

Newsletter, May 2017



[Flight] Oil and ink on Masonite 1956

The Houston “Forgotten Master” Issue

In 1936 Alexandre Hogue called this Houstonian one of the two “most progressive artists in Houston today, and the least appreciated.” This same artist was juried into the Texas General Exhibition 9 times, and the Houston Annual Exhibition 17 times, once even winning the Museum of Fine Arts Houston purchase prize; received the first MFAH fellowship for advanced study, in 1949, allowing for a year of art-making in Europe; had numerous one-artist exhibitions, at MFAH and elsewhere in Houston, in New York City (3), and in Europe, in Madrid, Rome, Milan and Vienna; took a new name and became 10 years younger at midcareer; showed in New York during the 1950s with Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey, and sculptor David Smith; had a studio adjacent to Cy Twombly in Rome in the 1960s; was included as one of the 73 painters in “The Sphere of Texas Art” at HemisFair in 1968, more than a decade after leaving Texas for good; and is spending eternity looking out over the Mediterranean Sea from a resting place in the hills above Positano, Italy. If you haven’t already guessed who this artist is, turn to page 3 for the answer.



[Three triangles] and [Abstract Composition] ink, graphite and wash on paper 1953

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group



As always, CASETA Symposium weekend was GREAT! The presentations were informative and entertaining (we even got a glimpse of Early Texas Artist [Farrah Fawcett](#) in her fabulous red swimsuit); the Texas Art Fair was filled with art temptations and art-chat opportunities galore; the exhibition mounted just for us, by Scott Barker and other Fort Worth collectors, was amazing; and the special events, to the home of collectors Nancy and Ted Paup, the Amon Carter Museum and the George Grammar exhibition at Texas Wesleyan University, were icing on a rich Early Texas Art cake. Look for the presentations at [CASETA on YouTube](#) later this summer. And plan to attend the Symposium next year at the Witte Museum in San Antonio.

Houston was well represented in the audience and on the stage, where Althea Ruoppo, Curatorial Assistant at MFAH, gave a fascinating talk on Robert Preusser after Texas; Susie Kalil reprised the excitement generated by her masterful Dorothy Hood exhibition and book; and William Reaves moderated an illuminating panel discussion on collecting from multiple points-of-view. Houston and Houstonians were also honored with CASETA awards in several categories:

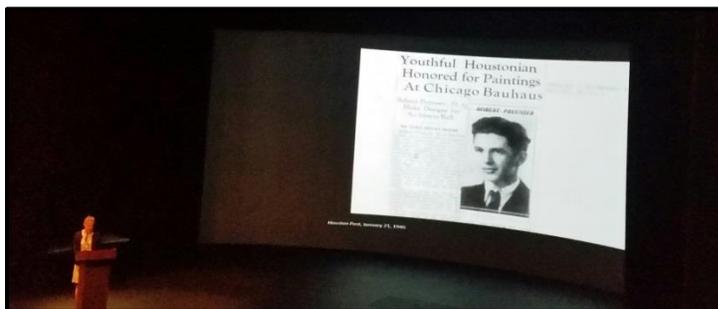
William J. Hill was presented with the **Bill and Mary Cheek Patron Award** for his innumerable contributions to historical Texas Art and Culture, and the institutions which preserve and make available that art and culture.

The Art Museum of South Texas: CASETA Exhibition Award for “**The Color of Being/El Color del Ser: DOROTHY HOOD (1918-2000)**” curated by Susie Kalil.

The Heritage Society at Sam Houston Park: CASETA Publication Award-Catalog for “**This WAS Contemporary Art: Fine and Decorative Arts in Hosuton 1945-1965.**”

The Museum of Fine Arts Houston: CASETA Publication Award-Book for *Julian Onderdonk: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Harry A. Halff and Elizabeth Halff.

I was immensely honored and moved to receive the **CASETA Distinguished Service Award**.



Althea Ruoppo talking on Robert Preusser (l); Leslie Thompson and Sarah Beth Wilson McKeel in the Texas Art Fair

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

HOUSTON ART HISTORY NOTES: Houston's Forgotten Master

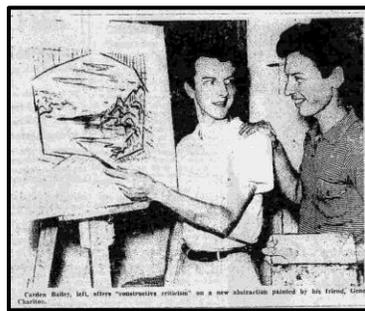
And the answer is: **Gene Charlton (1909-1979)**. The question, in case you missed it, is on page 1 of this issue.



Gene Charlton about 1960

There are a million reasons why some first-rate artists are forgotten. It may all boil down to talent, though I think most everyone would agree that marketing, luck and “forces beyond anyone’s control” play their parts too. It probably doesn’t help when the artist leaves his home turf for the big city, and then, after a promising start, moves again, this time to Europe, and even changes his name. Not a good marketing strategy. But whatever the reasons, it does happen all too often that artists with immense talent fall out of art-world consciousness, even in their own home towns, and that’s a real loss. Gene Charlton is one of those artists.

Born in Cairo, Illinois, in 1909¹, Charlton got to Houston in the late 1920s. With very little formal art training (he did study with Ola McNeill Davidson, but he never went to art school), he quickly established himself as the leader among the avant-gard young artists in the city. Writing in *Art Digest* in 1936, Alexandre Hogue dubbed Charlton and his partner, Carden Bailey, “The most progressive artists in Houston today, and the least appreciated ... two youngsters in their early twenties.”²



Charlton [Manhattan] c. early 1930s watercolor (l); Carden Bailey and Charlton 1937 (r)

¹ At some point after leaving Houston for New York, Charlton shaved 10 years off his age. Some later listings incorrectly show his birth year as 1919.

² Hogue, Alexandre. “Progressive Texas,” *Art Digest*, vol. X, No. 17 (June, 1936), page 18. Texas Centennial Special Number.

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

Though it's true that Robert Preusser, another young student of Davidson, was the first Houston artist to have his abstract work added to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston permanent collection when three of his pieces won the annual purchase prize in 1940, the somewhat older Charlton was already doing his own abstractions even earlier – work Preusser would likely have seen in Davidson's studio.



Charlton [abstracts] c. mid-1930s watercolors

But even though he was clearly comfortable with abstraction, Charlton never entirely abandoned representation in his work.



Charlton *Les Sylphides* 1942 oil on board (l); [street scene] c.early 1940s oil (r)

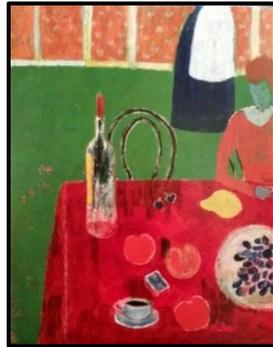
During World War II, the US Army stationed Charlton in England. While there he renewed a pre-war contact with Duncan MacDonald, by then working at the Lefevre Gallery in London, who had bought one of his paintings on a trip to Houston in 1941. The painting MacDonald bought was one of a series, the others of which won [Charlton the Houston Annual Exhibition MFAH](#) purchase prize in 1942.



Charlton *Roses, Oranges and Egplant* c.1942 oil on canvas 17th Annual Houston Artists Exhibition, museum purchase prize, 1942

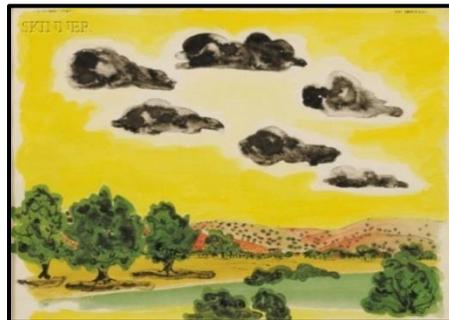
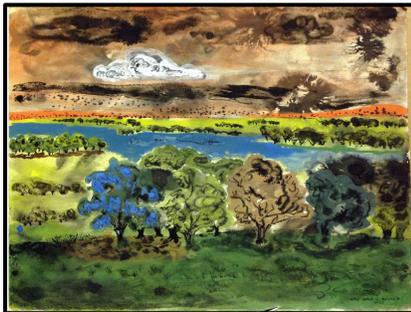
HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

While in England Charlton made contact with members of the neo-romantic group prominent there at the time, including the Scottish couple, Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde. Colquhoun even gave Charlton one of his paintings. Clearly the art and artists he encountered in England, and on trips to New York in the immediate post-war period, had a significant impact on his work. He embraced the flatness of the canvas and became a bolder colorist.



Charlton [red table] c.1946 oil on board (l); [cherries on a table] 1947 oil on canvas (r)

Even his landscapes became something other than depictions.



Charlton [near Bandera] 1947 watercolor (l); [near Bandera] 1947 watercolor (r)

In 1947/48 he spent a year in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Predictably, his work showed the impact, though this time the result was a new emphasis on form over color.



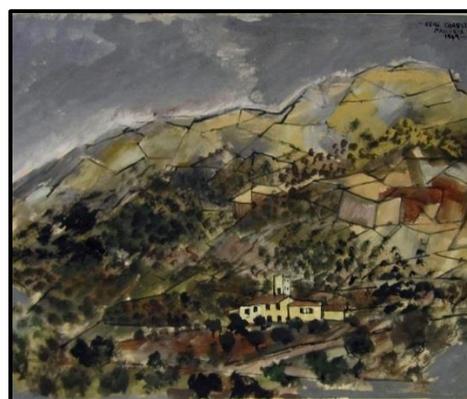
Charlton [tablescape] c.1948 oil on board (l); [Mexican woman] 1948 oil on canvas (r)

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

Even as early as his time in England Charlton became convinced that he was ready to conquer an art world larger than Houston. In 1944 he wrote to Bailey:

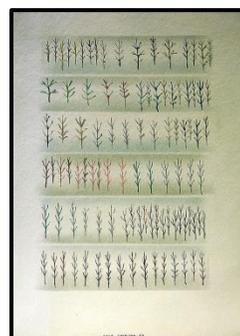
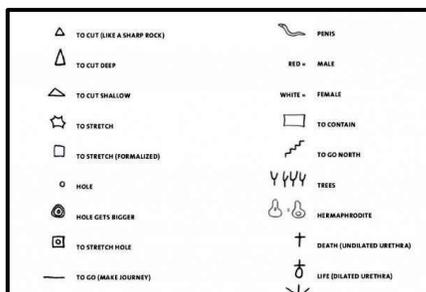
I know firmly now that we must go, either to New York – or to San Francisco – and paint like hell – I also believe that New York will be the Paris in the sense of a clearing house for art – it probably is to some extent, now – though London is possibly it. But – post war – will be a new era in painting – and we've got to ride in on the crest of that wave. It belongs to us – it is ours and we'll do it. If only, you'll be willing to suffer the thing out. That keeps me alive, I know. – We must be ready – I'm doing all that I can.³

In 1949 he received the first Museum of Fine Arts Houston fellowship for advanced study, which he used for a year of art-making in Europe.



Charlton *Two Figures* 1949 oil on canvas (l); Charlton in 1949; *Mallorca* 1949 watercolor (r)

In the 1930s and 1940s, Charlton and Forrest Bess had a close working relationship. They conducted a school together for a while, and collaborated on a mural at the Bay City Theater (now lost). In his 1952 paintings (below), Charlton incorporated symbols also used by Bess in his visionary paintings. Their art relationship needs further study.



Charlton [untitled, Symbols and Squares] 1952 (l); Bess symbols (c); Charlton *Trees* 1953 (r)

³ Gene Charlton, letter to Carden Bailey, England, April 2, 1944. Private collection

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

By the early 1950s, Charlton's confidence seemed to be vindicated. He had three one-artist shows in New York between 1947 and 1954, including one at the prestigious Willard Gallery. One of his paintings from that show, *Sunset Japan*, was featured in the *New York Times*.⁴ The still young, but already astute, critic Dore Ashton, noted in *Art Digest*, in her review of the show, that, "The artist has seen very distinctly, and felt deeply."⁵ He was also showing in group exhibitions with Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey, and sculptor David Smith.



Charlton [five paintings from his 1954 Willard Gallery one-artist show] 1952, oil on canvas or Masonite

⁴ "An Oriental Note by A Contemporary," *New York Times*, February 14, 1954.

⁵ "Gene Charlton" *Art Digest*, February 15, 1954, p.20.

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

Even though he was having a good deal of success in America – with a piece added to the [collection of the Chicago Art Institute](#) – he decided to move to Madrid, where he had a one-man show, and where he absorbed influences of the dynamic Spanish art of the time.



Charlton [Spanish abstraction] 1957; [untitled] c.1957, both oil on board

And then on to Italy, where Edna Lewis invited him to teach at her Positano Art Workshop – a job that turned into a career for the remainder of his life. He met his wife-to-be there (yes, “strangely he married,” to quote a Houstonian who had known him well during his almost 15 year relationship with Carden Bailey), and started a late-life family, naming his two sons after a famous ancient Roman. Once again, the new place had its impact on his art. He made an extensive series based on Roman senators, but also created a series of dry pigment paintings that were the most abstract he ever did.



Charlton [untitled Roman figures] c.1960s watercolor (l); [Green spot on Pink] 1961 dry pigment on panel (r)

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

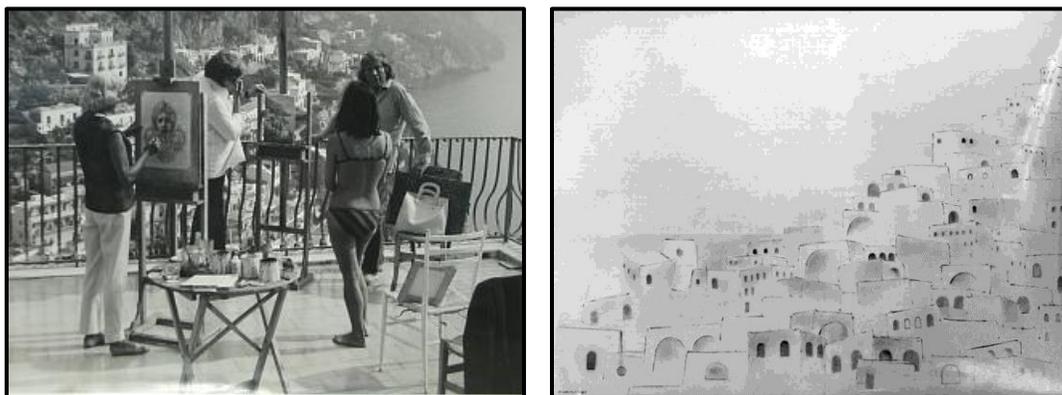
Charlton found studio space in Palazzo Pio, overlooking Piazza Campo dei Fiori, along with other American expats including Cy Twombly, who, according to one critic, shared with Charlton “a certain lyricism in terms of linear relationship.”⁶

According to his wife, Charlton’s last years were good ones, with summers spent in Positano and winters in Rome or London. He returned to Houston only once, when his mother died, but on the trip he arranged for another Houston show, at Kathryn Swenson’s New Arts Gallery, where he showed his ripped-from-the-walls-of-Rome collages jointly with Gertrude Barnstone’s Plexiglass sculptures. The de Menils bought several of his collages from the show, now in the [permanent collection](#), similar to these.



Charlton Mixed media collages 1958

In his later years, Charlton, who as a child had taken the name of his mother’s second husband, English-born Houston cellist Athelston Charlton, returned to using his birth name, Eugene Rafalsky, sometimes signing his work Charlton-Rafalsky or simply Rafalsky. He died on July 5, 1979, just short of his 70th birthday, and is buried in the hills above Positano, overlooking the Mediterranean he had come to love.



Charlton with students in Positano, Italy, c.1970s; Charlton drawing of Positano, c.1970s

⁶ Lucas, John. “Rome: Habitat of American Painters,” *Arts Magazine*, February 1966, p.40-43.

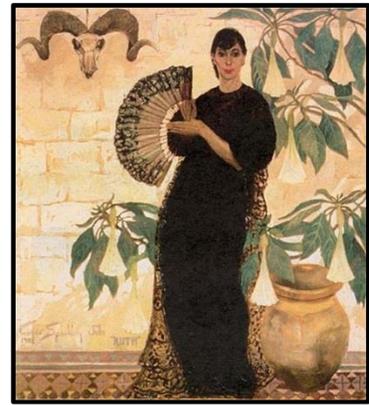
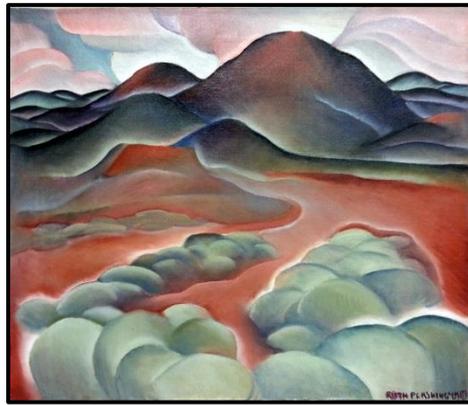
HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

Upcoming Exhibition:

Planned, Organized and Established: Houston Artist Cooperatives in the 1930s

An exhibition to be presented in the Julia Ideson Building, Houston Public Library
August 12 – November 10, 2017

Focusing on two artists cooperatives, one all white, the other all black, the Houston Artists Gallery and the Negro Art Guild, separate-but-parallel groups organized by Houston artists so that they could exhibit and sell their art. Though work by artists of the different groups could not be exhibited in the same gallery in their time, now they will be shown together, so that Houstonians of today can learn more about the art and the social environment from which it grew. Among the 60 paintings and sculptures in the show, highlights will include Samuel Countee's *My Guitar*, a star of the art exhibition in the Hall of Negro Life at the Texas Centennial in Dallas in 1936; all five of Ruth Pershing Uhler's "Earth Rhythms" paintings, shown in the Houston Annual Exhibition of 1936, and reunited for the first time since then; and Grace Spaulding John's fabulous *Patterns: Portrait of Ruth Pershing Uhler*. This is sure to be the Earlier Houston Art not-to-be-missed exhibition of the season.



HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

Exhibitions

[Printed and Bound in Texas: Selections from the Powell Library's Hogg Family Collection](#)

Lora Jean Kilroy Visitor and Education Center, Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
6003 Memorial Drive at Westcott Street
Houston, TX 77007 | mfah.org

Tells the story of early Texas printers and binders through a selection of books and pamphlets made between the early-19th and early 20th centuries. On view Spring, 2017

Out of town exhibitions:

[JOSE ARPA: A SPANISH IMPRESSIONIST IN TEXAS](#)

Art Museum of Southeast Texas, Beaumont

A major touring exhibition of Arpa's work – not getting any closer to Houston than Beaumont, so don't wait!

March 11 through May 28, 2017

[Texas Art of Early Days to Now: the Witte Collection](#)

Witte Museum, San Antonio

Selections from the Witte's incomparable permanent collection of Texas art.
Through May 29, 2017

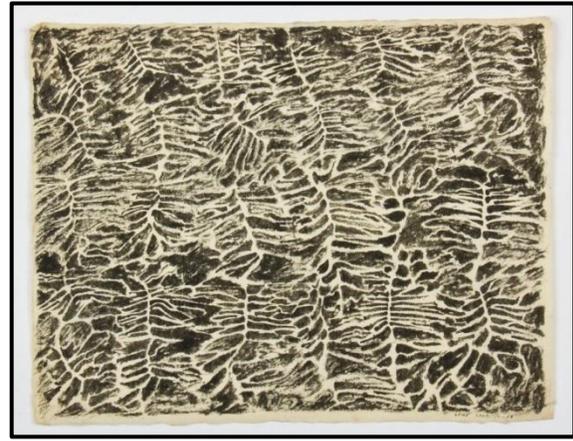
[When Georgia Was Here](#)

Panhandle Plains Historical Museum, Canyon

Commemorating the centenary of Georgia O'Keeffe's time teaching and working in Canyon.

Through February 24, 2018

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

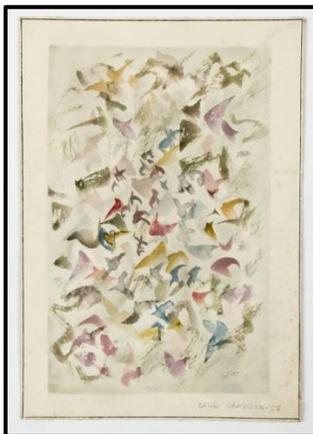


Gene Charlton *Exterior No.1: Arrangement Around Two Houses* c.1936 oil on canvas; Gene Charlton *Landscape* 1953 monotype

HETAG Mission Statement:

HETAG has been around for almost 15 years now, but we've never had a formal mission statement. Maybe it's time we got one. Let me know what you think about this suggestion – or, better yet, make suggestions of your own.

The mission of HETAG is to remind Houstonians that art worth looking at has been made in Houston for a long time, and to provide more opportunities for all of us to see it.



Gene Charlton *Bird and Flower Movement* 1953 (l); *Scarab* 1952 (c); *Three Trees* 1953 (r) all ink and wash on paper

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group



Gene Charlton [untitled Oriental landscape]
1956

Randy Tibbits, coordinator
HETAG: The Houston Earlier
Texas Art Group
tibbits@rice.edu