painted a portrait of President Grover Cleveland for The White House.

Nearly simultaneous with the Artists' Association, Newcomb College was founded in 1886, providing young women the opportunity to study art within a structured academic program. In 1895 Newcomb College introduced the pottery program, which was later expanded to include metalwork, bookbinding, and textile work. Experienced women were brought in as teachers and the program earned an international reputation that persists today; the pots decorated by the women are highly desirable collector's items. The Ladies' Decorative Art League, the Five or More Club and other support organizations sprung up around these two endeavors. Metalworker and pottery decorator Rosalie Roos Wiener (d. 1983) is represented with an oil *Self-Portrait*, shown with a palette in her hand and her metalworking tools on the wall behind her. During most of the existence of the Newcomb Pottery, it was considered unacceptable for women to throw pots. Despite their endeavors being limited to decorating pottery, many women found opportunities for sales, especially through the Newcomb Pottery Guild.

While these structured organizations provided encouragement as well as venues for exhibiting artworks, it was not until the Arts and Crafts Club of New Orleans and its School of Art were established that women began to work alongside male artists. Indeed, some of the teachers were women. Through the years some of the women associated with Newcomb were also active with the Arts and Crafts Club, including Amelie Roman, Evelyn Gladney Witherspoon, Angela Gregory, Clayre Barr Lewis, Jane Smith Ninas, Caroline Wogan Durieux, Selina Bres Gregory, and Elizabeth Heintzen Laughlin -- women whose names are still recognized by the city's *cognizanti*.

Gregory, who worked under sculptor Antoine Bourdelle in Paris from 1926 to 1928, executed sculptures throughout Louisiana, including the State Capitol Building, as well as in France and New Zealand. Curiously, Gregory's success in "cutting stone," a truly untidy endeavor, was achieved at the same time that women at Newcomb could not throw their own pots.

From her initial studies at Newcomb, Witherspoon received recognition for her work, winning the Mary L.S. Neill Medal for excellence in watercolor painting in 1923, and the Alice Ravenal Huger Smith prize at the Southern States Art League's annual exhibition in 1928. Witherspoon benefited from the opportunities then open to women, studying at the Art Students League in New York, Columbia University, the Grand Chaumière in Paris, and the Haystack School of Craft in Maine. She later returned to Newcomb to study under Katherine Choy, who was brought in by John Canaday, director of the art school, to head the pottery department after Sadie Irvine's retirement in 1952.

Educated first in her native Shanghai, Choy attended Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia, and received her B.A. from Mills College in Oakland in 1950. After studying painting at the University of California, Berkeley, Choy worked under F. Carlton Ball at Mills, completing her master's degree. Choy augmented her studies in ceramics with research on ceramic glazes and demonstrated pottery techniques at exhibitions and numerous schools. Choy collaborated with Ball in at least one example, a circa-1954 glazed stoneware bottle. Witherspoon benefited from the dynamic Choy's tutelage and produced creative hand-built sculptural pieces. In 1957 Choy established the Clay Art Center in Port Arthur, New York, but her innovative techniques took root in Witherspoon's ceramics.

The Orleans Gallery, the city's first co-operative gallery -- and one of the first in the South -- expanded opportunities for women like charter members Lin Emery and Ida Kohlmeyer, both of whom achieved international recognition for their work. Educated at Columbia and Syracuse Universities, Emery studied at the Sorbonne and then undertook an apprenticeship under abstract cubist sculptor Ossip Zadkine. Although she is known today for her wind-driven kinetic sculptures, Emery's early work was more traditional, like her 1957 *Guardian Angel*. Kohlmeyer, who received her B.A. in English literature from Newcomb in 1933, took a hiatus for familial responsibilities, and then earned an M.F.A. in 1956. After study that same summer with Hans Hoffman in Rhode Island, Kohlmeyer taught at Newcomb through 1965. She is one of the foremost nationally recognized women artists.

The sequence of organizations and art institutions, together with the New Orleans Museum of Art, formerly the Isaac Delgado Museum of Art, served as a platform for the vigorous art that would emerge during the last half of the twentieth century, a springboard that included women as serious

artists. This exhibition, which ends on the cusp of postmodernism, brings recognition of women artists in Louisiana and offers an opportunity to explore their contributions to art and culture, and their role throughout the history of the state.

### About the author

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### About the exhibition *Women Artists in Louisiana, 1825-1965: A Place of Their Own*

The New Orleans Museum of Art and The Historic New Orleans Collection are presenting *Women Artists in Louisiana, 1825-1965: A Place of Their Own*, the first in a two-part series at NOMA showcasing the contributions of women artists through the permanent collections of both institutions, from April 16 to September 13, 2009. (right: Seilna Elizabeth Bres [Gregory], *Portrait of a Woman Holding a Ewer*, between 1893 and 1896. Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 (diameter) inches. The Historic New Orleans Collection)

*Women Artists in Louisiana, 1825-1965* marks the fifth collaborative effort between the New Orleans Museum of Art and The Historic New Orleans Collection. Part one of the series features paintings, sculpture, Newcomb pottery, photographs and metalwork by artists who visited or resided in Louisiana from the late 19th century through the mid-1960s. Part two, opening in April 2010, will feature artworks from 1965 to the present.

The initial exhibition includes more than 50 examples by more than 40 artists, such as Caroline Durieux, Colette Heldner, Josephine Crawford, Ida Kohlmeyer and Helen Turner. Photography in the exhibition includes portraits by Florestine Perrault Collins, architectural views by Frances Benjamin Johnston and modernist still lifes by Carlotta Corpron. Newcomb Pottery decorated by Amelie Roman, Henrietta Davidson Bailey, Marie Levering Benson, Matilda Geddings Gray and Ada Wilt Lonnegan will also be on view.

Additionally, there are works by 19th-century silversmith Susan Turk and 20th-century metalsmith Rosalie Mildred Roos Wiener, who also has a self-portrait in the exhibition, painted in oils with her metalworking tools on the wall behind her.



## Wall texts from the exhibition

The emergence of women artists into the mainstream has been a protracted and arduous ascendancy from coast to coast. In recognition of this uphill battle, The Historic New Orleans Collection and the New Orleans Museum of Art are celebrating, in their fifth joint exhibition, the accomplishments of Louisiana women artists. The exhibition is presented in two parts. The first part, *Women Artists in Louisiana, 1825-1965: A Place of Their Own*, commemorates the creative legacy of Louisiana women artists over a 130-year period, from the state's early days through modernism. The second part, which will be presented in the spring of 2010, covers the period from postmodernism through the present.

### Gallery One: The Odyssey

The exhibition *Women Artists in Louisiana, 1825-1965* draws from the collections of the two museums and features painting, sculpture, photographs, pottery, and decorative arts by more than forty-five women artists who visited or resided in Louisiana.

Early nineteenth-century Louisiana women artists subjugated their identities or worked in collaboration with male family members. Watercolor painting was long accepted as a suitable endeavor for women, and the compositions of many women artists were skillfully executed. In Louisiana, several women trained under their husbands' tutelage at a time when there were few opportunities to study art. Opportunities, however, opened in the mid-1880s with the establishment of the Artists' Association of New Orleans and the H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College for Women and the founding of the Newcomb Pottery. Here the women decorated pottery and produced handcrafted metalwork, bookbinding, and textiles.

Subsequently, with the establishment of the Arts and Crafts Club of New Orleans in 1922, women studied, worked, and exhibited alongside male artists who were the luminaries of their day.

### Gallery Two: The Culmination of the Struggle

Advancements afforded to women through the organization of Newcomb College and the Arts and Crafts Club included scholarships for studies in art institutions of long-established reputation, such as the Art Institute of Chicago and the Dow Summer School in Ipswich, Maine, as well as study in European ateliers.

While the course of study at Newcomb was conservative, the Arts and Crafts Club urged its artists first to learn the elementary principles of art and good craftsmanship, and then pursue personal artistic expression.

Several women earned national and international reputations. After her studies at Newcomb, sculptor Angela Gregory worked at Antoine Bourdelle's Paris atelier. Now internationally known,

Gregory's commissions for sculpture include the Louisiana State Capitol. Helen Turner studied at the Arts and Crafts Club, at the Women's Art School at Cooper Union, Columbia University, and with American Impressionist painter William Merritt Chase. In 1949, at age 90, Turner held a solo exhibition at the New Orleans Museum of Art, then known as the Delgado Museum of Art. Newcomb graduate Elizabeth Heintzen [Laughlin] began her art studies at the Arts and Crafts Club, but painted for 26 years before having her first solo exhibition there.

Ida Kohlmeyer's expressionist paintings and Lin Emery's non-objective sculpture represent the advances of women of talent, character, and determination. Their works manifest the culmination of women artists' prolonged journey toward recognition.

### ***Resource Library* editor's note**

The above article was reprinted in *Resource Library* on June 1, 2009, with permission of the New Orleans Museum of Art. The text is a reprint of an article from NOMA's *Arts Quarterly* concerning an exhibition of the same name on view at NOMA April 16 to September 13, 2009. The permission was granted to TFAO on June 1, 2009.

*Resource Library* wishes to extend appreciation to James J. Mulvihill, Director of Communications & Marketing at the New Orleans Museum of Art, for his help concerning permission for reprinting the above text.

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